

2019 NATIONAL DIALOGUES ON BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
COLLABORATION: AN ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCK FOR CREATING VALUE

ASSOCIATE JUSTICE DAWN BEAM, MISSISSIPPI SUPREME COURT

I. Introduction (slide 1)

Good afternoon, I'm Dawn Beam and I serve on the Mississippi Supreme Court. Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today about collaboration across different fields. I'm honored to share with you what we're doing in Mississippi to help children.

But first, you all might be wondering what a judge knows about collaboration – we sit behind a bench in our black robes, make our final decisions, bang our gavels, and that's that. But the truth is—it's not that simple on the state's highest court... or in life, in general. I work with eight other men. We argue about different things every day. But at the end of the day, we have to work together to make the best law.

That makes collaborating difficult sometimes. When you have one closely held belief which you defend with all your might and someone else has a ***different*** closely held belief, it's hard not to take that personally. But what I've found is this: at the end of the day, we are all just people... trying to make a difference... and also—food can do a lot to mend fences. After each of our most heated meetings, all of the justices get together and “break bread” over a catered lunch. I don't know how we'd be able to move on from some of our disagreements if not for that one meal.

Learning how to collaborate—and realizing the benefit of it—isn't something reserved for just professional or scientific settings. From the day we enter this world, we learn each day how to interact with other people. We learn how to cry when we are hungry or tired or need something. As we get older, we learn how to get along with siblings, friends, teachers, spouses, children, bosses, and coworkers. No one is doing life alone... because no one can ***do*** life alone. We are interconnected. So how do we apply this interconnectivity and collaboration to our causes? And how is a judge going to tell us how to do it?

II. Overview of the foster care problem in the MS (slide 2)

In addition to serving on the Supreme Court, I also participate in several efforts involving children's justice issues. I co-chair the Commission on Children's Justice—which is an effort designed to work with the three different branches of government to improve the child welfare system. I also serve as the co-chair and founder of the Mississippi Family First Initiative, which is a sub-entity of the Commission. Mississippi is making some great strides regarding child welfare. This is information I received at a national conference recently—where our state was applauded for leading the country in foster care reduction. The national trend is an increase in placements. Which is great news because Mississippi is usually doesn't lead the country any anything good.

And just because we have good news doesn't mean that there isn't more work to be done. We all want our children—the future of our country—to be safe and protected. While we may have well intended efforts, a look at Mississippi's child welfare numbers proves that our efforts were at times mis-focused. A vast majority of children—almost 70%—are removed from their parents and their homes are due to neglect. A large driving force behind child neglect in our state is untreated substance abuse and poverty. One day in any youth court in Mississippi will show you how the toll these issues take on these families.

Our collaborative efforts through the Commission on Children's Justice and the Mississippi Family First Initiative address all of this. The joint efforts of all of our stakeholders helped to improve these statistics. The judiciary works with different state agencies—like Medicaid, MDCPS, MDHS, and other overlapping agencies.

III. *Explaining Mississippi Family First Initiative (slide 3)*

In furtherance of that goal, the Supreme Court started the Mississippi Family First Initiative. The heart of the Initiative is solely collaboration. We work to connect resources with people in need – from the top of our state to the pilot counties... right down to the individuals who need assistance. We do this is by looking at child welfare as a whole picture or system, instead of isolated cases.

In 2016, I joined the First Lady of Mississippi in creating a research group to see how all these individual risk factors pile up and impact mothers who are addicted to drugs. The result of that study showed that a substance-using mother in the system is not “just a drug addict.” With no employment or housing or education or transportation or access to rehabilitation... and sometimes with an abusive significant other, she is trapped.... She is the victim of a system that operates in silos – a system which refuses to work together for her betterment and misses all of signs of trauma that scar her and her child.

Our job is not to take children out of poverty and find them a “better” home... One with a middle-class family who can comfortably afford the child's every need and want. Our job is to protect children at risk of abuse and severe neglect, yes, but to provide families with the wholistic support they need to provide safe homes... stable lives... and self-sufficient incomes. And the way we provide that support is through the efforts everyone in this room is pursuing – through domestic violence prevention, opioid treatment, mental health care... the list goes on and on for how we can better support these families.

