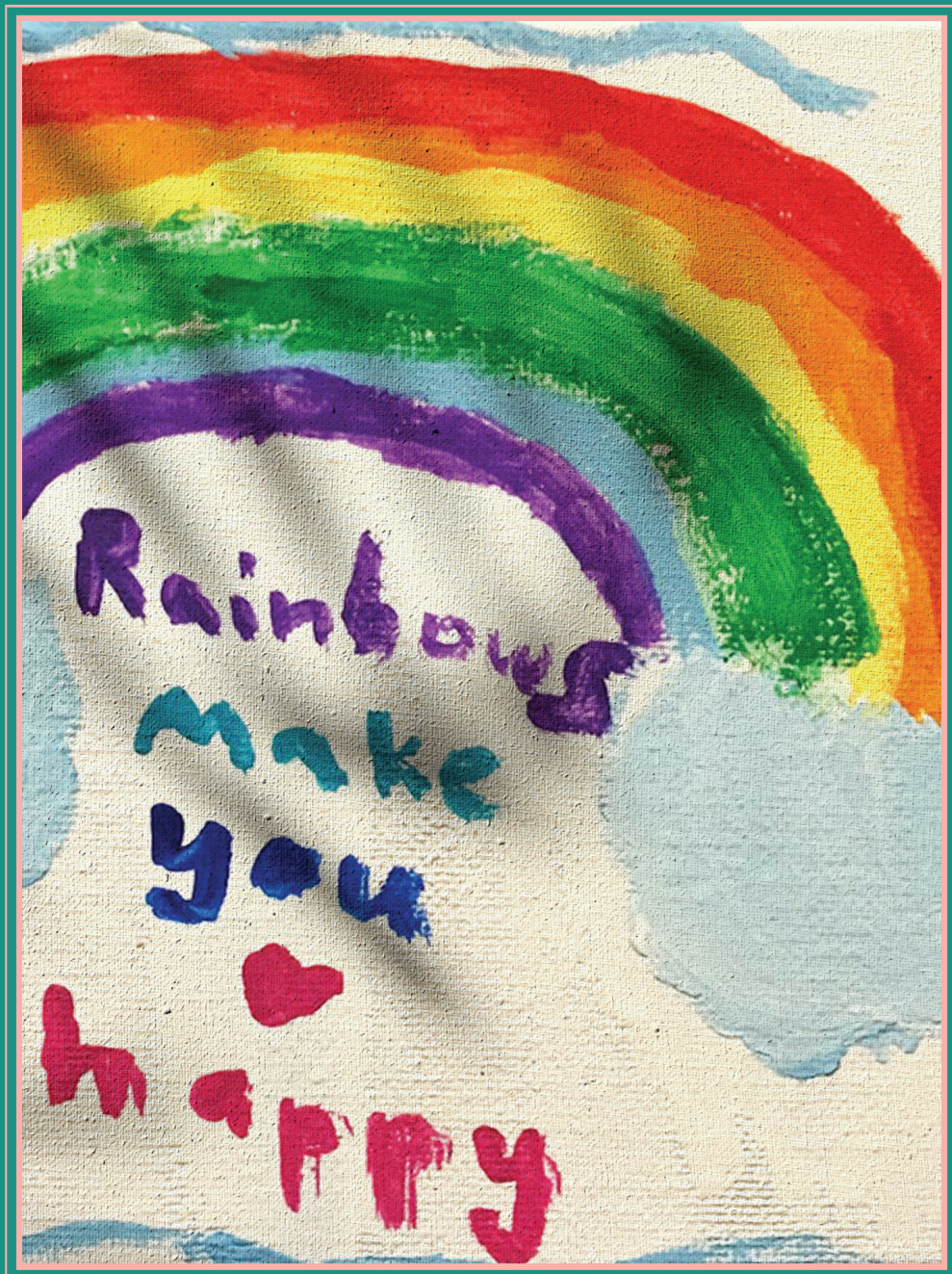


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WHEN LIGHT CONVERGES

From Child Saving to Family Flourishing

An “Upstream” Re-imagination of Human Services



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I. Introduction

Systems can only change to the extent that we can imagine change. Our imagination is constrained by our mental models, the deeply held assumptions, beliefs, and narratives through which we interpret how the world works. Mental models shape what we see as possible, what we ignore, and ultimately the decisions we make—often without us realizing they are guiding our thinking.

