



February 2025

What do first spouses say about working to address child and family well-being?

The spouses of governors (first spouses) are in a unique position to elevate and advocate for the well-being of children and families in their states and within local communities. This includes supporting families so that children can remain with their families whenever safely possible and, when foster care placement is necessary, [placing children with kin](#) and ensuring that their [time away from their family is as brief as possible](#). While they are not elected officials, first spouses are able to engage a wide variety of partners to support their causes, serving as essential allies to child welfare leaders to implement [upstream prevention](#) services and [transform the child welfare system](#).

States differ widely in the structure of supports available to first spouses, including whether the first spouse has an official role, staff, or budget. Their personal and professional experiences also influence what they choose to focus on. Some first spouses have no previous experience in public life, while others have had a great deal. Nonetheless, all first spouses can find ways to make positive impacts in their states in a manner that suits their interests, expertise, and personality.

This brief shares the experiences and insights of two current and seven former first spouses in their work to improve child and family well-being in their states during their respective spouses' tenures as governors. The current first spouses are Abby Cox (Utah) and Sarah Stitt (Oklahoma). The former first spouses are Lauren Baker (Massachusetts), Tracey Quillen Carney (Delaware), Angela Ducey (Arizona), Donna Edwards (Louisiana), Susan Hutchinson (Arkansas), Susanne Shore (Nebraska),¹ and Tonette Walker (Wisconsin). For more specific information about the work of first spouses, see the companion brief: [How can first spouses promote child and family well-being?](#)

Through the [Governors' First Spouses' Program](#), the National Governor's Association provides opportunities for professional development and networking, including learning labs on a variety of topics of interest to first spouses, including: childhood hunger; trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and child welfare; and public policy.

Personal experiences and connections

First spouses build on personal and professional strengths and interests when deciding what issues to focus on and how to address them. Serving as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), experiencing or hearing about friends' childhood experiences with maltreatment, or observing friends and family serve as foster or adoptive parents have influenced the decisions of many first spouses to focus their work on promoting child and family well-being. Many first spouses also may have developed relationships with child protection agency leaders and other child welfare system partners during the campaign or during their spouse's previous positions in government.

Even without pre-established relationships, first spouses may initiate partnerships with their state's child protection agency to better understand the needs of children and families in their state, and how to best support them. For example, soon after **former First Lady Lauren Baker of Massachusetts** assumed her role, she requested meetings with leaders from the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. This allowed her to get to know the commissioner and some of the deputies, and helped guide her work.

“It would be beneficial for state and child welfare leaders to reach out to the First Lady's office. The knowledge from child welfare leaders is huge. They can figure out how to get that spouse involved.

—Donna Edwards, Former First Lady of Louisiana

First spouses emphasize that child welfare leaders need not wait to be approached but instead personally reach out to and engage first spouses themselves, beginning with an introductory meal or other brief meeting as an occasion to get to know each other. Given the many issues and priorities competing for first spouses' attention, it can take several tries before a child welfare leader is able to get on the first spouse's calendar, so child welfare leaders may need to be persistent and start outreach as early as permissible. First spouses also recommend that child welfare leaders invite first spouses to observe and experience programming in person, rather than inviting them to attend large events such as fundraising galas, so that they can see the impact of the work firsthand. Many first spouses have come to rely on the advice of their state's child welfare leader, and many child welfare leaders appreciate that first spouses lift up and celebrate their work. **First Lady Sarah Stitt of Oklahoma** suggested to child welfare leaders: “Don't be afraid to reach out and ask questions. Don't be afraid to try to find a connection to the first spouse. Let them know the statistics, because getting accurate information is difficult during a changeover in state government.”

Advocacy and education

Given their position, first spouses have access to a wide audience. Priority areas that first spouses highlight are likely to be picked up by the media, further spreading their message. First spouses also are less constrained than elected officials when bringing attention to issues and are able to talk about them more freely, often at a personal level and in a way that is relatable for members of the community.

First spouses can raise the public profile of organizations that are doing effective work for children and families, which can directly or indirectly impact those organizations positively. First spouses also are in ideal positions to advocate, educate the community on issues important to them, and lift up the voices of constituents. **Former First Lady Susan Hutchinson of Arkansas** explained: “People want the first lady to talk. I talk about what it is like to live here and then I talk about the children.”

