THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS:
LISTENING FOR CHANGE

August 2015

RICH HILL image courtesy of Dinky Pictures, The Orchard, and Independent Lens.
A letter from the Director:

Changing our destination and improving child welfare outcomes often involves starting from a different place. The different place begins by reexamining our view of families, understanding behavior and the change process, and determining who needs to be involved in supporting and sustaining safety and wellbeing for children and families.

Missouri Children’s Division is successful in achieving its mission to the extent that we are able to engage children, youth, families, and communities as partners. This process begins with listening to families, young people, front-line child welfare practitioners, and community partners in order to make informed decisions and determine what makes the most difference for families. We can then start doing more of what works and stop doing those things that are ineffective or counterproductive.

The Community Conversation process implemented initially in seven communities around the state brought together Children’s Division staff from a variety of job roles with an equal number of community partners for a day-long session introducing the Five Domains of Wellbeing, viewing an award-winning documentary film featuring three families, and applying the lessons learned to our work with families and child welfare system change.

Important values and practice principles surfaced, along with practical ideas and motivation for future exploration and innovation. The Conversations provide significant guidance and momentum for culture and practice changes in Missouri’s child welfare system.

We are grateful for all those who participated in the Community Conversations and continue to partner with us to achieve enhanced safety and wellbeing for Missouri children and families.

We look forward to future Conversations and opportunities to amplify this very important and transformative work!

Tim Decker  
Director, Missouri Children’s Division

A letter from the CEO:

In fall and winter 2014, Missouri Children’s Division and the Full Frame Initiative partnered to create a forum for reimagining and reinvigorating child welfare in Missouri. We shared the aspiration that stakeholders could come together to create new connections to each other and to the work that we are all passionate about: the safety and wellbeing of children, achieved in the context of healthy families. Casey Family Programs joined us in this vision and allowed us to make it a reality. Dinky Pictures, producers of RICH HILL, provided us with a set of stories which are riveting, compelling and absolutely essential. We thank Casey Family Programs and Dinky Pictures.

Our greatest thanks go to the more than 300 people from Children’s Division, emergency departments, juvenile justice, courts, domestic violence programs, churches, addiction counseling, foster parents, and more who brought their whole selves to these seven day-long events. Your passion, your commitment, your honesty and your vision are palpable and are fueling important new directions in helping children and families.

Indeed, in the months since the Community Conversations closed, the energy and changes within Children’s Division have been extraordinary. These changes are driven by the dedication of the workers in the field and are strongly supported by the administration. We have heard from and begun to work with a number of community partners whose efforts are equally important and exciting. As the Community Conversations so clearly illustrated, child welfare is a community charge. We look forward to your continued and expanded partnership.

We are deeply hopeful for the children and families in Missouri. Thank you for your partnership and for your daily work on behalf of children, youth, families, and the communities in which we all live.

Onward!

Katya Fels Smyth  
Founder and CEO, The Full Frame Initiative
The wellbeing of each generation’s children is of paramount importance to society. Child welfare agencies play an important role in children’s wellbeing by protecting and enhancing their safety, but Children’s Division’s efforts alone are not enough. A truly community response of public agencies, community-based organizations and non-service community assets—businesses, faith communities, and families themselves—is essential to children’s healthy growth and development. Indeed, all children need community, so child welfare must learn to partner better and differently with families and communities.

THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: LISTENING FOR CHANGE

With the support of Casey Family Programs and the Full Frame Initiative (FFI), Missouri Children’s Division hosted seven Community Conversations across Missouri between September and December 2014. The Conversations’ goals were to:

- Introduce staff and stakeholders to the Full Frame Initiative’s Five Domains of Wellbeing framework\(^1\), a lens which increases understanding of children and families in the “full frame”\(^2\) of their lives and has potential to amplify the impact of other strengths-based, trauma-informed practices and models;

- Identify opportunities and readiness for applying this wellbeing framework within Children’s Division and other agencies, organizations, and the community;

- Nurture collaboration and connection across programs, agencies, and systems; and

- Signal the commitment of Children’s Division’s leadership to cross-system learning and making fundamental changes in organizational culture and practice.

Roughly half of the over 40 champions for children who participated in each Community Conversation were drawn from Children’s Division and half were from community organizations and other stakeholders in systems charged with the wellbeing of children and families (e.g., representatives from courts, behavioral health, schools, domestic violence, housing, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and more).

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1 The Full Frame Initiative’s Five Domains of Wellbeing—social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery, and meaningful access to relevant resources—are the universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical essential needs we all have.

2 “Full frame” is a term from documentary filmmaking. To truly show a character, a film cannot just focus on the individual; rather, the filmmaker must pull the lens all the way back, filling the frame with the environment, the context, the relationships, the serendipity, the events, and the interactions that define and are defined by the character.
The Children’s Division Regional Director for the given community and Tim Decker, Director of Children’s Division, set the stage for the day. They communicated the agency’s understanding that “if you want to change your destination, sometimes you have to start from a different place.” These Community Conversations were about that different place.