Akin is in the midst of a deep transformation—evolving from an historic foster care provider toward a focus on family flourishing and becoming a prevention ecosystems builder. Akin is the new name for two organizations that merged in 2024, both of which carried over 100 years of history: Children’s Home Society of Washington, and Childhaven. Both organizations were catalytic leaders in the Progressive era and helped to build the modern-day child welfare system. As an organization, we’re coming to terms with the fact that the “child saver” mental model is now obsolete. For over a century, the human services sector has relied on this model—waiting for a family to break before stepping in to rescue the child. This model is reactive, expensive, and flawed. The stark truth is that government funding pays to maintain this status quo, forcing providers to operate at a loss while managing the damage. Children and families need help now and should not have to wait for us to figure out how to fix the system.

As we shift towards upstream prevention, Akin is working to undo harm and build a new

model for relationships with our families and communities. The name “Akin” itself stands for connection, kinship, and the fundamental belief that supporting children requires supporting the entire family and community ecosystems. As we work towards becoming a prevention ecosystems builder, we see Ecosystem Building as supporting many more families to flourish than direct services alone by creating durable changes in the systems, organizations, and people they interact with.

A key goal of our evolution is seeking to develop the nimbleness and adaptability of a start-up—a 130-year-old start-up. As we grow into our new name, we are not simply rebranding. We are reimagining the purpose of the organization at a philosophical level, shifting how we relate to families, communities, and the ecosystems we all live within. Akin is redesigning its mission, vision, organizational structure, business model, and the core strategies for how we deliver services and build ecosystems. This is the story of Akin’s transformation.

A Perilous Economic Environment for Community-Based Organizations

This is an unprecedented time for Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) across the country. CBOs are being asked to do more at precisely the moment when their operating model is being squeezed from every direction. In economic downturns, CBOs have always experienced a precarious squeeze: demand for their services sharply increases as budgets are being cut. But the nonprofit sector is currently experiencing disruptions on a scale not seen for many years. In Washington state (where Akin operates), 42 CBOs have closed or restricted services since 2023, due to a volatile funding landscape and a “race to the bottom” contracting framework. That places more pressure on the organizations that are left providing services. Meanwhile, 185,000 children in our state are living in poverty as their options for support rapidly disappear.

These disruptions are compounding and reveal that the programs, services, and supports currently provided to children, youth, and families are falling far short of expected outcomes. From federal policy and public funding changes to the erosion of confidence in CBOs, the foundation of the human services sector is on shaky ground.

Here at Akin, we believe these crises create a new opportunity for us to rethink how the human service sector operates, partners, and impacts the lives of children and families. We can’t respond

to these challenges by just doing what we’ve done before. We must develop a new and better way. We must focus on root causes.

The Current System is Failing Children and Families Experiencing Poverty

As Frederick Douglass reminded us, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men (Douglass, 1985).” We know that poverty experienced in childhood can have devastating consequences on healthy development. Childhood poverty is one of the strongest predictors of lifelong negative outcomes across nearly every domain of well-being, including health, cognitive development, education, and long-term economic outcomes. Early exposure to economic hardship elevates toxic stress, disrupting brain architecture and physiological systems in ways that increase risks for chronic disease and impair learning (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Typical solutions to address childhood poverty and improve well-being have so far been inadequate. Services remain fragmented, underfunded, and often inaccessible to those who need them most. Reactive approaches leave them struggling to access even basic supports, while systemic inequities continue to disproportionately impact communities of color and those furthest from opportunity.

These challenges reflect deeper systemic issues that cannot be solved through programmatic solutions alone. The complexity and interconnected nature of these challenges demand a new approach, one that moves beyond isolated interventions to address root causes and transform entire ecosystems of support.

