

# SYNERGY

RCDV:CPC

The Newsletter of the Resource Center on Domestic Violence:  
Child Protection and Custody

A Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

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The Full Frame Initiative (FFI) believes that everyone has a fundamental right to wellbeing, defined as the combination and balance of basic elements needed to weather challenges; retain hope; and achieve adequate physical, mental, and emotional health. Yet, we live in a society where a host of factors—such as a person's race, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, education, level of income, and history of trauma—dramatically expand or constrict one's access to wellbeing.

Systems designed to help people address challenges to their wellbeing, including those designed to intervene in child abuse and neglect and domestic violence, are staffed by talented, caring people. Despite their efforts, these systems too often keep people and families on the social service equivalent of life support. Initial progress doesn't necessarily result in lasting change: people cycle in and out of programs, and in and out of care, and cases are closed only to be reopened a short time later. Practitioners and communities often conclude, understandably but erroneously, that this outcome is inevitable.

FFI is a nonprofit organization committed to helping public systems, nonprofits, and communities across the country increase access to wellbeing for those who live at the intersection of poverty, violence, trauma, and oppression. A growing group of organizations and agencies in the U.S. is working with FFI to demonstrate that orienting practice and policy around the Five Domains of Wellbeing (see p. 7) improves outcomes for individuals and families and has the potential to interrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence.

This is the hard, vital work of understanding and engaging people and communities in the full frame of their lives. Full frame is a term we take from filmmaking. To show a character fully, a film cannot focus only on the individual; the filmmaker must pull the lens back and fill the frame with the environment, relationships, events, and interactions that define and are defined by that character. Similarly, to truly understand a person and help that person overcome a challenge, we cannot focus only on the presenting problem. We have to see the whole person in context, beyond that problem. Who is she, beyond being a survivor of domestic violence? Who is he, beyond being a teenager on his third foster home placement in as many months?

Far from coddling, seeing people in the full frame of their lives means seeing them accurately. It means holding people accountable, identifying pathways for change and growth, and understanding and building upon what's working (rather than attending only to what is broken). Community-based organizations and systems of care, including domestic and sexual violence programs, child protection agencies, homelessness organizations, state juvenile justice systems, and public health agencies in diverse regions of the U.S. are taking the lead in working with people in the full frame of their lives. They are partnering with FFI to ground policy and practice in the Five Domains of Wellbeing. Their attentiveness to wellbeing enables better, sustained outcomes for individuals and families.

The universality of the framework offers opportunities to address the fragmentation that has challenged so many important change efforts. As readers of Synergy know well, domestic violence is deeply intertwined with child abuse and neglect, yet the systems and services that address each of these issues have historically been fragmented, even working at cross-purposes at times. This issue of Synergy profiles two innovative applications of the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework, one in child welfare and one in domestic violence.

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- Carla Gilzow, Quality Assurance Unit Manager for Missouri Children's Division, describes her agency's strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and families in child welfare by seeing families in the full frame of their lives and ensuring that safety becomes a stepping stone to wellbeing.
- Anna Melbin, Director of Network Growth and Strategy at FFI, summarizes the findings of a three-year project in California to document how different stakeholders understand success for survivors of domestic violence. The results—that survivors of violence seek wellbeing, not just safety—have important implications for systems, nonprofits and communities.

Increasing access to wellbeing is not the charge of any one nonprofit, agency, system, or profession. It requires collective, sustained attention and it is entirely possible.

Katya Fels Smyth, CEO

To learn more about the Full Frame Initiative and the Five Domains of Wellbeing, please visit us at [www.fullframeinitiative.org](http://www.fullframeinitiative.org).

# How Survivors Define Success:

## Research That Sheds Light on How to Respond More Effectively to People Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence

By Anna Melbin and Katya Fels Smyth

Across the country, domestic violence advocates and their allies work toward a shared goal of increased safety for survivors and their families. In pursuit of this goal, the domestic violence field, the courts, and human service agencies have traditionally equated success with narrowly defined pathways to safety, such as separation from the abusive relationship and access to formal, professionalized services. But what if our collective focus on a narrow concept of safety is undermining the effectiveness of our interventions and the wellbeing of survivors?

In 2012 the Full Frame Initiative (FFI) undertook a three-year effort to explore how key stakeholders (practitioners, funders, and survivors) define success for survivors of violence. FFI published the findings of this project in the November 2014 report entitled *How Do Survivors Define Success? A New Project to Address an Overlooked Question*, shortened here to, *How Do Survivors Define Success?* The report calls into question some of the foundational assumptions that have driven how the domestic violence field and related systems approach their work with survivors. Most notably, the findings suggest that: safety from an abusive partner is not always the first step to wellbeing, survivors' pathways to safety often begin outside an abusive relationships, and "survivor" is not necessarily the primary or preferred identity of those who have survived violence.

This project was designed to allow survivors to talk about success in whatever terms they chose, with few parameters or instructions. It was neither framed by nor focused on the Five Domains of Wellbeing (social connectedness, safety, stability, mastery, and meaningful access to relevant resources) that are described in detail on p. 7 of this issue. Yet the responses of the 150 survivors who participated in this project reinforce the universality of the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework, which suggests that the key to making change that lasts is twofold: 1) build on what's already working, and, 2) minimize the tradeoffs that make change unsustainable.

Survivors of domestic violence are, first and foremost, people driven by the same needs and desires as everyone else. Like all people, they realize success and wellbeing through building assets in and minimizing tradeoffs between the Five Domains of Wellbeing. However, survivors frequently interact with systems that discount what may be working well in their lives in favor of a specific outcome (e.g., safety from a partner who is abusive), even when that outcome can only be achieved through tradeoffs that are unsustainable for the survivor. Survivors emphasized that safety is not necessarily the first step in achieving other aspects of success and wellbeing; instead, safety is often enhanced by increasing social connectedness and personal mastery. As one survivor reflected:

*I was at the courthouse and I was representing myself ... I had my ex-husband on the witness stand and asking questions, and he was trying to make me feel small. But I didn't feel small. I felt more powerful, and more authentic, and free and not scared ... I felt stronger than I ever thought I could be.*

*How Do Survivors Define Success?* offers important empirical evidence that survivors' personal goals and indicators of success—belonging, connection, and creating worth for self and others—should also be our shared primary strategies for increasing safety and wellbeing. Since the release of this report, a diverse and growing group of organizations and individuals has been seeking to incorporate this new understanding of success into their practice and work.

Here, we provide an overview of the project's purpose, methodology,<sup>1</sup> and findings, and the role these findings suggest for advocacy, intervention, and prevention programs, as well as court and social service systems.

### A Commonly Overlooked Question

Although survivors were at the center of the creation of the domestic violence movement

more than 30 years ago, professionalization of the mainstream domestic violence field has compromised the primacy of survivors' experiences and voices in guiding services. Well-intentioned practitioners within social service, government, philanthropic, and academic systems and institutions have driven the creation of relatively standardized responses to survivors that do not always meet their needs.

This mismatch between what is needed and what is offered contributes to a revolving door of help in which survivors who seek support and even engage in multiple services and systems are often not experiencing real, sustainable change. Systems are hampered by long waiting lists for services and appointments, providers are frustrated in the absence of real progress in ending domestic violence, and survivors do not have access to the full range of support and services they need to live securely and thrive in their communities.