FFI provided a one hour overview of the Five Domains of Wellbeing, after which participants watched RICH HILL. FFI then facilitated a discussion of RICH HILL through the lens of the Five Domains of Wellbeing, which helped broaden participants’ thinking about the children and families portrayed in the film, and helped them identify the many areas of families’ lives that they may not see in their professional capacities. FFI and Tim Decker then facilitated an extended conversation of the question: “What would be possible if we were to see families involved in child welfare in the ‘full frame’ of their lives?” For approximately 20 minutes, each table of 6-8 cross-sector participants was asked to consider how a framework for wellbeing that looks at people’s strengths as well as their challenges might be used to help families, and how it might also change the agency and its partners. A scribe at each table captured their ideas and concerns. Facilitators then engaged the whole group in discussion on this question and ideas were recorded on flip charts. All flip chart pages, scribe sheets and participant evaluations were compiled and themes identified.

3 RICH HILL is a full-length film, winner of the 2014 Sundance Film Festival U.S. Grand Jury Prize: Documentary, from filmmakers Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz Palermo. The film follows three boys in economically-distressed Rich Hill, Missouri, a small town 70 miles south of Kansas City. While not shying away from the myriad challenges these boys face, the film focuses on their strengths, hopes and dreams, and their love for their families.
HERE’S WHAT WE HEARD

The Community Conversations were seen by participants as a signal of Children’s Division’s interest in change and partnership, which inspired expressions of excitement and hope. There was an observed sense of collectivity, a feeling that child welfare is not uniquely the responsibility of Children’s Division, but of the whole community. The Community Conversations showed just how much leadership there is already in Missouri communities and systems. All of the Conversations surfaced the desire for a family-oriented system of child welfare, with less emphasis on compliance by families and workers, and more emphasis on engaging families by community stakeholders (in addition to Children’s Division) and getting to the root of problems in families and in systems.

Participants brought up the same themes in each of the Community Conversations, but specific emphasis of participants’ comments and input varied at each event, reflecting the diverse realities of child welfare work in different communities. In general, groups in larger metropolitan areas honed in on the potential of the Five Domains of Wellbeing to be a shared language across systems, but in smaller communities where there are fewer people and programs to coordinate, participants were more focused on engagement and how to ask families different questions.

Four themes were common and prominent across all the Conversations:

**The importance of seeing families accurately.** Participants consistently commented that the pairing of RICH HILL and the Five Domains of Wellbeing provided a powerful mechanism to experience how the judgements and biases we all have shape what information we deem relevant and what we discard. This resulted in a full and rich discussion during which values—spoken and unspoken—surfaced. Understanding that families are more than a dirty house or an allegation of abuse or neglect was less of a struggle for some participants than for others. Most people had to stretch their thinking to see families’ strengths, reframe behavior and accept that life is messy for each of us. Participant evaluations suggested that the Community Conversations not only surfaced a diversity of thought, but also helped shift some people’s thinking, an experience many appreciated. Participants worked hard to find assets and consider the messy realities exposed through RICH HILL—that families have moments of deep struggle as well as moments of grace.

**The need to engage families, youth, children, and community partners in the work of Children’s Division.** Participants identified that systems rarely see the “full frame” of families’ lives. RICH HILL illuminated that many moments that illustrate families’ potential happen outside the context of services. The desire to engage families more authentically dovetailed with the greatest challenge explicitly voiced by participants: the pressure of paperwork and the very finite time afforded to work with each family. This concern was expressed in each Community Conversation, although it was more pronounced in some communities than in others. It is helpful to remember that these Conversations are a step toward supporting champions for child welfare to see and do things differently, not to do more.

**An interest in increasing understanding of behaviors and tradeoffs.** Child welfare systems and services are brought in to deal with problems, as it is these problems which produced an allegation of abuse or neglect. This can lead to chasing symptoms because these systems and services are not set up to get to the root cause of a problematic behavior. Participants across the state expressed interest in the concept of tradeoffs—that forward progress in one of the Five Domains of Wellbeing usually means giving up something valued in another domain. When the cost of progress is too great, change doesn’t last. This interest was married with recognition that agency structures and policies often limit workers’ and families’ ability to minimize tradeoffs, potentially undermining the very success that everyone is seeking.
A desire for a shared language among all systems so that agencies can work together more efficiently and effectively. A common language among agencies ensures that families will be able to navigate the different systems they often experience through the course of interventions. Many participants were excited by the possibility that the Five Domains of Wellbeing might be that common language. Missouri Division of Youth Services (the state’s juvenile justice agency) is already integrating the Five Domains of Wellbeing in assessment and treatment planning, and illustrating the potential for the framework to help a system see families more accurately and engage families more fully—and make better decisions based on this.

CHANGE IS HAPPENING

Each Community Conversation featured myriad opportunities for partnership and advancement. Ideas were bold and wide-ranging, and built momentum for change through Children’s Division and beyond.

Children’s Division is working to incorporate the Five Domains of Wellbeing into the culture and foundation of child welfare practice in Missouri with the guidance of the Full Frame Initiative and Casey Family Programs, a national foundation strengthening child welfare across the country. This requires structural change; significant training, coaching and capacity building; and strong leadership, among other things.