In Adam Benforado’s (2023) book *A Minor Revolution*, he highlights the bold social innovations created by Progressive era (1890 to 1920) reformers, and makes the case for why we need a second Progressive era now:

So, what care, what protection, what chance do we give to a child born a century after the child savers? In those hundred years, we have built nuclear submarines, self-driving cars, and rockets to take tourists to space.... In nearly every domain, we have made miraculous strides. But, not with children. Against all reasonable expectations, in the quest to better their lot, we have slowed to a trudge.... A hundred years on, children still go hungry. Children still end up on the street when their families can’t make rent (Benforado, 2023, xiv).

We have experienced profound progress in so many domains, but why has progress stalled for our children? As a society, we can't say that we don't know what works. Mountains of evidence have been created in the last hundred years.

Our greatest failure is a failure of imagination—mental models are not keeping pace with the science.

We have considerable evidence that policy solutions can cut child poverty dramatically (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). In his book *Poverty, by America*, Matthew Desmond (2023) discusses the complex history of poverty in the U.S., and highlights that we have already demonstrated how to end poverty:

During a time of intense polarization, disturbing threats to democratic institutions, and partisan gridlock in Washington, calling for transformative federal policies to abolish poverty might sound hopelessly naïve. Then again, Congress responded with bold, bipartisan relief during the pandemic, making more progress on poverty than we've seen in a generation. After the Great Recession that began in 2008, families in the bottom half of the income distribution had to wait nearly ten years before their incomes returned to pre-recession levels. After the COVID-19-induced recession, they waited just a year and a half. Government aid played a major role in the recovery (Desmond, 2023, 132-133).

II. Evolving Mental Models: A 130-Year-Old Start-Up

In a paper titled *The Waters of Systems Change*, John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge (2018) offer a framework for leading systems change work that begins with understanding the implicit mental models that are currently in operation. They illustrate this concept with a story: "A fish is swimming along one day when another fish comes up and says 'Hey, how's the water?' The first fish stares back blankly at the second fish and then says 'What's water?'"

Whether we are aware or not, we are all swimming in the water of our prevailing mental models which frame our understanding of the world. Drawing on systems theory and organizational learning literature (For example, see: Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006; Kania, Kramer, and Senge, 2018), mental models can be understood as the implicit cognitive frameworks that define how a system understands itself: what it believes is true,

what it values, what it prioritizes, and what it treats as inevitable or unchangeable. Meaningful, durable change only occurs when it fits within existing mental models—or through intentionally reshaping those mental models—so that people can see the change as possible.

Akin has always been a catalytic organization. We were founded in 1896 as part of a national movement of Children's Home societies as the Children's Home Society of Washington (CHSW). The mental models of the American Gilded Age perceived women and children as mere property, lacking any human rights. Public funding for the well-being of children did not exist, and this function was dominated by faith-based charities. Part of a movement of Progressive reformers, CHSW's early leaders were instrumental in shifting mental models, as they worked towards the creation of children's rights, government regulations, and public funding for the protection of children and families. They were also tireless charitable fundraisers who understood the need for unrestricted private capital to execute their visions. Childhaven, founded in Seattle in 1909 as the Seattle Day Nursery, evolved from a daycare for working mothers into a pioneering therapeutic center for abused and neglected children. In 1921, CHSW was one of the founding members of the Child Welfare League of America, which would create much of the public policy regarding foster care, adoption, and child protection for decades to come.





In 2024, under the new name **Akin**, the organization ended its last foster care program. This decision reflected a deliberate shift in our mental models, incorporating our belief into the organization itself that durable child well-being is established by investing in upstream prevention.