Child welfare leaders can support first spouses in their efforts to inform the public about children's issues through a number of activities that deepen their understanding, such as: sharing data and stories;

providing connections to community organizations to learn more about on-the-ground work; and assisting with the development of effective messaging to further the first spouse's priorities. Child welfare leaders have access to a great deal of data and information about child and family well-being in their state, including service strategies and priorities, funding streams and needs, and what is most needed to keep families safely together and prevent entry into foster care. They also can elevate the personal experiences of people navigating child protective services. Tonya Myrup, director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, noted: "It's that personal story — hearing a youth's story and the importance of having stability, family, and connection. This is what can really ignite the passion for this work."

"A child welfare leader could be tremendously helpful (to a first spouse) in that first year of learning how to be an effective advocate for children. It's important to recognize what you don't know and find the people who do know."

—Tracey Quillen Carney, Former First Lady of Delaware

Convening and connecting

While many community members and organizations already are doing good work to improve child and family well-being, they sometimes work in isolation from one another. First spouses can foster connections and encourage cross-system collaboration. **Former First Lady Tonette Walker of Wisconsin**, who focused on [reducing adverse childhood experiences](#), served as an [early convener and connector](#) of first spouses, galvanizing their interest in improving child and family well-being.

First spouses can convene and connect philanthropic partners, faith communities, and others with whom they have formed relationships, such as local children's hospitals, food banks, and experts in the field. **Former First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney of Delaware** noted that first spouses can "pass the microphone around" to ensure that a diverse set of voices is heard. **Former First Lady Angela Ducey of Arizona** worked with the [Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment](#) to mobilize the faith community in Arizona to support children in foster care. More than 16,000 children in Arizona have been served through [CarePortal](#), a network of churches aiming to safely prevent children from entering foster care and meet their tangible needs. **Former First Lady Donna Edwards of Louisiana** also viewed herself as a connector, explaining: "We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We just need to be encouragers and connectors. So many people are doing so much work but everybody is working in silos. Previously, there was no connection because people were just working hard and doing everything they needed to do, but they were not connected."

First Lady Abby Cox of Utah explained: "I'm at this nexus point. I'm adjacent to government agencies like the Utah Department of Health and Human Services and the Division of Child and Family Services, I'm adjacent to all the nonprofits and the donor class, and I'm connected with the governor's office and the executive branch and legislators. As I started to connect the dots, I realized that a lot of these disparate organizations were working in obscurity and weren't actually working together on all these things." Tonya Myrup, director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, said of the First Lady, "She brought us all together and said, 'We recognize some of you are competing for the same resources, and it's limited. But how do we come together and work more effectively as a larger child welfare system to improve outcomes for children and families?'"

First Lady Stitt of Oklahoma also noted the importance of community partnerships and connecting people to one another: "There are so many people out in the community doing great work. But sometimes the need is literally around the corner, and they have no idea." She also suggested learning from other first spouses: "I have learned a ton listening to other first spouses sharing their trials and errors and their journeys."

Asking questions and disrupting routines

First Lady Cox noted that it can be helpful to ask questions: “Sometimes it’s good to come in a little bit naïve. You want to have a little bit of ‘I don’t know what I’m doing — let’s do it together.’ Find out who the players are through the governor’s office and different organizations. Bring them together and ask, ‘OK, now, how does this work? And how do you do this?’”

Kevin Jackson, assistant director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, agreed that it is helpful for a first spouse to come with questions such as: *What are your initiatives like? What are you as a child welfare agency trying to bolster? What challenges are you experiencing?* “It would be an amazing opportunity to share some priorities and see where that aligns with their interests or initiatives,” Jackson said.

In 2022, **Casey Family Programs** convened a First Spouses’ Youth Mental Health Summit in Washington, D.C. Five First Ladies, all current at the time, attended — Lauren Baker of Massachusetts, Tracey Quillen Carney of Delaware, Abby Cox of Utah, Susanne Shore of Nebraska, and Sarah Stitt of Oklahoma — along with state delegations that included youth and pediatricians. Two now-former U.S. Department of Health and Human Services officials — January Contreras, assistant secretary for the Administration for Children and Families, and Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, assistant secretary for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration — also attended. During roundtable discussions, youth shared their experiences, their thoughts on how the government can positively impact young people’s mental health, and what community-level changes would positively impact mental health delivery systems. First Spouses, pediatricians, and other attendees also shared their thoughts. The summit closed with each state delegation sharing key takeaways and plans for promoting youth mental health in their respective states.