At the core of these services and systems are a set of assumptions—answers to questions never fully posed by the mainstream domestic violence field—about how survivors define success for themselves. One assumption is that success for a survivor is connected to addressing domestic violence, and that safety from domestic violence is a driving force throughout a survivor's experience. This is not illogical; violence is harmful and dangerous and survivors often need support in securing safety. But is safety, in the context of domestic violence, the only or even primary organizing principle for survivors? Is safety what they have found in moments of success?

Between 2012 and 2014, FFI conducted a project across California to explore a largely overlooked question in the field of domestic violence: *How do survivors define success for themselves, and do other stakeholders involved in the domestic violence field define success for survivors in the same way?*

The project was undertaken in two phases: information collection and analysis, and forming recommendations. In Phase I (Fall 2012–2013), FFI collected data via workshops and interviews with stakeholders. FFI engaged more than 150 survivors and more than 185 practitioners (in domestic violence and other social service settings) in 46 workshops across California (21 with survivors and 25 with practitioners), and conducted 12 interviews with policymakers and funders. Five of the survivor workshops were conducted by representatives from culturally-specific communities who were trained to facilitate the

workshops in their own communities and in their languages-of-origin on behalf of FFI.

The workshops were conducted using a process FFI has pioneered that combines Appreciative Inquiry and Significant Moment Reflection. The process began by inviting survivors to identify a single moment where they felt success in their own lives; practitioners were asked to identify a single moment where they felt a survivor they had worked with was successful. Workshop participants were then asked a series of questions to help them revisit (ground themselves) in that singular moment. Subsequent questions focused on what enabled that moment of success, and the range of strategies survivors create and people they rely on to help them cope in between moments of success.

In contrast to the traditional focus on learning from instances when things go poorly, FFI's workshops reframe the question by having participants focus on when things go well. Much as a critical incident review allows individuals to learn from one negative incident to avoid a similar situation in the future, an individual's systematic examination of each *success* moment, and of the enabling factors that contributed to it, make it possible to create more such moments of success in the future. A systematic analysis of a large group of these moments and what enabled them allows for discovery of important patterns that can inform systemic efforts to help survivors be and feel successful.

Upon completion of all 46 workshops, workshop audio recordings were transcribed and the data analyzed<sup>ii</sup> by a team of FFI and non-FFI staff (bringing diverse perspectives). This analysis was the basis for Phase II of the project.

In Phase I, FFI also conducted 12 interviews, divided evenly between policy advocates (including administrative policy makers, law enforcement and state advisory board members), and funders (administrators of philanthropic and government funds to domestic violence programs). The questions for these interviewees focused on their individual definitions of survivor success, their organizational or departmental definitions of success, and how these definitions are formed and communicated. These interviews were also analyzed.

To ensure that stakeholders drove the recommendations resulting from the Phase I analysis, in Phase II (January–July 2014), FFI re-engaged almost 100 stakeholders (primarily Phase I practitioner and survivor workshop participants)

in a series of community conversations. These events were designed to share the Phase I project findings and collectively generate specific recommendations for strengthening systems' response to survivors.

### Success: More than a Single Perspective

The project's Phase I findings were drawn from the perspectives of more than 335 people across cultures, race, age, and other differences. Success for survivors, as expressed by both survivors and practitioners in this project, is about personal identity: who we are, based on how we affect—and are affected by—our external environment and our relationships. However, there were important differences between survivors and practitioners in terms of how this identity is formed. And while every story of

**To learn more about the Full Frame Initiative's Methodology and findings for this project, join us for a webinar:**

### How Domestic Violence Survivors Define Success for Themselves

Date: February 19, 2016

Time: 9:00am PST

10:00am MT

11:00am CT

12:00pm EST

Duration: 90 Minutes

Faculty: Anna Melbin, Full Frame Initiative

To participate, contact Alicia Lord at [alord@ncjfcj.org](mailto:alord@ncjfcj.org)

**“Only 7% of survivors mentioned leaving or significantly changing the abusive relationship as a moment of success. Instead, these relationship changes most often followed other personal achievements and transformations that were unrelated to the abuse.”**

success was different, the greatest variation was between survivors and practitioners (rather than, for example, among distinct cultural groups of survivors). Survivors understand and arrive at moments of success differently than other stakeholders believe they do.

### The Perspective of Those Who Have Experienced Violence

For survivors, domestic violence is not central to their identity; it is one of many of their life experiences. Success, in turn, is not defined in the narrow terms of the abusive relationship or by traditional notions of safety. Instead, in survivors’<sup>iii</sup> moments of success, identity is formed through positive social connections, feelings of belonging, and opportunities to experience mastery, which lead to increased safety as part of broader wellbeing. As expressed by one survivor in a workshop:

*This doesn’t have to do with DV. But it is all mixed in there together. DV was always the predominant issue in my life until this moment with my daughter. She didn’t like to touch people. [But that day,] holding her hand, for the length of time, was extraordinary. . . . I felt a joy I had never experienced. . . . [After that] I left my abuser for the last time and never went back.*

Only 7% of survivors mentioned leaving or significantly changing the abusive relationship as a moment of success. Instead, these relationship changes most often followed other personal achievements and transformations that were unrelated to the abuse. As one survivor in a workshop explained:

*After graduating I started dating and I had not dated the whole time I was in school. And you know if I was somewhere if people weren’t treating me how I deserved to be treated, I told them to stop and if they didn’t, I left...and it made a huge difference in my sense of wellbeing. Moving forward from that moment I claimed the life I wanted.*

The remaining 93% of survivors’ moments of success were social connectedness, mastery, and the normalcy of daily life. Examples include improving a relationship with a child, attending a child’s first softball game, dancing in the kitchen, winning a disability court case, passing a citizenship test, and reaching a sobriety milestone after decades of substance abuse. One survivor identified and shared this success moment:

*One afternoon, when my whole family and I were swimming in a pool. . . we were swimming and eating. . . and the weather was perfect, and everyone was smiling and sharing and playing alongside the rest of the family. Because I felt happy and protected. . . I could look forward, and I was filled with goals and projects, and hope.*

The stories survivors shared illustrate that they derive meaning and

strength far beyond the parameters of the abusive relationship or the walls of a service provider’s office, and in ways that are likely to sustain them long after their involvement with systems has ended. Many of their moments included a sense of being on the threshold of something new or better. This survivor was among many who accomplished or gained something she or others had thought was not possible:

*A few years ago I moved here from [another state]. I didn’t have any money and I needed a car. I’d never made a purchase that big, I didn’t even think I could. But I filled out a credit report and they told me I had excellent credit and could take any car I wanted. . . I felt an incredible feeling of power; like I could take care of myself.*

For the survivors in this project, experiencing mastery caused or contributed to a subsequent shift in how they viewed many other things, including their relationship with the person perpetrating the abuse. In other words, mastery and change outside an abusive relationship was a necessary antecedent to safety and change within an abusive relationship. This experience of success is at odds with the belief intrinsic to many service models: that positive opportunities are only possible if safety and separation from the abuser are achieved first, with the help of services. This misconception is itself rooted in the belief that the person perpetrating the abuse and the violence he/she commits is the source of all a survivor’s problems.

Survivors surveyed in this project most often credited themselves, family members, and God/faith as factors enabling their success. They described the support they received from programs, occasionally naming individual advocates, as particularly helpful, but formal services and professionals were not the only, or even the most important, enabling factors.