Akin's founders were unabashedly "child savers." Child savers treat children as objects of rescue, justifying state intervention by framing child abuse and neglect as the result of individual parental failures rather than the product of social conditions and structural inequality (Benforado, 2023). Foster care, adoption and residential care are a significant part of the history of Akin. We acknowledge that this is a mixed blessing for our institution which we continue to work to reconcile. While Akin was a leader in shifting mental models in the Progressive era, we also were late in shifting towards new mental models of the current era. With deep humility, we realize that there were things our institution "got right" for the realities it was addressing—and also, there were mental models Akin supported and helped to create that have unintentionally caused harm, both in the past and present.

Akin is currently in the middle of a deep transformation, evolving from a historic foster care provider toward becoming a prevention ecosystems builder. In recent years, both CHSW and Childhaven have been moving toward upstream approaches to better support families, especially those with young children. The decision to merge came about because traditional child and family services are not meeting the needs of families. Despite many years of effort, key measures of child and family well-being have shown little change, highlighting deep-rooted problems that require a fresh approach. Both organizations recognized that to make a lasting impact, they needed to address the underlying root causes rather than just treating the symptoms.

The name Akin¹ became more than a brand; it was a statement of philosophical intent. It suggested an organization defined by relationships, interconnectedness, and a holistic approach to supporting children and families. This was not just a merger of two nonprofits, but the birth of a new way of conceptualizing child and family services.

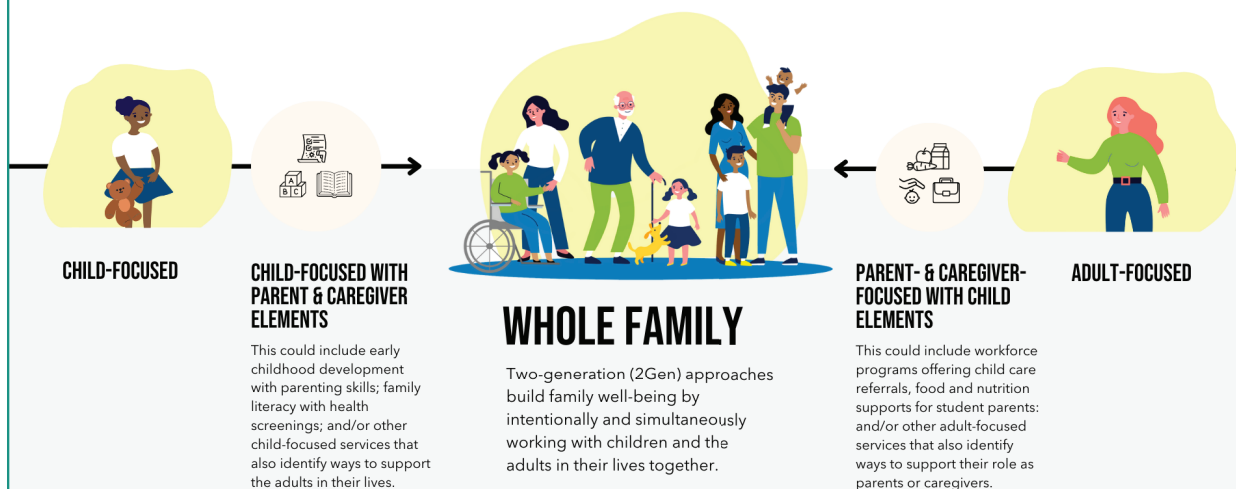
Ultimately, the merger reflected the hope that our new organization will embody the mental models that will create the space for children and families to truly thrive in the twenty-first century.

Whereas child saving was based upon an individualistic narrative that pointed to poverty as a personal failing, **Akin is now guided by a holistic Two-Generation approach** recognizing that child well-being cannot be separated from family-well-being. Ascend at the Aspen Institute describes this approach as intentionally focusing on children and the adults in their lives together, honoring lived experience, and emphasizing racial, gender, and economic equity through an intersectional lens (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Rather than blaming and villainizing parents, Akin now recognizes the irreplaceable role they play in the lives of their children. We see parents as essential partners in helping us to undo the harm that these systems have caused and continue to cause.

