

# Quick Takeaways

## Youth Mental Health Action Lab: Leveraging First Spouses to Drive Change March 9-10, 2026 | Asheville, North Carolina

On March 9-10 NGA hosted First Spouses and state policy teams from across the country for a series of discussions on actionable steps states and territories can take to improve youth mental health outcomes. For more information on this event and upcoming NGA activities, please contact [Jess Kirchner](#).

### Overview of Youth Mental Health Priorities

#### Speakers

- North Carolina First Lady Anna Stein
- Oklahoma First Lady Sarah Stitt
- Jordan Hynes, Program Director, Children and Families
- Kelly Crosbie, Director of the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
- Sharon Bell, Deputy Director, Division of Child and Family Wellbeing, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

#### Overview

North Carolina leaders and First Spouses from multiple states convened for NGA's Youth Mental Health Action Lab to address the growing youth mental health crisis, emphasizing the bipartisan and shared responsibility of the work. During the opening remarks, Jordan Hynes shared how NGA has been building on this effort since 2022, most recently working with six states — Alabama, Hawaii, Kentucky, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Virginia — through a 2024-2025 project to help these states advance their goals in this area, with this convening marking the kickoff of NGA's 2026 Youth Mental Health initiative. First Ladies Stein and Stitt offered perspectives on the importance of youth mental health and wellbeing, and North Carolina agency leaders shared information on the state's landscape, challenges, and recent innovation.

#### Quick Takeaways

1. **Youth mental health is a bipartisan, cross-state priority.** Every state or territory is grappling with rising rates of depression and anxiety, and suicide rates among young people remain alarmingly high despite recent progress. Collaboration across states and territories is essential to share and expand best practices.
2. **Suicide and self-harm statistics are alarming.** In North Carolina, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-18. High-risk groups include LGBTQ+ youth, girls (self-harm), and increasingly, black male youth.
3. **Stigma and lack of awareness are as big a barrier as access.** Almost half of those who don't receive mental health care don't seek it due to stigma around asking for help.

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Normalizing conversations about mental health, as First Ladies Stitt and Stein both modeled, is as critical as building out services.

4. **Crisis infrastructure in North Carolina is expanding through a "three-part" model.** North Carolina is investing in *someone to contact* (988, peer mentors), *someone to respond* (mobile crisis/co-response teams), and *a safe place* (25 mental health urgent cares and community crisis beds). The framework is designed to be replicable across states and territories.
5. **Schools and telehealth are key levers for reaching underserved youth.** Embedding behavioral health services in schools can improve engagement and remove barriers like transportation. Tele-behavioral health pilots are now active in 24 rural or underserved North Carolina communities, supported in part by philanthropic funding from the Duke Endowment.
6. **Family-centered care and peer support are emerging best practices.** North Carolina is training certified Family Peer Support Specialists and is working to make this service Medicaid-reimbursable. Keeping children connected to family, even through therapeutic foster care, can improve long-term outcomes.

### **From the Top Down: How a Champion Can Disrupt Longstanding Mindsets**

#### **Speakers:**

- Oklahoma First Lady Sarah Stitt
- Brett Hayes, Director of Hope Awareness Training, Hope Rising USA
- Moderated by Brianna Keys, Independent Consultant

#### **Overview:**

This session explored Oklahoma's implementation of the Science of Hope as a systems-level strategy to improve outcomes for vulnerable families and the workforce serving them. Leaders described hope as an evidence-based, cognitive framework that is simple, teachable, and applicable across populations and agencies.

#### **Quick Takeaways:**

1. **First Lady Stitt was the impetus and engine of Oklahoma's Hope Science work.** Driven by personal experience, the First Lady leveraged academic and institutional relationships to advance the agencies' adoption of Hope Science as a policy practice.
2. **Hope is a cognitive framework, not just a feeling.** The Science of Hope is built around three concrete elements: goals, pathways, and willpower. Purposely designed to make it simple enough for staff, children, and vulnerable populations to understand and apply.
3. **When leading from the top-down, start small and strategic, then scale.** Oklahoma began the Hope Science work with the state's child welfare office in their Department of Human Services (DHS), which is the state's largest agency touching the most vulnerable

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families, rather than rolling it out state-wide immediately. Their success created organic demand from other agencies.

4. **Common language drives cross-agency collaboration.** One of the most powerful outcomes from the effort was that different agencies (DHS, juvenile affairs, corrections, schools) began speaking the same language, enabling more cohesive and coordinated service delivery for families.
5. **The workforce benefits as much as the families served.** Implementing the Science of Hope led to measurable reductions in staff turnover and burnout, which is critical in high-stress human services roles where morale is chronically challenged.
6. **Systems-level change must accompany individual-level shifts.** The child welfare agency began reviewing internal policies to identify where hope was being "stolen" from employees or families; Hope became embedded in policy, not just culture.
7. **Legacy requires intentional infrastructure.** To outlast administrative turnover, First Lady Stitt established a foundation, hope-driven coaching programs, and parenting initiatives to ensure the work survives political transitions.

### From the Bottom Up: Elevating Existing State and Territory Initiatives

#### Speakers

- North Carolina First Lady Anna Stein
- Kelly Crosbie, Director of the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
- Sam Grimm, Chief of Staff, Office of First Lady Anna Stein
- Moderated by Maggie Bizzell, Director of Communications, Office of First Lady Anna Stein

#### Overview:

This session highlighted how First Lady Stein's Office and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services collaborate effectively by maintaining clear focus, strong relationships, and disciplined communication, and discussed how agencies and First Spouses could work together to elevate the profile of existing initiatives. The conversation drew upon North Carolina's current priorities and the First Lady's professional history as an expert within the state's Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS).

