



STRATEGY BRIEF

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

How are some first spouses promoting child and family well-being?

The spouses of governors (first spouses) can leverage their influence to advance child and family well-being. Although not elected officials, first spouses are important allies to child welfare leaders as they seek to collaborate with a wide range of partners, build [upstream prevention services](#), and [transform the child welfare system](#). This brief offers examples of the work of six first spouses on child and family well-being: Lauren Baker (Massachusetts), Tracey Quillen Carney (Delaware), Angela Ducey (Arizona), Donna Edwards (Louisiana), Susan Hutchinson (Arkansas), and Susanne Shore (Nebraska).^{1,2} For key insights from these first spouses about their unique role, please see: [What do first spouses say about working to address child and family well-being?](#)

Arizona

First Lady Angela Ducey of Arizona gained firsthand experience of the child welfare system through prior work as a court-appointed special advocate (CASA). That experience now informs her work as co-chair of the [Governor's Council on Safety and Empowerment](#), run through the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family. This state-based council aims to prevent and mitigate adverse childhood



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experiences (ACEs), strengthen families to safely prevent children from entering foster care, support foster families, and promote permanency.

Council members include the director of the Arizona Department of Child Safety, state legislators, representatives from nonprofit agencies (such as Catholic Charities), and community stakeholders. “The idea was to get the movers and shakers from all these different partners to join together on this council and to strengthen each other in their roles,” First Lady Ducey says. The council has several workgroups to address community needs and systemic challenges through the identification of best practices and evidence-based solutions. These include outreach (focusing on engagement of faith-based communities), prevention (identifying and addressing issues that lead to children’s placement into out-of-home care), and support (identifying and developing trainings for people who interact with children in the child welfare system).

Arkansas

Moved by the personal stories of friends who experienced child abuse, **First Lady Susan Hutchinson of Arkansas** discovered the work of children’s advocacy centers after being invited on a tour. The centers support children and families by conducting child-friendly medical evaluations and interviews, and providing follow-up child and family therapy in calm, cheerful settings. First Lady Hutchinson has focused on supporting these critical centers, serving as a board member for [Children’s Advocacy Centers of Arkansas](#). She also supports the centers by educating people about their importance through talks at venues like churches and rotary clubs. She strives to help people

understand how difficult it is for a child to come forward to disclose abuse and recover emotionally without a resource like a children’s advocacy center. “We’re breaking the cycle,” she says. “People need to be healthy inside and out, their minds included.”

Delaware

First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney of Delaware

has been a leader in [First Chance Delaware](#), which encourages business, community, nonprofit, philanthropic, private, and public partnerships to address three issues affecting children and families: ending childhood hunger, promoting healthy brain development and school readiness, and recognizing and responding to adverse childhood experiences.

The central goal of the framework is to create a coordinated statewide culture of commitment to Delaware’s children. In addition to the creation of effective cross-sector partnerships, the framework aims to increase awareness of opportunities to support Delaware’s children — including youth in and aging out of foster care — and to share research and best practices. First Chance Delaware complements the state’s [Family Services Cabinet Council](#) in its coordination of efforts to meet the needs of families that historically have been underserved, and to make Delaware a [trauma-informed state](#). First Lady Carney chairs Delaware’s Coalition to End Hunger, serves as honorary chair of the Kindergarten Registration and Dolly Parton Imagination Library campaigns, and is an honorary board member of Kind to Kids and [Trauma Matters Delaware](#), a new organization promoting a collective effort to prevent and heal trauma through coordination, advocacy, and education.

[First spouses] have to consider their own state. They’re all very different. See where your heart is, what you’re interested in. See where your state is on different issues.

— SUSAN HUTCHINSON,
FIRST LADY OF ARKANSAS

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Louisiana

Through the [Louisiana First Foundation](#), **First Lady Donna Edwards of Louisiana** promotes the teaching of movement, arts, and music; works to [end human trafficking](#); and supports youth in foster care. The foundation supports [Louisiana Fosters](#), which First Lady Edwards created in partnership with Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services Secretary Marketa Garner Walters. Building on the [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) implemented by the department, Louisiana Fosters is a statewide campaign that mobilizes diverse partners — business, community, faith-based, and nonprofit — to support children and families in the child welfare system. An [online interactive guide](#) helps direct people to local and statewide partners that can provide resources and support.