While mental models are omnipresent like the water, when we become aware of these models and how they operate on us, we give ourselves the opportunity to change them through intentional effort. Over the course of our history, Akin has evolved, transformed, and recalibrated in ways that mirrored and shifted the prevailing mental models of the day. As part of our merger, we wish to continue this evolution and develop the nimbleness and adaptability of a start-up, providing the flexibility necessary to continue to adapt as we seek to meet the challenges of tomorrow. To achieve this, we recognize that the most important change must occur in the mental models that shape how Akin thinks, relates, and operates. By beginning with ourselves and the lens through which we view the world, we can also become more effective in shifting mental models externally in the broader ecosystem.

¹ For example, see our video, "How To Pronounce Akin:" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fZWnV_XeCo

TWO-GENERATION (#2GEN) APPROACHES CENTER WHOLE FAMILIES



III. The “Why” of Akin

For 130 years, Akin’s core purpose, or “why,” has remained the same: we seek to improve the well-being of children so they can truly thrive and flourish. However, we are changing the “how,” by shifting our approach to child well-being towards one that is aligned with prevention, reflecting a deeper understanding and commitment to equity and justice. Akin’s transformation is centered on making the mental model and business model shifts that align with a compassionate ethic of care rather than the ethic of surveillance and blame that predominates in the child welfare system.

Building Akin’s New “How”: An Ecosystem of Support

As Buckminster Fuller said, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete (Fuller, n.d.).” We recognize that now is not the time for business as usual. The families we support, policies we help advocate for, and communities where we reside all require us to challenge the status quo in dynamic ways. In June 2025, we launched a new organizational strategic plan, mission, vision, and values. Instead of trying to reform the current broken systems, we strive to create a new supportive ecosystem focused on family well-being, rooted in community needs, and co-designed with families themselves. This will involve not only improving our direct service

to families but also building a comprehensive ecosystem of support.

Building this ecosystem will focus on three key strategic priorities:

- Support families in accessing the resources they need.
- Develop a workforce that truly understands and represents the communities it serves.
- Improve access to resources by amplifying the voices of families.

Akin engages in this work alongside families, utilizing their insights. Families deserve to be appreciated for the perspectives they have gained from their direct experience with these systems. These experiences provide them with precisely the right expertise necessary to transform systems and undo the harm they have caused. Through authentic, equity-driven collaboration, we are working to design ways to ensure that parents and communities are the architects of the services meant to support them. Additionally, forming new coalitions and partnerships will be essential to Ecosystem Building, allowing us to test collaborative solutions that lead to improved outcomes for family well-being.

Ecosystem Building work is not new for Akin, we’ve touched on it and led this type of work throughout our history. Thanks to a significant investment from MacKenzie Scott, Akin has been

able to support Family Resource Centers (FRCs) in Washington state and beyond. In 2021, Akin led efforts to establish a state law defining FRCs. We also launched the Washington Family Support Network, now comprised of 124 FRCs around the state. Because of this strong coalition, we have helped to secure \$8.3 million in new public funding that supports all Family Resource Centers throughout the state. We have also leveraged this funding to advance the National FRC Coalition alongside our key partner, the National Family Support Network.

Whereas Akin's work has historically focused more on direct services, Ecosystem Building charts a path towards having significantly more (population-level) impact. This strategy both draws on and deepens Akin's expertise as a direct support and ecosystem builder, a role that few other organizations in Washington state play. Because this strategy centers active portfolio management and time-bound work to achieve concrete goals, it allows Akin greater flexibility to respond to policy, economic, and other changes in the ecosystem.

Akin will continue to offer direct services, but we are seeking to expand our capacity to deliver Ecosystem Building in a way that enables and mutually reinforces our direct support programs. Ecosystem Building enables direct support work by: (1) increasing resources so Akin can better support families it serves directly; (2) tackling funding and policy barriers that make delivering services challenging and unsustainable; and (3) providing opportunities for families to change the systems they're navigating.