*Well, CPS was the one that granted [custody], but I did all the work. Yup, I did all the work. I had to go to domestic violence classes, parenting classes, and I went to the [survivor support] group. And all my effort, that was my saving grace.*

### Other Stakeholders’ Perspectives

Other stakeholders in this project—practitioners, policy advocates, and funders—defined success differently from survivors.<sup>iv</sup> In many cases, practitioners did not make a clear distinction between a successful program or system, and success for a person in that program. As stated by one practitioner who participated in a workshop:

*Success means having a system [of services] available to survivors when they need it.*

In the workshops, 39% of practitioners’ moments of survivor success involved the survivor’s separating from an abusive partner. More than 90% of moments of survivor success that practitioners identified occurred in the context of formal services, such as during a counseling session or support group. Policy advocates and funders described success for survivors in terms of gaining freedom from the abusive relationship in order to have autonomy and decision-making power. They saw access to services and systemic interventions, including criminal justice responses, as the path to that success. Policymakers, funders, and practitioners all placed significant importance on the role of formal, professionalized services in facilitating survivor success. One practitioner put it this way:

*The common theme in getting to success is various services leading to empowering that individual, so you see the transition from being a victim to a survivor; that's when the magic happens.*

## Perspectives on the Workshop Experience and Findings

Despite stakeholders' divergent views on the definition of and pathways to success, participants across stakeholder groups agreed that the workshop process itself provided a means to think about their life experiences and work that was a significant shift from the widespread crisis- and problem-orientation of domestic violence responses. The process instead created a valuable and needed structure for learning from what goes well, intrinsic to a wellbeing perspective.

In Phase II, the findings summarized above were the basis for a series of community conversations across California in which stakeholders identified opportunities for change. Survivors' definitions of success resonated with other stakeholders. They expressed impatience for the field to change and a distinct understanding of the urgency for this change. Recommendations from these community conversations focused on addressing and seeing opportunities for change with particular attention to: 1) the disconnect between practitioners' investment in survivors' identifying primarily as survivors, and survivors' identity actually being rooted in experiences and ambitions beyond the experience of domestic violence; 2) the need for service providers to better understand, recognize, and leverage survivors' informal social networks as the primary drivers of change, progress, and sustainable success; and, 3) the need for funders and practitioners to generate consistent measures of program success that are directly informed by survivors.

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## Implications and Recommendations

Nothing in these findings should be interpreted to mean that the abuse survivors have experienced is mild, fleeting, or justifiable. Nor do the findings suggest that survivors discount the abuse they have endured or the importance of the services and service providers that assisted them. Services are important and needed. Rather, these findings confirm the resiliency of survivors: individuals seek not to be defined by what hurts them, and strive to regain moments of joy and good in the context of community and family.

However, the findings do call into question the wisdom of holding tightly to models that require people to identify with a singular problem

instead of allowing them to show their whole selves, and that emphasize separation from the person abusing them and help from formal systems as the primary paths to safety and wellbeing. Advocates, social service programs, and court systems must reconcile their work with the reality that safety through separation, particularly without regard to the tradeoffs separation requires, is not a viable option for many survivors. Similarly, service providers often engage in practices that may prevent survivors from experiencing and expressing mastery and achieving long-term safety and success. Too often, services and systems pre-determine that a survivor should experience mastery through changing or leaving a relationship with a partner who is abusive. FFI's research suggests a shift in focus is needed: help survivors find and build mastery in areas of their lives which are relevant to them, and leverage those successes to increase survivors' safety.

Much of what we know to be helpful to survivors' increased safety and wellbeing exceeds the reach of the courts. Yet the judicial system has a unique role to play in creating avenues of support and justice. Of particular importance, the manner in which the courts intervene in domestic abuse cases can drive change for better—or worse.

In order to move beyond the revolving door of services, “no shows,” and “frequent flyers” in our systems, advocates and courts must first **ask** survivors, and **listen** to their answers, about what safety and success mean to them, how they achieve these goals, and what tradeoffs they can and will make in order to pursue safety and success. If a survivor relies on a partner who is periodically abusive to transport her severely disabled child to and from a daily living program, she may feel it is not worth it to leave or risk the relationship with her partner, if that could mean losing access to this crucial service for her child. It may be more productive for the court to connect her with community resources that can help her identify and access alternative ways to transport her child **if that's what she wants**. Care must be taken, however, not to assume that she is necessarily eager to cut ties to her partner, even if the transportation issue is addressed. Courts that have partnerships with community resources, social services, and other systems are well positioned to connect with relevant resources in ways that respond to a survivor's understanding of her needs, not someone else's. Even more importantly, courts must work to understand the range of people who contribute to safety and wellbeing, including survivors' community members, family, and friends.

For many survivors, increased safety comes through opportunities to experience personal achievements and through connections to family, friends, and peers. Courts and other government systems that intervene in survivors' lives can serve both their own goals as well as survivors' safety and wellbeing when they move away from policies and practices that separate survivors from important social connections and undermine survivors' chances to experience the mastery often created and found in everyday

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## First Steps: Shifting Our Perspective and Interactions

accomplishments. This may mean granting temporary restraining orders or protection orders when the survivor identifies them as helpful pieces of a safety plan, but it does not mean that these orders are always necessary. Indeed, whether or not safety plans include a restraining order, they should include increasing survivors' social connections and should not routinely separate survivors from their children, loves ones, or even their geographic community unless this is what the survivor seeks.

While courts and advocates focus primarily on risks to a survivor posed by a specific perpetrator, survivors may be far more worried about other risks, such as threats to their legal immigration status, jobs, or housing. Understanding these diverse risks through the lens of balancing tradeoffs provides opportunities to connect survivors with community resources that can help them hold onto the assets that are vitally important to them.

In response to the unique constellation of concerns and strengths each survivor has, every survivor must be asked: Is it worth it to you to make this change? How can we help make it worth it? For example, if the justice system's goal is for a survivor to press charges, the court must understand how the survivor sees the potential consequences and how negative consequences can be mitigated. Effective responses require listening to each survivor's answer and garnering the resources, through partnerships with service providers and other systems, to act quickly and in ways that are relevant and increase wellbeing and success.

As the domestic violence field learns more about how survivors define success in their lives and the range of strategies and supports they need to get there, we can collectively refocus our time and scarce resources. Systems responding to domestic violence must look beyond traditional policies and services to create thoughtful and explicit ways for survivors to express what **they** want and need to achieve safety and wellbeing. Consideration of the implicit and explicit assumptions projected onto people who have survived violence, as well as those who perpetrate violence, is an important start.

To begin this shift in interaction, FFI suggests the following shifts in perspective, which some advocates and courts are already adopting. Moving:

**From:** *"She needs to get safe."*  
**To:** *"She is doing what she can to be safe, given what she knows, her history, and the supports, information, and resources available to her."*

→ Assume that every survivor entering the justice system is actively working to be safe and also balancing the tradeoffs necessary to achieve that safety. Ask questions like: What has worked for you in the past to keep you safe? Who and what help you and your kids be safe?

**From:** *"She needs to understand how the system works."*  
**To:** *"We need to understand how she is making the system work for her."*

→ Courts and advocates are often frustrated by survivors who seek restraining orders, only to seek to have them vacated or not renewed, or who return to an abusive partner. These survivors may be demonstrating how they manage the violence in their relationship and find ways to distance themselves periodically from a partner during a particularly violent period. Others may be vacating the restraining order because the tradeoffs weren't worth it. In other words, these survivors may be demonstrating what works for them.

**From:** *"She needs to understand how serious this is."*  
**To:** *"We need to understand what else is going on in her life that is as important to her as her safety and her children's safety."*

→ While today the most important concern may be the violence that brought her to the emergency department or to court for a restraining order, tomorrow it may be the eviction notice under her door, her elderly mother's hospitalization, or her child's suspension from school. At a minimum, courts and service providers need to recognize this as the juggling of important priorities and the minimizing of tradeoffs. The practitioners and systems a survivor

encounters need to understand and support her efforts to keep the domestic violence from destroying everything else she has in place.