Through Louisiana Fosters, Ms. Edwards also helped found the statewide [One Church One Child](#) campaign, which recruits and supports foster families through churches. She maintains a blog, [Loving Louisiana](#), to share updates on issues related to child and family well-being and other topics of interest to Louisianians. First Lady Edwards says she plans to continue her role with the Louisiana First Foundation even after her tenure as first spouse ends.

Massachusetts

First Lady Lauren Baker of Massachusetts serves on the board of directors for [Wonderfund](#), a nonprofit

that provides resources and opportunities to children engaged with the state's Department of Children and Families (DCF). Wonderfund provides duffel bags with clothing, toiletries, and gift cards for children entering foster care. All 29 DCF offices across the state have a closet stocked with duffel bags, and many caseworkers carry the bags in their car so they are prepared at any time to distribute them. Caseworkers are encouraged to request enrichment supplies and activities at any time.

“Enrichment is anything a child engaged with DCF wants or needs,” First Lady Baker explains. “When a social worker meets with a child, they can say, ‘What does this child want or need? What does he want to do for fun?’ It allows the social worker to have some good news to talk to the child and families about. It’s not all about court cases and doctor’s appointments and lawyers. It’s everything from baseball gloves to gymnastics lessons to renting a tuba, SAT prep, driver’s ed. If they request it, we will bend over backwards to make it happen.”

Wonderfund also focuses on providing summer camp opportunities for children engaged with DCF. The nonprofit works with camp providers to hold slots for children who may enroll at the last minute. First Lady Baker’s background in business was key in re-imagining the organization (originally called DCF Kids Fund) so that it could scale up to offer more resources to more children and youth.

Some people look at child well-being and foster care as problems that won’t be solved; it’s too overwhelming. That’s not the case. Through the National Governor’s Association, many first spouses are very committed to trauma-informed approaches, ACEs, and doing work for child advocacy centers. I am encouraged because there is a lot of desire to see outcomes improved.

— ANGELA DUCEY,
FIRST LADY OF ARIZONA

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If you could get first spouses to focus on two things — community involvement and prevention — the world would be such a better place.

— SUSANNE SHORE,
FIRST LADY OF NEBRASKA

Nebraska

As a CASA, **First Lady Susanne Shore of Nebraska** observed the trauma children and families endure when separated by the child welfare system. When she became a first spouse, she decided to focus on educating people about the child welfare system and the importance of upstream prevention, supporting and strengthening families so that they never would need to engage with the child protection system. “One challenge is getting people to understand what child welfare is,” explained First Lady Shore, “It’s not just child welfare. It’s family welfare, community welfare, and prevention versus ripping kids out of their families.”

In partnership with Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, public and private agencies, and community collaboratives throughout the state, First Lady Shore and Gov. Pete Ricketts launched [Bring Up Nebraska](#) in 2017. This collaborative approach aims to increase formal and informal supports for children and families, and to safely reduce the number of children entering foster care and other systems of care (such as juvenile justice and behavioral health) through local [community collaboratives](#). Built on the [Strengthening Families protective factors framework](#), Bring Up Nebraska is community-driven, engages traditional and non-traditional partners, and utilizes both public and private dollars.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 This brief is based on interviews with Tracey Quillen Carney, First Lady of Delaware, Feb. 10, 2021; Susanne Shore, First Lady of Nebraska, Feb. 11, 2021; Angela Ducey, First Lady of Arizona, and Maria Fuentes, Director of the Governor’s Office of Youth, Faith and Family, Feb. 26, 2021; Lauren Baker, First Lady of Massachusetts, March 22, 2021; Susan Hutchinson, First Lady of Arkansas, March 29, 2021; Donna Edwards, First Lady of Louisiana, and Marketa Walters, Secretary, Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, May 5, 2021.
- 2 Other first spouses also are working on issues related to child and family well-being but were not interviewed for this brief.

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