#### Quick Takeaways:

1. **Specificity is a strategy.** First Lady Stein deliberately chose stigma as a focus rather than trying to tackle the full scope of challenges faced by mental health and substance use systems. A narrow, well-defined lane can be deeply impactful, and resisting pressure to expand beyond it can be an effective tool: continually narrowing the focus down to a clear "thesis statement" makes the work achievable and ensures every use of time and resources directly serves the mission.
2. **A high-profile champion is a gift, not a pressure.** While high-profile attention can foment pressure, it presents an extraordinary opportunity for agency staff, as having a powerful,

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credible voice advocating for marginalized populations (substance use, mental health, justice-involved) is rare.

3. **Build relationships before you need them.** North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services staff proactively reached out for coffee with First Lady Stein early on into her tenure, and that relationship became foundational. Consistent, intentional communication kept collaboration running smoothly and held everyone accountable for progress.
4. **Go directly to the people doing the work.** First Lady Stein strongly advocates for cutting through bureaucratic layers to meet with frontline agency staff, not just their supervisors. Filtering through management can slow progress and obscure the real work happening on the ground.
5. **Respect protocol while still moving fast.** The panel stressed that navigating hierarchy is a skill, not a barrier. Coordinating through proper communication channels while maintaining strong personal relationships allows things to move efficiently without anyone feeling bypassed.
6. **Align agency work to the priorities at the top.** North Carolina's agency team regularly posits how their work connects to the priorities of the Governor, Secretary, and First Lady. Communicating those connections upward ensures leadership can celebrate and amplify the work, which creates a cycle of mutual support.

### **Building a Bridge: Leveraging a First Spouse as a Community Connector**

#### **Speakers**

- Stephanie Lagos, Mayor, Bordentown, New Jersey
- Brianna Keys, Independent Consultant, Former Senior Children and Families Advisor, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy
- Sarah Allred, Director, First Lady Initiatives with the State of Utah
- Tracy Gruber, Executive Director, Utah Department of Health and Human Services
- Moderated by Jordan Hynes, Children & Families Program Director, National Governors Association

#### **Overview:**

This session examined how first spouses can function as powerful community connectors and strategic extensions of a governor's agenda. Panelists highlighted how first spouses use their influence, public trust, and cross-sector convening power to advance complex priorities such as maternal health, youth mental health, and foster care. Panelists also touched on how a first spouse initiative can run parallel to and reinforce a governor's initiative as NGA chair, with both New Jersey and Utah reflecting on their time in the role.

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### Quick Takeaways:

1. **First spouses are a powerful extension of the governor's agenda.** Their platform to convene across sectors (philanthropy, business, government, community) makes them uniquely effective messengers — often more so than the governor or agency heads on certain issues.
2. **Build relationships with community with face-to-face events.** Utah's "foster care night out" and New Jersey's year-long listening tour both demonstrate the value of establishing trust with communities before launching programs. That groundwork made later policy wins much easier.
3. **Use philanthropic seed funding to pilot and prove.** In both states, private/philanthropic dollars funded early pilots driven by the First Lady's office, which then provided the evidence base needed to secure legislative funding and build credibility.
4. **Regular, transparent communication between First Spouse and Governors' offices is essential.** Standing meetings, open sharing of priorities, and consistent back-channel communication between the governor's policy staff and the first spouse's office were critical to avoiding silos, finding opportunities to align and overcoming any tension between the work of the two offices.
5. **Know when to step back and let the experts handle it.** First spouses are most effective as conveners, messengers, and relationship-builders but may not be as impactful as problem-solvers for complex bureaucratic issues. Channeling constituent feedback to agency leaders, rather than trying to solve it directly, preserves trust on all sides.

### Looking back: Reflections from Former First Spouses' Offices

#### Speakers

- Former Delaware First Spouse Tracey Quillen Carney
- Emily Hershman, Strategic Communications Consultant, Former Communications Director for Governor & First Spouse of Delaware
- Stephanie Lagos, Mayor, Bordentown, New Jersey
- Moderated by Tyler Clendenin, Member Relations Manager, National Governors Association

#### Overview

This session highlighted how First Spouses' offices can leverage unique convening power to drive child and family wellbeing across state systems and featured reflections from former first spouse offices about lessons learned during their tenure.

#### Quick Takeaways

1. **The First Spouse's office holds unique convening power.** The ability to call commissioners, hospital CEOs, community advocates, and families into the same room was repeatedly cited as the office's most valuable asset. This soft power enabled conversations and coalitions that simply wouldn't have happened otherwise.

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2. **Coalition building across silos drives the best policy ideas.** Many of the most impactful initiatives, like asking ER patients about mammograms, or expanding foster care housing support statewide, emerged not from the top down, but from structured conversations that brought together unlikely partners: hospital CEOs with doulas, OBs with mothers, government leaders with youth advocates.
3. **Sustainability requires intentional planning before departure.** Key strategies included embedding work in legislation, establishing dedicated workgroups, creating documentation, and developing explicit succession plans. Panelists resonated with the idea of “sending a child to college”: executive leaders prepare agencies to continue to thrive on their own.
4. **Tangible outputs help ideas stick.** Whether it was a children's book, a policy blueprint, or handing new parents Dolly Parton's Imagination Library enrollment form at the hospital, having something concrete to share helped programs take root in communities and persist through administration changes.
5. **Sustainability of the *people* doing this work matters too.** Speakers emphasized the importance of celebrating incremental wins, allowing vulnerability, and remembering that these are generational problems not solvable in one term.