**From:** *"The perpetrator and the survivor."*  
**To:** *"This person perpetrated violence, and this person survived it."*

→ People are more than a single identity, experience, or behavior. Victims may not hold their victimization as their primary identity; perpetrators may be survivors of other forms or incidents of violence.

**From:** *"She's not dependable."*  
**To:** *"She's balancing tradeoffs."*

→ When survivors recant their stories, dismiss charges against the person abusing them, or exit shelter or other programs to return to the abusive relationship, they are providing those who seek to help them with critical information about which tradeoffs are intolerable. Preserving and strengthening opportunities for connection and mastery are important strategies for helping survivors achieve safety and wellbeing. Put simply, most survivors will not sustain change that requires leaving behind their community, routines, support systems, and all sense of personal identity and worth.

**From:** *"He's never going to change."*  
**To:** *"He may change—he may become more violent, he may become less violent."*

→ Awareness of the risk factors for lethality and escalating violence is crucial to determining with some probability, but not certainty, whether a given perpetrator of violence is likely to escalate the violence. In these cases, the court has particular powers to detain that social service programs clearly don't, and can be a critical ally when high risk has been identified. Some perpetrators of violence, however, do more than just "not escalate"—they change for the better. Courts' familiarity and partnerships with reputable batterers' intervention programs can be essential in assisting people to make and sustain their own change.

<sup>i</sup>The full *How Do Survivors Define Success?* report, with actions and recommendations, can be downloaded for free at: <http://fullframeinitiative.org/how-do-survivors-define-success-report-recommendations/>.

<sup>ii</sup>The data were analyzed using both traditional frequency analysis and qualitative story analysis.

<sup>iii</sup>To facilitate readability, we use "survivor" throughout this article, while fully recognizing the importance of not assuming "survivor" is the primary identity of those who have experienced domestic violence.

<sup>iv</sup>It is very possible that practitioners, policy advocates or funders surveyed may also have been survivors. We were careful to ask people to respond in the role associated with the workshop they attended, which divided survivors from practitioners.

<sup>v</sup>To facilitate readability, we will generally use the pronoun "she" when referring to a survivor or victim. We do so with full recognition that people of all genders can be victims, survivors, or perpetrators.

# The Five Domains of Wellbeing

From chief executive to chef, single mother to senior citizen, veteran to veterinarian, adolescent to adult, we all share a set of universal needs that are critical to our wellbeing. These essential human needs are what the Full Frame Initiative defines as the Five Domains of Wellbeing: 1) **social connectedness** to people and communities, in ways that allow us to give as well as to receive, and to feel that we belong; 2) **safety**: the ability to express core parts of our identities without significant harm; 3) **stability** that comes from being able to count on certain things to be the same from day to day and knowing that a small bump won't set off a domino-effect of crises; 4) **mastery**: feeling that we can influence what happens to us and having the skills to navigate situations and life; and, 5) **meaningful access to relevant resources** to meet our basic needs without shame, danger, or great difficulty.

We are universally driven to meet our needs and to build assets in these domains. Yet a range of factors, including our personal history, race, gender, age, community, family, and values, causes each of us to experience the domains in different and deeply personal ways. A pick-up soccer game might give one person a sense of belonging and connectedness, but make another feel awkward and isolated. Travelling across town in traffic to a medical clinic may be a mild hassle for one person, while a returning veteran may feel unsafe and vulnerable sitting in that same traffic. When he's buying clothes for school, a young black man may face a level of scrutiny from security guards at a department store that his white friends do not. These different experiences of the domains—when we feel safe, whether we have meaningful access to resources like health care, clothing, or school—can determine whether it is worth it to a given person to pursue an opportunity or a change.

Building assets in one domain usually means giving up something we value in another: a tradeoff. We all ask ourselves, "Is it worth it to me?" For example, we might ask, "Is it worth it to take a job that pays me significantly more than I make now?" If it means waking 20 minutes earlier, the answer may be "yes." But if it means consistently missing visiting hours

at a parent's nursing home, perhaps it's "no." Sometimes, we identify ways to minimize the tradeoff, to shift the balance toward opportunity (to extend the example, we're able to convince the nursing home to make an exception for visiting after hours twice a week).

We all balance tradeoffs every day. How we weigh the tradeoffs—what we are (or are not) willing to or give up in order to move ahead in life—is also influenced by factors such as personal history, race, gender, age, community, family, values, and context. A high school honors student might be accepted to the college of his dreams, and still might not enroll if it means moving away from a family that depends on him for financial support. A victim of domestic violence might not leave a dangerous situation if it means uprooting an autistic child from a school where the child is successful and safe.

Being able both to decide for **ourselves** what's worth it and to navigate life in ways that build our assets and minimize tradeoffs fosters wellbeing. Yet many people, families, and communities living at the intersection of poverty, violence, and trauma encounter constant threats to their wellbeing. Services designed to help them address a challenge in one domain—for example, gaining access to housing—are rarely designed to take into consideration the tradeoffs that might be unintended consequences of this progress.

If the tradeoffs aren't worth it to the individual, progress is likely to be temporary, and the result is an expensive, inefficient, and even inhumane revolving door of services. For example, if a young mother doesn't accept low-income housing when her name comes to the top of the waiting list, and the system therefore automatically disqualifies her from other housing options, the system has decided housing is the most important asset an individual must pursue, no matter the tradeoffs. But if accepting this housing requires this mother to move across the state, away from her job and the grandmother who provides care to her child who has a disability, the tradeoffs are truly significant and the housing placement—even if she takes it—probably will not last.

To create meaningful and lasting change, systems and services must help people minimize tradeoffs and build assets in the Five Domains of Wellbeing. Doing so can help break cycles of poverty, violence, and trauma that undermine wellbeing.



## The Community Conversation Process

Roughly half of the 40-50 participants in each of the seven Community Conversations 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). These Community Conversations introduced the Five Domains of Wellbeing as an approach for change at the individual, family, community, and system levels, and generated cross-sector interest in change.

After an introduction and call to action by Tim Decker, Director of MCD, FFI provided a one hour overview of the Five Domains of Wellbeing. Participants then watched a screening of the award-winning documentary RICH HILL, which follows three teenage boys and their families in a small town (Rich Hill, Mo). The film provides a powerful illustration of how seeing a person only as an issue or problem that they present leads to a fundamentally inaccurate portrait, and how seeing families in the full frame of their lives allows us to see them accurately. FFI led 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. Tim Decker and FFI 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?"

# Wellbeing, the Missing Piece of the Safety and Permanency Puzzle: A Different Approach from Missouri Children's Division

By Carla Gilzow and Katya Fels Smyth

Like other state child welfare agencies in the U.S., the Missouri Children's Division (MCD), has struggled to ensure immediate safety of children in ways that lead to sustainable, long-term change for children and families. Between 2009 and 2015, Missouri's foster care population increased 41.28%. More than 13,000 of Missouri's children—the most in state history—are in out-of-home placement as of summer 2015. This reflects both an increase in children coming into care, and the sluggish rate that children are being reunified with their families. The federal standard for timely reunification is that at least 76.2% of children removed from their homes will be returned home within one year of their entry into foster care<sup>i</sup>, but in Missouri, only 68.25% of children removed in 2010 returned home that year. In 2014, that percentage dropped to 58.45%. On average, achieving permanent placement in Missouri takes nearly 22 months, 10 months greater than the federal standard.