- Children’s Division has begun to evaluate prevention services provided by the agency and re-design of the prevention services model is underway.
- Children’s Division has developed a new values statement for Family Centered Services:
  - **Wellbeing:** The wellbeing of children is tied to the wellbeing of their families.
  - **Family:** Families are made up of whole people.
  - **Whole People:** All people have strengths and assets.
  - **Strengths:** When everyone brings their strengths, partnership is more likely.
  - **Partnerships:** Partnerships and relationships are the catalysts of change.
  - **Change:** Making changes is hard, sustaining change is harder.
- Following a successful pilot with the Jackson County Children’s Division (Kansas City, Missouri) this spring, an extended version of the Community Conversations is being incorporated into new worker training across the state in fall 2015.
- Planning is underway for many more initiatives, including workshops for policy staff of Children’s Division to understand and have avenues to address the Five Domains of Wellbeing concept of tradeoffs when developing new or updating existing policy; new supervision training; webinars on family engagement and seeing families accurately; and workshops for understanding adolescent behavior through the lens of the Five Domains of Wellbeing. While some introductory events like the Community Conversations may be helpful, this deeper training and coaching on the Five Domains of Wellbeing is essential for responsible application of the framework.
Beyond Children’s Division, the Community Conversations created new buy-in among partners and community entities for working with Children’s Division.

• The Juvenile Office of the 22nd Judicial Circuit (St. Louis City) is beginning plans to incorporate the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework into their work with youth, families, and the justice system.

• The Full Frame Initiative led a full day of workshops and a plenary address on applications of the Five Domains of Wellbeing in juvenile justice in May 2015 at the Missouri Juvenile Justice Association’s Educational Conference, an invitation directly due to the Community Conversations.

LOOKING FORWARD—IT TAKES ALL OF US
The Community Conversations demonstrated the potential for true collaboration—with birth families, foster parents and adoptive families, and across agencies—to support children’s wellbeing and safety. Looking at the families in RICH HILL through the lens of the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework proved a potent, provocative and enduring experience for a diverse audience, and there is demand to broaden the reach of the Conversations throughout the state. FFI and Children’s Division cannot and should not lead all these Conversations; they should be held by and in communities that will own the outcomes and results as well. We heard from many participants who would like to support and replicate the Conversations with their own constituencies to bring a family focus throughout their work and increase buy-in for a common language of wellbeing across systems and services.

FFI and Children’s Division, with the support of our partner Dinky Pictures (RICH HILL), are seeking new resources to develop a training institute to support community and field leaders in facilitating Community Conversations. These leaders will use discussion of RICH HILL through the lens of the Five Domains of Wellbeing to begin new dialogue and, importantly, will follow through on themes and ideas that emerge so change becomes a reality for children and families like the three featured in RICH HILL.

YOUR INPUT MATTERS
We want to encourage the energy and momentum from the Community Conversations to continue. Please get in touch with the Children’s Division/Full Frame Initiative partnership by emailing childwelfare@fullframeinitiative.org to let us know you are interested in being trained to organize, facilitate or support a Community Conversation in your area in 2016, or to comment or ask questions.

If you participated in the Community Conversations, we would like to hear what impact the discussion has had in your work and your community. Please get in touch to share how you are using the experience and how you are seeing or doing things differently.
WHAT PARTICIPANTS ARE SAYING ABOUT MISSOURI CHILDREN’S DIVISION COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

[People should know] that the Children’s Division and many agency partners have begun a process to fertilize multi-system transformation.

Thank you for this opportunity. This was supportive... and motivating. The Community Conversation opportunities would be invaluable for therapists, direct care workers, in-home professionals, mentors, case managers, etc.; partner with the private sector to drive culture change. Most of us [in the private sector] will do whatever is needed or asked. Thank you for sharing this experience.

[I’m leaving today] really thinking about the tradeoffs, what our families and older youth have to give up to meet the goal.

Interagency collaboration and assessing tradeoffs could make all the difference in making positive changes.

[I’m leaving today] optimistic and excited.

[I’m leaving with] a reminder that it takes all of us to make up the child welfare system—we all have a part.

[I’m leaving today with] a different way to look at building on the family’s strengths and identifying their needs; thinking about how agency goals or actions impact the family.

[I’m leaving today with] a reminder that it takes all of us to make up the child welfare system—we all have a part.

[Something from today that people should be doing is] changing the lens that we are looking at families through, stepping back to look at what is really going on to help us create sustainable change.

[I’m leaving with the observation that] those of us who support families must also have relationships with each other.

[People are ready to improve their practice, and folks are finally seeing child welfare as meaning more than Children’s Division.]

[I am excited] that leaders of “systems” in child welfare are having this conversation as well.

[I am excited by] hearing all the agencies in this area brainstorming ways to implement the [Five Domains of Wellbeing] into their work.

All testimonials are from participant evaluations of the 2014 Missouri Children’s Division Community Conversations.