



# Using film to transcend boundaries and transform child welfare

## Systems struggle to see the full picture

From child welfare to juvenile justice to education, children involved in systems or who need extra support are seen as different or even deviant. Too often, this “othering” is carried forward into system reform efforts, perpetuating the problems that reforms seek to address and intensifying inequities. What if instead systems were built, first and foremost, on the recognition of what all kids have in common?

## To change the destination, start from a different place

When Tim Decker took over as Director of Missouri Children’s Division (the state’s child welfare agency), he partnered with the Full Frame Initiative (FFI) to rebuild child welfare with this recognition. The starting point was the Community Conversations.

Through seven day-long convenings across Missouri, FFI and Decker brought together more than 300 people to challenge the assumption that kids involved in systems are fundamentally different. Many participants worked for the Children’s Division, but more than half did not. They were foster parents, pastors, teachers, police, librarians and others who have a profound impact on the welfare of children generally.

## Using film to bridge divides and shift perspectives

Instead of examining families in the context of child welfare, the Community Conversations rooted participants in what all children and families share: a universal drive for wellbeing. To do this, FFI leveraged the power of film for its ability to bridge divides, unlock insights and inspire action. First, FFI introduced the Five Domains of Wellbeing - the essential needs and drives we all share that create health, hope and resilience - and then screened the Sundance award-winning documentary *RICH HILL*, which follows three boys in economically distressed Rich Hill, Missouri. While not shying away from the myriad challenges the boys face, the film focuses on their strengths, hopes and dreams, and their love for their families.

FFI then facilitated discussions of characters and events in *RICH HILL* through the lens of the Five Domains of Wellbeing, leading to perspective shifts as participants came face-to-face with how our brains oversimplify who is “good” and “bad” and experienced how a wellbeing perspective holds a fuller picture. Participants then explored what would be possible if kids and families involved in child welfare were seen through this lens.



## A new trajectory for systems, rooted in community

Starting with wellbeing triggered a transformative community-wide response that transcended divides of place, politics and perspective. Participants concluded that children and families didn't need more programs - they needed full support across public agencies, nonprofits, businesses, religious institutions, the broader community and families themselves. Through this shared understanding came collective ownership over the solutions.



From these events, a new model for child welfare emerged that had wellbeing at its foundation, leading to overhauling staff training, policies, supervision and practices. The Children's Division responded to feedback during the Conversations about how its own policies kept staff, foster parents, police, pastors and others from helping kids and families have a fair shot at wellbeing. They responded by eliminating policies that, for example, kept kids in foster care from attending normal activities such as slumber parties, after-school activities and others. Challenging behavior that was normal and predictable for adolescents was no longer pathologized and attention was paid to differentiate between neglect and poverty. Paperwork was reduced so that child welfare workers could work with kids, not sit at their computers. Agency leaders identified new opportunities for collaboration and champions surfaced across the state who were tapped to help shape child welfare reform in the years that followed.

Over the next five years, FFI supported shifts in culture, policy and practice within the Children's Division, other agencies (like courts and mental health), and communities like St. Louis. FFI brought community conversations to schools and courts to dig into new solutions to drug epidemics and community violence, and continues to leverage film and other forms of art to shift perspectives in our systemic change work across the country.

"The Community Conversations unlocked new ways of thinking, acting and relating to one another. This profoundly impacted child welfare workers and agency partners, and changed the public's view of the work and willingness to become involved. As a result, programs, agencies and systems are working together alongside communities to enact sorely needed changes alongside children and families. After 8 years, we're still seeing the ripple effects of this shift."

— Tim Decker, former Missouri Children's Division Director

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To learn more about this partnership or FFI contact us at [learn-more@fullframeinitiative.org](mailto:learn-more@fullframeinitiative.org)



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The Full Frame Initiative is a social change organization that partners with a growing cohort of pioneering organizations, systems and communities across the country to fundamentally shift their focus from fixing problems to fostering wellbeing – the needs and experiences essential for health and hope. Together, we are creating possibilities for lasting change in people's lives and sparking a broader movement that replaces poverty, violence, trauma and oppression with wellbeing and justice.

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