## Looking Beyond Short-Term Safety at the Expense of Everything Else

In child welfare, a linear process of considerations guides theory and practice: the safety of a child from abusive or neglectful caregivers must be achieved before permanency (of placement) is considered; wellbeing is considered once safety and permanency are achieved. In reality, however, immediate safety for children does not consistently lead to permanency, and permanency is not always a gateway to wellbeing.<sup>ii</sup>

Safety is of paramount concern to and the mandate of MCD. Yet as MCD tackles its challenges, it has begun to question whether some of its efforts that focus just on safety without a context of wellbeing are actually

creating insurmountable obstacles for youth and families.

In 2014, MCD began a systemic transformation that considers wellbeing from the first contact with a family. In making this change, the agency has adopted the Five Domains of Wellbeing as the foundation of its philosophy and practice. The principle that building assets and minimizing tradeoffs in the five domains fosters wellbeing informs MCD's engagement, assessment, and intervention with the youth and families they serve.

## Child Welfare Beyond a State Agency: The Community Conversations

Tim Decker became Director of MCD in 2013 with a mandate to enact significant reforms that would improve outcomes for children and families. Because engaging other agencies, community organizations, and community partners at a systemic level and at the level of the family was too often an afterthought, Decker and his team decided to signal early on that others' perspectives,

**"In reality, however, immediate safety for children does not consistently lead to permanency, and permanency is not always a gateway to wellbeing."**

ideas, and experience were needed to help the agency chart its new course.

In the fall of 2014, with the support of Casey Family Programs (a national foundation focused on strengthening child welfare), MCD and FFI hosted seven day-long Community Conversations across the state of Missouri. These conversations were designed to: generate cross-system buy-in, ideas for action, and collaboration; signal MCD's



belief that child welfare is a responsibility that requires many agencies working with community; and test the potential of the Five Domains of Wellbeing as a framework that could translate across agencies and programs, shifting child welfare from the sole responsibility of one agency. More than 150 MCD workers and an equal number of court staff and judges, physicians, domestic violence advocates, pastors, foster parents, mental health workers, juvenile justice staff, educators, and other child welfare stakeholders participated. See sidebar on p. 8 for a description of the process.

Participants examined their own values and biases through their responses to the families in the film. Participants were also challenged to recognize that people want to be known as more than their problems and mistakes; understanding families are more

than a dirty house or an abuse allegation was a struggle for some participants and easier for others. Most people had to stretch their thinking to see families' strengths, reframe behavior, and accept the value that "life is messy" for each of us. But these challenges were welcomed. Participants provided extensive feedback, including these representative quotes:

- *It takes all of us to make up the child welfare system—we all have a part.*
- *Children's Division and many agency partners have begun a process to fertilize multi-system transformation.*
- *Those of us who support families must also have relationships with each other.*
- *Interagency collaboration and assessing tradeoffs could make all the difference in making positive changes.*

The Community Conversations

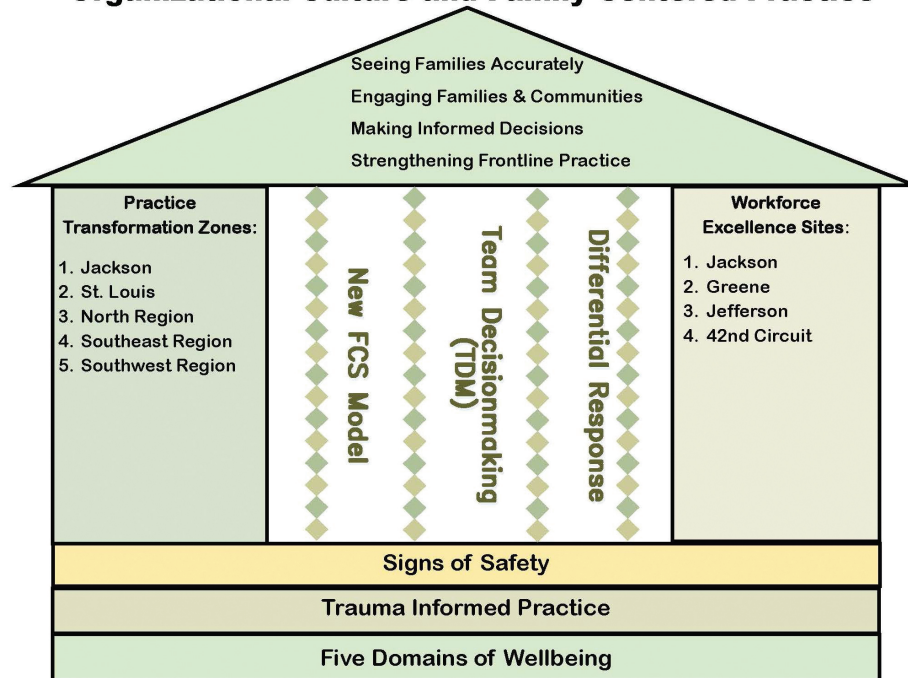
generated four significant themes: seeing families accurately; engaging youth and families; understanding behavior, tradeoffs, and motivators to make decisions that help children and families achieve wellbeing; and the power of a common language and framework across systems. These themes were refined into MCD's four core strategies, articulated in 2015 to guide its policy and practice:

- Seeing Families Accurately
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Making Informed Decisions
- Strengthening Frontline Practice

The following example from MCD illustrates how these four strategies work in concert, leading to different and more effective intervention:

A young mother sits on a couch in her home, wrapped in a blanket. She is

### Organizational Culture and Family-Centered Practice



We can think of MCD as a house, which holds its philosophy, culture, and best practices.

MCD has four strategies that are the roof: seeing families accurately, engaging families and communities, making informed decisions, and strengthening frontline practice. Everything MCD does supports these strategies, and they all work together.

The foundation of the house is The Five Domains of Wellbeing. Because trauma is such a major issue in the lives of the children, families and communities MCD works with, and because trauma interferes

with people's ability to achieve wellbeing, trauma-informed care sits on that wellbeing foundation, and the house then rests on these concepts.

MCD is, of course, charged with keeping kids safe. Signs of Safety is a specific way MCD engages with and works with families around its mandate of safety. With Five Domains of Wellbeing as its foundation, MCD can use Signs of Safety to make sure that the agency is helping children and families achieve safety in a way that is also a pathway to wellbeing and that reduces the impact of trauma.

Several practice transformation zones and workforce excellence sites are piloting new ways to use these frameworks in the field. These are the walls of the house that support the roof, or MCD's four core strategies. These zones and sites create the "room" for MCD to develop a new Family Centered Services model, apply Team Decision Making, and truly apply a Differential Response based on the foundational frameworks and on child, family, and community wellbeing.