Investing in Families: FRCs as Community Builders

Akin envisions a world where all families flourish, nurtured by the strength of community. As part of our Ecosystem Building strategy of supporting families in accessing the resources they need, we believe that Family Resource Centers can serve as foundational community anchors. FRCs offer a single-entry point for providing comprehensive, integrated, and collaborative community-based services for families. FRCs exist to bridge the gap between families' everyday needs and formal service systems by offering accessible, preventive, strength-based supports within a trusted community setting.

Across the country, FRCs have been part of a positive movement to strengthen families and communities by addressing family needs and offering upstream support to prevent child abuse and neglect, and a host of other negative outcomes

throughout the lifespan. The evidence base on FRCs is growing rapidly: FRCs have demonstrated significantly lower rates of child maltreatment investigations in Allegheny County, PA (Wulczyn and Lery, 2018), lower rates of CPS referrals in Orange County, CA (OMNI Institute, 2021a), and 63% reduction in child maltreatment in Teller County, CO (OMNI Institute, 2021b). Cost-effectiveness analyses of FRCs have consistently shown stunning results: one dollar spent on FRCs saved \$4.93 in public spending in a study of an Alabama FRC network (Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers, 2014), \$4.51 in Orange County, CA (OMNI Institute, 2021a), and \$2.91 in Teller County CO (OMNI Institute, 2021b).

Unfortunately, the size and reach of FRCs are determined not by the depth and breadth of family needs, but instead by the limited opportunities for blending and braiding funds to pay for FRC operations. At the national level, there is no dedicated federal funding for FRCs, and they currently rely on a complex and limited patchwork of private and government sources. Akin is currently working diligently to fix this. In February 2026, Akin's advocacy contributed towards successful language inclusion in the federal spending package which allows Social Services Block Grant funding to be used in support of FRCs (Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health, 2026). This incremental progress is the result of a multi-year advocacy effort that benefits Akin as well as FRCs around the country. If we can grow funding for FRCs, they could then scale up to meet deeper levels of need, making significant inroads into child poverty in Washington state and beyond.

IV. What We've Learned (And are Continuing to Learn)

In the course of our organizational transformation and merger, we can already identify important lessons and insights from our experience that other organizations may benefit from:

1. Access to unrestricted capital facilitates creativity and innovation

Meaningful innovation in the nonprofit sector requires access to unrestricted investments, which have been instrumental in creating Akin. Unrestricted capital allows for building new solutions, adapting to changing conditions, and achieving durable outcomes, which all demand flexibility, risk tolerance, and long-term investment. To help us move through the merger as intentionally as possible, Akin was awarded a \$5 million grant from Ballmer Group. This funding

was vital in helping us take a planful approach to integration and facilitate our transformation process, all while avoiding service disruptions for our families in the course of our merger. Innovation is not a linear nor predictable process; it depends on an organization's ability to invest in people, infrastructure, learning, and experimentation, and to pivot when evidence or community needs evolve.

2. Public funding is insufficient for supporting child and family well-being

While the human services sector is rapidly moving towards shared understanding and support for prevention services, federal and state funding are not keeping pace with these changes. Funding is currently designed around reactive approaches, responding to harm after it occurs rather than to prevent it. The largest share of funding is designed to support foster care, investigations, and crisis response instead of strengthening families upstream. At the national level, there is no dedicated federal funding for Family Resource Centers. If dedicated and sustainable funding could be secured, FRCs would be able to grow their capacity to meet the needs of substantially more families.