This picture shows the design behind our collaboration. The Initiative aims to break down the silos that these stakeholders usually operate within. These people all touch the same lives. We want all of these players talking the same language and striving for

the same goal—the judges, the non-profits, the agencies, businesses, churches, and so on.

IV. *How we got people to the table (slide 4)*

The most important part for collaboration on this scale is “buy-in.” If your stakeholders don’t believe in what you’re doing or are not on the same page, collaborating will be difficult. We achieved this by thinking about who we needed at the table to address this issue—which you saw in the last slide.

The next step was planning. Here’s a timeline of how we planned out the Initiative. We brought everyone together for an initial dream meeting where a facilitator helped our stakeholders dream up big ideas for how they want the system to look. We asked: What would it look like to lift families up with wholistic preventative care? And what do we need to do different to make this happen?

After that, a smaller group called the Steering Committee met multiple times from June to July, planning how the Initiative was going to look. We had a stakeholder from each of the circles from the last page.

On July 30, we launched the Initiative at the Westin. With the help of our friends at Casey Family Programs, we put together an event at the Westin that the media hailed as the “greatest meeting of statewide leaders in years.” Children’s justice is an issue which people can rally behind relatively easily—so the buy-in was there. We just had to communicate to everyone that we had a meaningful plan. Once you identify what your obstacle is going to be for buy-in, getting the people to the table to collaborate is easy.

V. *Keeping Up the Energy – It’s About Adjustments (slide 5)*

Once the Initiative was launched, we went into our pilot counties to conduct similar analysis at the local level. The counties model their structure off of the state structure. Each quarter, the Initiative meets and gets reports from the local pilots.

The biggest advantages we realized we needed to prioritize is to be patient and encouraging. Not everyone is going to follow these plans perfectly. We put together step-by-step plans for each county. And do you know how many counties followed our plans exactly? Zero. Every single county understood what we were trying to achieve and they morphed the program to their needs.

The results have been incredible. After just a year, our stakeholders have already made incredible impact. In the Mississippi Delta, community leaders are working to provide job fairs and transportation services. Down closer to the Gulf Coast, a little boy was provided emergency dental services for free that his mother was too poor to afford. In Tupelo—the birth place of Elvis, the collaborative group was able to give a parent fresh start out of jail for failure to pay child support – they set him up on a

community service repayment plan, helped with groceries... electricity... everything he needed so that his child could stay with him and not go into foster care. These children were never removed from their home thanks to the powerful new network of do-gooders established through this Initiative.

We had pilots that met multiple times per month and others who took full summers off. One county created a coalition and another county is basically being run by one steering chair. In all situations, the Court remained an encouraging force and patiently waited for the counties to come up with a plan that fit their collaborations and needs best.

As Mississippi's Family First Initiative progresses into its next year, our hope is to expand similar wrap-around networks and solutions which address housing, addiction, and mental health needs in our state. We aren't afraid to try things and come back to the drawing board when they didn't work. It's all about adjusting.

VI. Conclusion – Inspirational bit about connecting; what that means to us as individuals (slide 6)

Before I wrap up, I want to leave you with the vision of the Initiative. We are establishing safe, stable, and self-sufficient families for Mississippi's children: one family and one community at a time.

That isn't a task that can happen without collaboration. It also isn't a task that is going to happen over night or be perfect in its progress. I bet that your vision isn't simple, either... otherwise you wouldn't be here listening about collaboration. It's important for us, as collaborators, to remember our vision... to encourage ourselves... and to break bread with everyone, even when things get tense – like when I argue with the Justices on the court.

All of this started with working together. And as we all continue, we will work together – with other people in our profession, with people outside of our profession, and with people whose lives we are trying to improve. I wish you all the best of luck with your efforts and I'm available to answer any questions you might have on how to build your collaborative, cross discipline teams.

As a side note—I've included the first year report on our initiative on the thumb drive. This goes deeper into our stakeholders and the progress of this effort from this past year.