First Lady Sarah Stitt noted that sometimes mindsets need to change, and first spouses can encourage that: “You can come across this perspective of, ‘Well, this is the way we’ve always done it,’ and people don’t want to change or look at evidence-based practices and data. But we can say, ‘OK, maybe we’ve always done it that way but we’re the highest in this statistic or the lowest in that — and we shouldn’t be.’”

Amplifying existing work and partnerships

Some first spouses build new partnerships, while others strengthen and uplift those already in place. **Former First Lady Baker** developed Massachusetts’ [Wonderfund](#) — a nonprofit that works on behalf of children engaged with the state’s child protection agency — out of a smaller existing organization. In Arkansas, after **former First Lady Hutchinson** took a tour to learn about the important work of children’s advocacy centers, she promoted their work and advocated to expand the network of centers.

First spouses also can enhance existing programs by convening and connecting organizations that previously have not worked together. [Bring Up Nebraska](#) and [Trauma Matters Delaware](#) are examples of collaborations that have built on existing resources. “Honoring what’s already in place always seems to be a good starting point, and where we need to add things, we do,” **Former First Lady Quillen Carney** said.

“It was really important to me that as we evolved the organization (Wonderfund) and changed it, we did it in a way that was really smart, business-oriented, and sustainable. We’re trying to make sure that these resources and opportunities will keep going no matter who the first lady is. The need will be there. We have to make sure that everything we do is sustainable. As long as we keep that front and center in our strategic planning, we won’t start programs or deliver services that can’t be replicated or scaled.”

—Lauren Baker, Former First Lady of Massachusetts

Planning for sustainability

Recognizing that governors' time in office is limited but that deeply entrenched issues affecting child and family well-being persist well beyond their terms, many first spouses plan for the sustainability of their work. Rather than referring to an effort as "The First Spouse's Project," they aim to promote community ownership of the issue and the solutions. **Former First Lady Susanne Shore of Nebraska** pointed to Bring Up Nebraska as an example: "We have never said that this is my idea or my project. We talk about it being something I support and that I partner with. But when it becomes 'my project,' it dies." Indeed, Bring Up Nebraska continues to support children and families statewide even as the state has a new governor.

First Lady Cox also is planning for sustainability: "I feel like we are on the clock to get our programs self-sustaining by the time we leave office. In four years, I plan to have our program self-sustaining with ongoing funding from the Legislature and an endowment from private donors." In support of sustainability, Show Up Utah is collecting data to track impact. "We've been strategic on data collection and making sure that we have actual research," First Lady Cox said. "We hired an impact study group, and they are informing us as we go."

First Lady Stitt was encouraged to plan for sustainability from the start. Although she was reluctant to start her own foundation, other first spouses told her, "If you don't have your own foundation, in a matter of months after the governor leaves office, all the work you've done within the state government will be gone." She started the Sarah Stitt Hope Foundation, which runs [Hope Rising Oklahoma](#). She said she is "focused on building programs and initiatives that are deeply embedded in communities. I believe if you can embed strategies within the agencies deeply enough, you have something that will last beyond an administration."

¹ This brief, originally published April 6, 2022, is based on interviews with Tracey Quillen Carney, former First Lady of Delaware, Feb. 10, 2021; Susanne Shore, former First Lady of Nebraska, Feb. 11, 2021; Angela Ducey, former First Lady of Arizona, and Maria Fuentes, former director of the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family in Arizona, Feb. 26, 2021; Lauren Baker, former First Lady of Massachusetts, March 22, 2021; Susan Hutchinson, former First Lady of Arkansas, March 29, 2021; Donna Edwards, former First Lady of Louisiana, and Marketa Walters, former secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, May 5, 2021. It has been updated to reflect these first spouses no longer are serving in those roles, and includes new information based on interviews with current First Lady Sarah Stitt of Oklahoma, Jan. 16, 2025; Tonya Myrup, director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, and Kevin Jackson, assistant director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, Jan. 21, 2025; and current First Lady Abby Cox of Utah, Jan. 22, 2025. 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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Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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