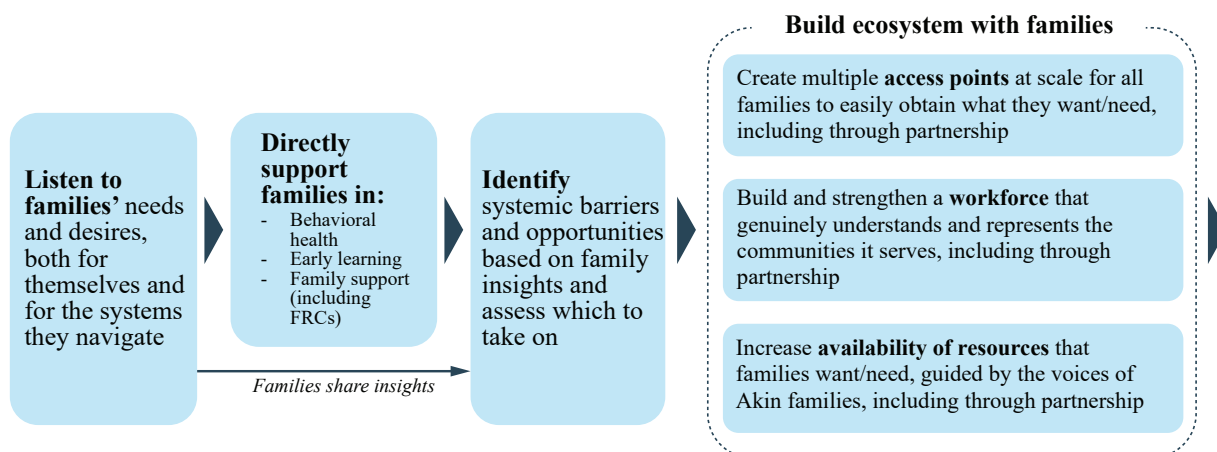
3. It's easier to create a new organization than to reinvent existing ones

In a major home renovation, it can be easier to build a new house from scratch than to create a new format within the confines of existing structures. Likewise, building a new organization from scratch can be simpler than trying to change older ones. One of our goals in merging was to build more flexibility into our organizational structure and culture so that we can be ready to rapidly adapt, like a start-up organization. To achieve this, we must continue a broad organizational transformation

that focuses on our mental models, our business model, and flexible structures as we seek to leave behind old ways of working and outdated models.

V. Our Challenge to the Sector: Let's Align Together to Move Systems Towards Prevention

Effective ecosystems are the result of partnership. As a catalytic organization, we are looking to shift mental models to better align with prevention both inside and outside of Akin. As a result, we are seeking allies and potential partners to work collaboratively alongside to anchor these shifts in the broader ecosystem. Despite similar missions and overlapping populations, social sector organizations often operate in parallel rather than in alignment. Too often, we are driven by siloed funding streams, competitive grant structures, and narrow performance expectations that prioritize organizational attribution over achieving coordinated population-level impacts. *Attribution* versus *contribution* represent different mental models and approaches to our work. *Attribution* assumes a direct, isolatable causal link between individual actions and a specific outcome; this approach may be more appropriate for direct services models. *Contribution* recognizes that outcomes emerge from multiple interacting actors and conditions, and this approach positions multiple organizations as meaningfully influencing change without claiming sole credit. A contribution approach better fits organizations seeking to impact ecosystems. We believe the era of the solitary nonprofit hero is over. We must move from a sector of 'competitors for attribution' to an 'ecosystem of contribution.'



Aligning and cooperating across the sector is therefore not merely a matter of collaboration, but a necessary strategy in working towards systems change. In addition to traditional partners from the child welfare and child well-being spaces, we are also seeking out non-traditional partners from the broader community, including business leaders, faith communities, public agencies and providers from health, education, housing, and economic support that promote family well-being from different disciplinary perspectives. When we coordinate around shared goals, common definitions of success, and complementary roles, we can function as a coherent ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated organizations and interests.

We all have a stake in our children's success. As an ecosystem, we need to consistently frame child well-being as a shared social responsibility. Therefore, rather than taking an individualistic, siloed approach to solving problems, we are building on each other's strengths, leveraging broader networks, and bringing the right people to the table. Such alignment will enable the ecosystem to shift from reactive, crisis-oriented responses toward preventive, two-generation approaches that address root causes and strengthen protective factors before harm occurs. Coordinated ecosystems are better positioned to partner with public agencies and philanthropy, leverage flexible capital, and advocate for policy and funding structures that reinforce prevention and family well-being strategies. Ecosystem Building is part of Akin's legacy, and we are committed to making it the central pillar of our future as well.

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