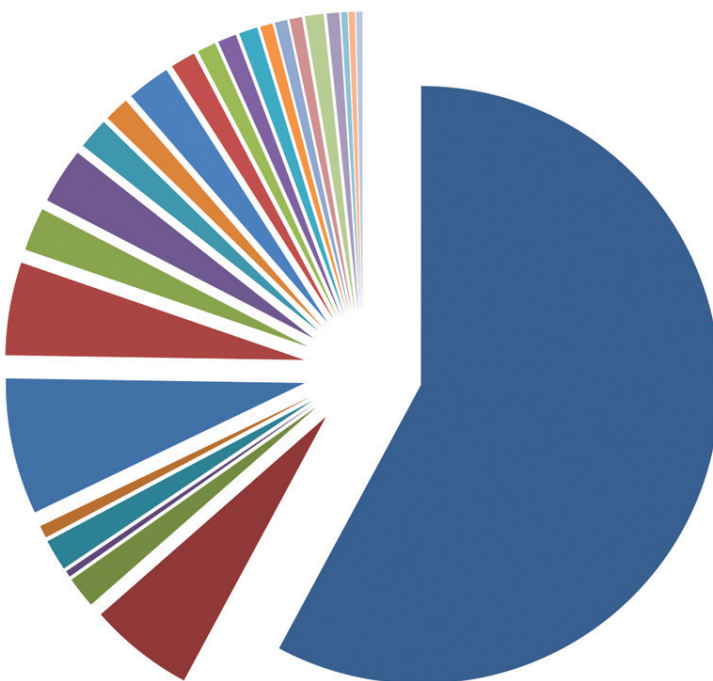
almost unresponsive as a child protection investigator asks her questions. Her infant had been found so hungry he was barely crying in a crib in the back bedroom. His diaper was filthy. The visiting case worker might well have focused her attention on this, and safety/risk assessments alone might identify this mother as a threat.

The reality was more complicated than a neglectful mother. A trained, supported worker knew to ask this mother some

questions about her own wellbeing, not just that of her child. The mother's boyfriend had arrived, high and violent, the day before. He had held her in terror in the front room ever since. Fearing for her child, she had borne the brunt of his violence, terrified that if she had gone to the back room to tend to her crying baby, he would have followed her and hurt or maybe killed the child. When an investigator knocked on the front door, the boyfriend had run out the back.

In broadening her focus from the child's immediate safety to the context of the mother's predicament, the worker came to see the child's situation in context. She could recognize that while the diaper was filthy, the room where the child was found was in order; while he was very hungry when the investigator arrived, he was not underweight. This situation was not the norm for the child. Seeing the situation and the family accurately transformed the worker's initial assessment

## Community Conversations Participants Fields



- Children's Division
- Division of Youth Services
- Department of Social Services
- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Department of Mental Health
- Department of Health & Senior Services
- Courts
- Mental/Behavioral Health
- Foster Care and Adoption
- Education/Schools
- Multiservice
- Housing/Homelessness
- Health/Medicine/Hospitals
- Foster Parents
- Academia
- Domestic Violence Programs
- Child Welfare Organizations
- Counseling
- Faith Communities and Services
- Disability
- Foundations/Philanthropy
- Law Enforcement
- Public Health
- Federal Government
- Other



of the mother as a threat to her child into a recognition she was a protective mother needing a range of support and services.

### Seeing Families Accurately

*Ensuring safety and wellbeing of children compels courts and child serving agencies to see families accurately through the full frame of their lives. —Tim Decker, Director, MCD*

Caseworkers, judges, attorneys, advocates, and others involved in child welfare cases are charged with examining specific incidents and drawing conclusions about the potential for harm, growth, and change in a family. While the allegations of abuse or neglect against parents are often similar, the particular circumstances and context for each family are as unique as the individuals in that family. Yet the judgments, conclusions, and service recommendations are often strikingly similar. Missing is an understanding of the context of the challenges that brought the family to the attention of the child welfare system. The assets within a family or community are often overlooked in the risk calculus of child welfare professionals, as are the other challenges and experiences that would help make distinctions between situations that seem so alike at first. This kind of differentiation is essential to tailored interventions; without it, we risk undermining the very assets that could support wellbeing for a person or family.

Developing an accurate understanding of a family's reality, including distinguishing their assets and challenges in the Five Domains of Wellbeing, helps MCD personnel better identify the strengths a family can draw from to address the root issues endangering their child.

Child welfare workers are trained and expected to pass judgment at critical times. But if this judgment is based on too little or too narrow information, we make false assumptions, expecting that what we have seen from the family at its worst tells us everything there is to know. The human

tendency for confirmation bias—giving more weight to information which corroborates our beliefs or experiences—is strong; it is therefore not surprising that after an original judgment is made, an agency or court often pays more attention to evidence that reinforces its original conclusion. This reflexive judgment needs to be interrupted with a methodical approach to understanding what might be motivating another person's behavior. MCD is encouraging its workers to approach behavior—whether in an initial investigation or when a parent falters in progressing through a service agreement—with curiosity, just as the worker did with the mother in the example above.

### Engaging Families and Communities

*Services alone do not ensure safety or wellbeing. The child welfare system and the courts must engage families and communities as partners in order to balance tradeoffs and achieve simultaneous progress across all five domains. —Tim Decker, Director, MCD*

Ideally, agencies working in child welfare would attempt to understand the risks and benefits families face when making decisions about changes to their behaviors (even unsafe ones). Unfortunately, the traditional approach to child welfare intervention provides little guidance in the benefits of such an approach, and insufficient time to engage families in ways that enable workers to see families accurately, as described above.

MCD is therefore working to ensure that their assessment process promotes engagement and acknowledges the unique perspectives and strengths of each family, while recognizing that such a thorough assessment protocol can be challenging for child welfare agencies. Timelines are tight and families—often for good reason—can be less than forthcoming. But these families also know what makes their child smile; they know his afterschool routine, favorite video game, nicknames, and what scares him at night. Information about a child's stability

Trauma deeply impacts how people experience each of the Five Domains of Wellbeing and how and whether they have true access to a Domain. But trauma does not eliminate the drive people have to meet their needs in each of the Five Domains of Wellbeing or their need to minimize tradeoffs as they build assets. We can think of wellbeing as a heart, and the pathways to each of the Domains as arteries. Trauma narrows those arteries, cutting off options for wellbeing. Trauma-informed care—a major focus at MCD enabled in part through an innovative, cross-agency partnership with the Missouri Department of Mental Health—can be the stent that widens the arteries again. Staff from the Department of Mental Health are working closely with FFI and MCD to articulate clearly the essential links between addressing trauma, providing trauma-informed care and increasing wellbeing.

“anchors” (the small but vital patterns in our days)—how a child meets her need for mastery, and what makes her feel safe—is critical to making a decision about whether that child should be placed in out-of-home care or allowed to remain in the home with supports and services. Authentically engaging the family—including youth and children—will provide the agency with a clearer, deeper picture of the family's functioning. It also will provide new leverage points for change. Application of the Five Domains of Wellbeing gives workers structures to learn from what goes well, as in solution focused case work. For example, rather than simply assessing how often a mother hits her child, workers are trained to identify what assets were in place on the days she didn't strike her child, and how can we get that to happen more often?

Engagement is essential to case plans and service agreements that are relevant,

## The Federal Reasonable and Prudent Parenting standard

The Federal Reasonable and Prudent Parenting standard, included in the Prevent Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act enacted by Congress in 2014, recognizes that some policies designed to ensure the safety of children in out-of-home placement often compromise their ability to have rich experiences and develop life skills. In absence of such a standard, policies commonly dramatically curtail the ability of youth in foster care to participate in extracurricular and social activities. For example, practice norms and courts often require background checks of parents hosting a sleepover for their child's friends, one of whom happens to be in foster care. Faced with the embarrassing prospect of requesting personal information from his friend or friend's parents, the youth has to decide whether to forgo the birthday party or explain to the attendees why the information is needed. While the policy may make sense in terms of safety, the overnight may be about social connection for this youth, not safety. Youth in foster care need opportunities to try, fail, and succeed in normal environments like sleepovers. Developing social connections for adolescents is extremely important for appropriate growth and life success. A sleepover does not ensure wellbeing, but preventing a youth from building assets in the domains of wellbeing can dead-end any chance of safety translating into lasting change for the youth. The Reasonable and Prudent Parenting standard allows foster parents and workers to make decisions that are more specific and relevant to the child, the opportunity and the context (for example), minimizing the tradeoffs for the youth. MCD is taking this principle and applying it far more broadly across its system.

appropriate, and co-owned by families. It is also essential to a family's ability to see a child welfare worker as a resource, not a threat. This kind of partnership, however, requires choice, control, trust, and transparency between the caseworker and the family, which may feel challenging to a child welfare professional who is operating in an environment of increased scrutiny and liability. MCD leadership is working hard to send clear and consistent signals that the kind of authentic engagement they are seeking does not amount to collusion, and is in service of better assessment and decisions that are truly co-owned by a family.

