



February 2025

## How can first spouses promote child and family well-being?

The spouses of governors (first spouses), while not elected officials, can play a critical role in advancing key issues in their state. Some first spouses have chosen to leverage their political access and influence to improve the well-being of children and families in their state. This can include 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](#). This brief offers examples of the work that some first spouses are doing related to child and family well-being, including two current first spouses (Abby Cox of Oklahoma and Sarah Stitt of Utah) and four former first spouses (Lauren Baker of Massachusetts, Angela Ducey of Arizona, Susan Hutchinson of Arkansas, and Susanne Shore of Nebraska).<sup>1</sup> For key insights from current and former first spouses about their unique role, see the companion brief: [What do first spouses say about working to address child and family well-being?](#)

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

—Susanne Shore, Former First Lady of Nebraska

### Utah

Having friends who were foster parents influenced the goals of **First Lady Abby Cox of Utah** as a first spouse: “A couple of friends started to foster. What I noticed was their invisibility in the community. I think people didn’t know how to interact with them and didn’t have the knowledge or skills to help them. As I came into this role, realizing that the state plays such a huge part in child welfare, I felt a weight of responsibility to be a voice for these families and children.” She started [Show Up Utah](#), an initiative aiming to promote empathy, connection, and a sense of community among the people of her state. One of the

initiative's [key areas](#) is supporting children in foster care and the families caring for them. Support is provided through foster family nights out (to the theater, roller skating, and other family activities) and [Care Communities](#). Supported by a public private partnership with faith communities, businesses, and [Utah Foster Care](#) (the state's foster parent recruitment and training organization), Care Communities are teams of eight to 10 individuals and families that provide tangible and emotional supports to foster families.

First Lady Cox explained: "We support foster families so that they feel seen. Family after family has reached out to us and said, 'We feel seen for the first time ever. We feel like somebody cares about what we're doing.' I think that's where first spouses can have an impact on families across their state — to make sure that they're seen, and genuinely working to make things better for them."

Recognizing that many nonprofits and agencies work in silos and compete for the same funding, First Lady Cox also is working to convene organizations and separate funding streams. "I'm bringing people who work in child welfare together," she said. "It has made a huge difference. And I ask people in the Legislature, 'How can we approach these funding streams differently so that organizations are not competing and can all work together?'" Kevin Jackson, assistant director of the Utah Division of Child and Family Services, recalled: "She brought us all together at the Governor's Mansion. We talked about what we're trying to accomplish and what we all bring to the table. It sets a different tone when the first lady brings us together."

"Child welfare leaders should reach out and ask for a meeting. Tell them what you're passionate about and why, and see if you can build a partnership."

—Abby Cox, First Lady of Utah

## Oklahoma

**First Lady Sarah Stitt of Oklahoma** is focusing on raising awareness of and reducing stigma around mental health issues, addiction, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). She explained that her work is grounded in her own personal story: "My own family struggled with addiction, access to care, severe mental health issues, abuse, all of those things. My story is a lot of people's stories in Oklahoma." Partnering with a local nonprofit, she shared James Redford's 2016 film, [Resilience: The Biology of Stress & the Science of Hope](#), throughout the state, inviting community members to view and discuss the film. "That provided a great open door for people to develop a common language," she recalled. "Then we began to introduce the [Science of HOPE](#) as a guiding principle in all the things we do." In collaboration with the [University of Oklahoma's Hope Research Center](#), First Lady Stitt helped the Oklahoma Department of Human Services become HOPE-centered and trauma-informed through HOPE awareness training, a HOPE summit, and the creation of 52 Community HOPE Centers launched during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To ensure that the work she has done continues after her spouse's term as governor ends, she created the Sarah Stitt Hope Foundation, which runs [Hope Rising Oklahoma](#). Inspired by [evidence](#) that children who have experienced trauma are more likely to thrive when they have high hope, that adults working in child welfare have greater well-being when they have hope, and that hope can be taught, First Lady Stitt conducted Community HOPE summits throughout the state, educating communities about the science of hope and equipping people with tools to support resiliency. This has led to deeper partnerships, as First Lady Stitt explained: "After we had been doing the summits for a while, we began partnerships with nonprofits and community organizations to create more sustainable and HOPE-centered programming to address some of the root causes of adversity. If we went into a community that was struggling with high school dropout rates, we would partner with that community to do a very specific deep dive into dropout rates through the Science of Hope. We found that to be very successful."

The university's Hope Research Center, which tracks indicators of community hope and resiliency over time, has found measurable improvements in participating communities.

“My goal is empowering mothers, caregivers, and families to connect them to resources and give them the tools and knowledge so they don't enter into that situation where their children are being taken away. We can come around them as a community and help intervene in a way that's not saying, 'You don't know how to be a parent,' but 'Let me help you. Let me come alongside you. Let me show you what's worked for me or for others.’”

—Sarah Stitt, First Lady of Oklahoma

## Nebraska

As a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), **former 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 welfare system in the first place. “One challenge is getting people to understand what child welfare is,” former First Lady Shore explained. “It's not just child welfare. It's family support, community support, 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, former First Lady Shore and former 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 (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.

## Massachusetts

**Former First Lady Lauren Baker of Massachusetts** served 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 children entering foster care with duffel bags of clothing, toiletries, and gift cards. All 29 DCF offices across the state have a closet stocked with the duffel bags, and many caseworkers carry them 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,” Former First Lady Baker explained. “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 the child protection agency. The nonprofit works with camps to hold slots for children who may enroll at the last minute. Former 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.

## Arkansas

Moved by the personal stories of friends who experienced child abuse, **former 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. Former First Lady Hutchinson focused on supporting these critical centers, serving as a board member for [Children’s Advocacy Centers of Arkansas](#). She also educated people about the importance of the centers through talks at venues like churches and Rotary clubs. Former First Lady Hutchinson aimed 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 said. “People need the opportunity to be healthy inside and out.”

“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, Former First Lady of Arkansas

## Arizona

**Former 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 informed her work as co-chair of the [Governor’s Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment](#), run through the Governor’s Office of Youth, Faith and Family. This state-based council aims to prevent and mitigate adverse childhood 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, 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,” former First Lady Ducey said. The council has two 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) and prevention (identifying and addressing issues that lead to children’s placement into foster care).

“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, Former First Lady of Arizona

---

<sup>1</sup> This brief, originally published April 6, 2022, is based on interviews with 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. 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 and current chair of the National Governors Association Spouses' Leadership committee, 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.

SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE  
CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN  
STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG  
FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES  
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG  
FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE  
CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG  
FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE  
CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES  
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN  
STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES  
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN  
STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE  
CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE SAFE  
STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG  
FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE  
CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES  
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN  
STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG  
FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN  
STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES  
SAFE CHILDREN STRONG FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE  
COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG  
FAMILIES SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SAFE CHILDREN STRONG

### Casey Family Programs

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.

**P** 800.228.3559

**P** 206.282.7300

**F** 206.282.3555

[casey.org](http://casey.org) | [KMResources@casey.org](mailto:KMResources@casey.org)



CONNECT WITH US