Although there is broad recognition that supportive communities beyond government service and community-based programs are essential to the wellbeing of children and families, child welfare interventions rarely account for or incorporate these assets in their work. It is one thing to know that friends and families—even with their inevitable imperfections—are often the most flexible and reliable source of long-term support. It is another thing to engage those social supports and to help a parent or child navigate the complexities of those relationships. A caseworker is far more likely to help an isolated mother access antidepressants than to encourage her to start going to the Wednesday night church supper group. MCD recognizes that unless its workforce is equipped to draw on natural supports (family, friends, librarians, shop owners, pastors, mechanics, and others who are community for children), neither families nor child welfare interventions will succeed. Rather than telling workers to engage with families, MCD is beginning to train and coach staff to engage families and their natural supports.

### Making Informed Decisions that Consider the Cost of Change

*The Children's Division operates from a stance of critical inquiry and uses a variety of interview techniques and assessment tools to determine safety*

*and risk of harm in the relationship between a child and the child's caregiver(s) and their environment. The Five Domains of Wellbeing helps us understand how an individual—whether child or caregiver or other person—experiences safety in a relationship, a community, or a situation. This information can help us make more informed decisions about removal, placement, activities, and how a child or a caregiver is responding in a given situation, utilizing their strengths, and weighing tradeoffs. This allows for specific and individualized safety planning, supports the development of a sustainable safety network, reduces trauma to the child and family, and supports sustainable change. —Tim Decker, Director, MCD*

All too often, child welfare interventions fail to achieve their desired effect, and can leave the family worse off for trying. For example, parents may be mandated to attend counseling or complete parenting classes, but the family is no closer to resolving the safety issue that caused the removal of their child because the issue is not related to parenting skills. Weeks of attending classes, however, cost the parent hours at work they needed to pay their rent and utilities; the added financial stress may be a new destabilizing force in their home. The intervention was not crafted with consideration of the family's unique context, their natural supports, or the impact of focusing narrowly on safety instead of accounting for both safety and wellbeing.

In the FFI Community Conversations, participants expressed a widespread desire to move away from generic case planning and compliance-oriented intervention. Informed decisions and tailored case plans rest on having a full and accurate understanding of the family, which requires family engagement. Additionally, MCD is investing in training and professional development to equip workers to design tailored plans.

Even with the most thoughtfully crafted service plan, however, explicit attention to tradeoffs is imperative. The following

**“Rather than simply assessing how often a mother hits her child, workers are trained to identify what assets were in place on the days she didn’t strike her child, and how can we get that to happen more often?”**

example is drawn from the Five Domains of Wellbeing introductory training all workers in MCD receive: A young boy in foster care flies into a rage when his foster parents deny him a Monster energy drink after school; they calmly tell him they don’t allow sugary soft drinks, but he is welcome to juice, milk or water. The next day, another rage; the third day, he refuses to go to school. The foster parents feel that they are not able to handle his behavior, and the child welfare worker feels she has little choice but to move him, this time to a group home. What they failed to understand was that one of this child’s few anchors—his stability assets—was having a Monster drink after school. Increasing his safety created a tradeoff that, for him, was not worth it, even if he can’t quite articulate it that way. An informed decision that explicitly and intentionally seeks to minimize tradeoffs might lead to a decision by the foster family to allow the boy to have Monster for 10 days while he settled into new routines. Perhaps the rages wouldn’t be so great, and he’d go to school. Once the cost of changing the behavior is understood, reducing or sometimes eliminating tradeoffs is necessary in order to ensure intervention success can begin.

When people don’t change, or change doesn’t last, some professionals believe the family doesn’t want the change badly enough or doesn’t feel the change is important. Others believe families are weak or resistant. Understanding the cost of change or the tradeoff needed to sustain the change may lead to more engaged families and better outcomes. For example, child welfare workers, courts, and advocates often find

themselves frustrated by a mother who won’t leave her boyfriend who is abusive, even if her children have been removed. The system has decided that if she would only leave him, the family could be reunited. The mother won’t help the courts in their case against him; she won’t make him leave the home and she won’t leave him; and the children are languishing in a group home, where their behavior has deteriorated markedly.

Trained MCD workers might approach this mother with curiosity to understand how she sees the tradeoffs. They learn that three generations of this mother’s family (and her abuser’s family) live in this community; they and her church will shun her if she doesn’t stay with her boyfriend. Without her community’s support, she cannot possibly provide for her children, so she stays in community and tries to get her children back. Application of the Five Domains of Wellbeing helps workers identify the loss of social connectedness and belonging, which provide her with meaningful access to relevant resources, as too great a tradeoff. Minimizing the tradeoff means engaging family members in a situation like this as assets in safety planning for the children, not as the deficits who are keeping a mother bound to an abusive partner. If the violence has clear escalation patterns, could an aunt or cousins down the street provide the extra bedroom for the kids when the violence threatens to escalate? This is not pandering to an abuser—it’s helping kids stay safe and connected to family and community, and giving MCD a way to engage the mother around solutions, not just crises.

This example is not meant to imply that a survivor should always leave (or want to leave) or always stay, or that children should always (or never) be with parents when domestic violence is present. Instead, it is intended to illustrate how thinking differently about assets and tradeoffs helps child welfare engage differently, assess more fully, and make decisions so that safety is a stepping stone to wellbeing.

## Strengthening Frontline Practice

MCD’s fourth strategy recognizes that families engage with frontline workers and that investment in these workers’ skills is imperative. Efforts include revamping training curricula and reorganizing and decentralizing the training units. In 2015, MCD began piloting new processes to reduce unnecessary and unhelpful paperwork and re-establish frontline workers as change agents. New career ladders, leadership training and support for supervisors and management, and a focus on worker retention that aligns with the Five Domains of Wellbeing are enhancing this effort. A new full day training on the Five Domains of Wellbeing is now part of orientation for all new workers; all current workers will have received this training retroactively by early 2016. The impact on the field is wide-ranging and positive, as described by a field supervisor:

**“Participants in the Community Conversations expressly pointed to the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework as the common language that, when applied across systems, can reduce friction between agencies and enable families to navigate more effectively the different systems they encounter throughout the course of interventions.”**

*In my [judicial] Circuit, which is a very rural area, we do not have a lot of opportunities for resources. There was a difficult case dealing with unsanitary living conditions and supervision issues in a very small town. The family consisted of multiple generations that had all grown up in the town and had built roots. There was discussion of having the family move to another town in the Circuit to start fresh in a “clean” home and be closer to some resources. I had a discussion with my workers about the true benefits of this transition. We would be asking a family to move away from everything they have ever known, to cut all of their ties to their childhood community, and to openly accept what we believed was a better way of life. Ultimately, we came to the realization that moving would not actually correct the issue at hand. It would not be a miracle fix for the family. It was determined to continue working with the family in their community, and attempt to implement services that we can provide to better their way of life. Five Domains of Wellbeing really did change my mindset on issues like this one, where the quick answer used to be to start over, rather than start from within. — Mike Beetsma, Children’s Services Supervisor, 43rd Circuit*

Additional efforts to support integration of the Five Domains of Wellbeing at the frontlines include:

- Training supervisors and managers in using the Five Domains of Wellbeing to reinforce the training that frontline workers receive, and to equip them to use the framework to support clinical consultations, help workers understand family behaviors, minimize tradeoffs, and work through resistance with families to create sustainable change.
- Developing and providing specialized training for older youth workers on adolescent development in the context of the Five Domains of Wellbeing.
- Creating recorded webinars for staff throughout the agency to gain basic

information about the reform efforts and the role staff play in ensuring positive results and a wellbeing orientation.

### A Common Language

Systems that intervene in the lives of a family often make value judgments about what tradeoffs a family should make to achieve sustainable change. For families with case plans from multiple agencies, the conflicts between these priorities can be unresolvable. Participants in the Community Conversations articulated the need for more cooperation and communication among agencies in the larger child welfare community, and a recognition that without a common language, collaboration often remains aspirational. Participants in the Community Conversations expressly pointed to the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework as the common language that, when applied across systems, can reduce friction between agencies and enable families to navigate more effectively the different systems they encounter throughout the course of interventions.

This increases efficiency. As one example, since 2012, Missouri’s Division of Youth Services, the state’s juvenile justice agency, has been using the Five Domains of Wellbeing as a primary focus in assessment and the basis of much of its treatment and community integration plans for youth and families involved with them. In Missouri, as in most states, there is tremendous overlap between child welfare and juvenile justice involvement in the lives of families. In many states, these agencies have radically different cultures and priorities. A wellbeing orientation can help create a natural bridge between a pursuit of children’s safety, permanency, and wellbeing on the one hand, and a pursuit of public safety and youth rehabilitation to wellbeing through treatment on the other hand. In 2015, several courts and other systems in Missouri trained staff and worked on policies and practices to make a common language a reality. That multiple agencies in Missouri are applying and investigating application of the framework offers even greater possibilities for helping families make change that lasts. Additional steps include introducing community

partners and foster parent agencies to this wellbeing orientation.

### Additional Steps Forward

Making wellbeing the foundation of child welfare practice to increase the safety of children requires structural change, training, coaching, and strong leadership. Additional steps include:

MCD is redesigning its Family Centered Services (preventative services) model. Through minimizing paperwork, reducing requirements that lead to a cookie-cutter approach, and explicitly expecting a more full frame engagement, MCD hopes to reduce the number of families with involvement in multiple systems. MCD is also articulating and relentlessly sticking to values and core beliefs. For Family Centered Services, these values and core beliefs are:

- The wellbeing of children is tied to the wellbeing of their families.
- Families are made up of whole people.
- All people have strengths and assets.
- When everyone brings their strengths, partnership is more likely.
- Partnerships and relationships are the catalysts of change.
- Making changes is hard; sustaining change is harder.

The Five Domains of Wellbeing is also being applied in a pilot designed to strengthen Missouri’s differential response, an explicit strategy (required by statute in Missouri) that tiers the response of the agency to the expected severity and risk in a given allegation. Charlotte Gooch, Unit Manager of the Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline notes, “Viewing families in the full frame of their lives will provide more opportunities for classifying child abuse and neglect reports as family assessments versus investigations. This approach leads to a broader understanding of the family’s dynamics rather than a narrow focus on the reported incident of abuse/neglect.”

To address the role of policy in supporting strong practice, Policy Development Specialists have been trained to identify and create avenues to address tradeoffs when developing new or updating existing policy.

The energy and engagement of MCD—from leadership to frontline workers—has been extraordinary, and staff are expressing positive impact of the new focus of wellbeing reaching far beyond their work with families. Wendy Libey, Training Technician II, MCD Northern Region Training Unit, shared the following reflection:

*During my initial introduction to the Five Domains, I was instantly pulled in by the relatability of the framework. I could easily start the process of thinking differently about how we can truly help families make sustainable change. Once I spent more time with the framework, really digging in to a deeper understanding of how the domains and the concept of tradeoffs connect, I found myself constantly asking in my personal life “is it worth it?” and slowing down to try and figure out why. I began hearing conversations at home and at work differently, and now hear people talking about their wellbeing every day. I’m so often relating the information people tell me to the framework, and the connections are so clear, I have a hard time turning it off.*

*As a trainer I love being able to spread my excitement about the framework to others in the agency. I’ve heard new employees relate the framework back to social work practices they learned about in school and to core agency philosophies already in place. Supervisors have said that while this is a new way to think about working with families, it connects with the core reason they came to the agency. It is a joy to be able to introduce a framework that provides a real and tangible guide to family engagement and family-centered practice. The framework provides a way to consider how we broaden our conversations with*

*others, to not only help us see them more accurately, but also to help us be purposeful in supporting them through a change process that works for THEM and is sustainable. I’m excited to watch the evolving implementation of the Five Domains of Wellbeing framework throughout the agency. The connections are so clear in our personal lives, in our direct work with families, and in how we support employees at every level. . . the possibilities for integration of the framework appear limitless.*

The families involved in MCD do not create sustainable change overnight; MCD cannot be transformed overnight either. But the early signs are deeply promising. The language of tradeoffs is explicit and common in the Central Office and increasingly in the field. Courts are having their staff trained, and communities are engaging with FFI and MCD to hold more Community Conversations to spark local cross-sector collaboration.

For FFI, the extraordinary energy and efforts of CD leadership and staff, and their hunger for change has made this partnership a signature one that offers an example for the country. For Tim Decker, Director of MCD, “Safety for children can be achieved without compromising their wellbeing, compelling multiple system partners to think differently and embrace strategies that support sustainable change at the individual, family, and community level. The Five Domains of Wellbeing is the organizing framework that can help us all make this vision a reality.”

<sup>[1]</sup>Background Paper: [Child and Family Services Reviews National Standards](#) ACF Administration for Children and Families U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES Administration on Children, Youth and Families Background Paper Issuance Date: 07/13/2012 Originating Office: Children’s Bureau [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr\\_background\\_paper.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr_background_paper.pdf).

<sup>[2]</sup>ACF Administration for Children and Families U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES Administration on Children, Youth and Families Log No: ACYF-CB-IM-12-04 Issuance Date: 04/17/2012 Originating Office: Children’s Bureau <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1204.pdf>.

To learn more about the Full Frame Initiative–Missouri Children’s Division Collaboration around Wellbeing, join us for a webinar:

## Wellbeing, the Missing Piece of the Safety & Permanency Puzzle: A Different Approach from Missouri Children’s Division

Date: February 26, 2016

Time: 9:00 a.m. PST  
10:00 a.m. MT  
11:00 a.m. CT  
12 noon EST

Duration: 90 minutes

Faculty: Tim Decker, Director, Missouri Children’s Division and Katya Fels Smyth, CEO, Full Frame Initiative

To participate, contact Alicia Lord at [Alord@ncjfcj.org](mailto:Alord@ncjfcj.org)

# SYNERGY

**RCDV:CPC** The Newsletter of the Resource Center on Domestic Violence:  
Child Protection & Custody

A Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

NCJFCJ | Synergy | Vol 19 | No 1 | Winter 2016

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## FAMILY VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS

## FAMILY VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS PROGRAM

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