Innovation at the Edges: How Community-Rooted Solutions Are Reimagining Ohio's System of Care

By Mark Mecum, CEO, Ohio Children's Alliance

Ohio's child and family serving organizations are responding to a landscape that looks very different than it did just a few years ago. Needs are rising. Families are facing complex challenges. The workforce remains strained. And yet, across the state, agencies are leaning into creative, community-rooted solutions that meet families where they are.

We see these efforts every day. My connection to this field stretches back generations. My wife served as a social worker in Columbus; my mom supported young mothers in Middletown, and my dad led a community agency in Cincinnati. Both of my grandfathers grew up in orphanages and remained close to the foster care community throughout their lives.

Because of that history, I have always understood this work not as a set of programs, but as something that empowers and propels people's lives. It's also why I believe the innovations emerging across Ohio's communities deserve to be elevated, nurtured, and replicated. This newsletter will be one way we spotlight community-rooted innovation — solutions built in partnership with families, neighbors, and local networks who know their communities best.

Community-Rooted Care Models

OhioRISE Care Management Entity (CME) program is one example of this shift. For years, family advocates have requested access to high fidelity wrap around and individualized support. OhioRISE was designed in this manner, and is leveraging local agencies, such as **Buckeye Ranch** in Franklin County, to administer regional CME programs as the coordinating hubs to do just that. In total, 17 different agencies across the state are embedding staff in schools, youth programs, and neighborhood organizations to reduce barriers and build trust on behalf of 50,000+ youth and their families. These partnerships are empowering families to navigate complicated systems with fewer handoffs and more continuity — grounded in the strengths of the communities they serve.

We saw this same approach within our Family Social Connections grantees (funded by ODBH). Agencies like **Beech Brook** in Cleveland strengthened relational health through play-based family sessions, cultural and bilingual outreach, rural gatherings, community events, and neighborhood learning circles. Across ten local initiatives, more than 2,000 Ohioans participated — and 83% of surveyed attendees reported feeling more connected to their community afterward.

These are Ohio-grown innovations responding to what families say they need.

Families as Partners in Innovation

Foster care agencies are also redesigning how they engage families. Some organizations are involving foster parents directly in codesigning training and placement processes. Others are piloting kin-first placement strategies, trauma-responsive coaching, and family-to-family recruitment and support systems. As an example, **Caring for Kids**, based in Canton, offers a program called Recess to their foster parents. Foster families are matched with other foster families to provide consistent monthly respite, which adds structure and balance, and engages families who may be between placements.

Agencies are applying similar thinking to peer support. Family and youth peer supporters are helping families navigate systems, build coping skills, and strengthen natural supports. Kinship caregivers, adoptive families, and caregivers impacted by trauma are accessing peer-led groups, bilingual materials, recreational outings, and neighborhood support circles. **SAFY of Ohio**, for instance, operates a Parent Partners Program in which experienced parents with lived child welfare experience serve as peer mentors.

These approaches reflect a shared belief: relational health drives family stability, and Ohio agencies are designing solutions that build it.

Flexible Respite and Holistic Supports

Respite care continues to emerge as a critical stabilizing resource. Agencies are expanding options using paraprofessionals for in-home support and partnering with foster parents and kin to serve youth not involved in child welfare. What started out for many as an "Add on" service has evolved into fully-fledged programs with their own managers and budgets, such as at **National Youth Advocate Program**, based in Columbus, who may be the largest behavioral health respite provider in the state. These models help prevent crises, reduce emergency room use, and sustain families during difficult moments.

Holistic supports are expanding as well. Agencies are integrating mental health services with food security, stable housing, and other basic needs. One agency — **Integrated Services for Behavioral Health** — is taking a major step by merging with a Federally Qualified Health Center to expand access to primary care and preventive services. Another, **Best Point Education & Behavioral Health**, built a pediatric behavioral health urgent care center, to address a major resource gap in the Cincinnati community.

These partnerships reflect Ohio communities building their own integrated systems of care, tailored to the needs of local families.

Smoother Transitions and Youth-Centered Pathways

Other organizations are improving transitions from inpatient psychiatric care through data driven partnerships with hospitals, strengthening discharge planning and follow-up supports. A great example of this is **NewPath Child & Family Solutions**' collaboration with **Cincinnati**

Children's Hospital/HealthVine to utilize a health information exchange to facilitate clinical collaboration for children transitioning from inpatient hospitalization to community-based care.

Bridges providers, through a partnership with the Collaborative and ODCY, are also innovating to support young adults aging out of foster care. Agencies such as **Cadence Care Network** based in Niles, are building housing partnerships, employment pipelines through a social enterprise coffee shop and creperie, peer-supported transition models, and financial capability coaching — practical tools rooted in the realities young people face.

What These Innovations Tell Us About Our System

Across all these examples, a powerful set of themes emerges:

- Innovation is coming from within Ohio — not from outside solutions imported into communities that don't fit.
- The most effective approaches are locally designed, culturally relevant, and built in partnership with families.
- Agencies aren't waiting for ideal conditions; they're building practical solutions with the resources they have and are therefore very investable from a funder's standpoint.
- Partnership is driving progress — between agencies, caregivers, educators, community-based agencies, and local leaders.
- Ohio's system is shifting from program-centric to community-centric.

This is the heart of our advocacy message:
led by the wisdom, creativity, and resilience of our communities, local agencies are essential in producing our state's solutions.

Innovation Across Ohio's Broader Ecosystem — Including at Our Spring Conference

Innovation is also emerging from cross-sector partners who are bringing new insights into the system of care.

New podcasts have been produced by community-based leaders in Ohio, including The Nonprofit Leader's Guide developed by **I Am Boundless**, and The Pull Up with George Guy, developed by the new President & CEO of **Lighthouse Youth & Family Services**.

And at our Spring Conference in April, the **Beacon of Hope Business Alliance** will present on how second-chance employment can strengthen families and communities — a reminder that economic opportunity is a child-welfare strategy. The **Ohio Family Care Association** and **The Ohio State University** will also lead a session on supporting the emotional wellbeing of child-serving professionals, recognizing that innovation is only possible when the workforce is supported.

These sessions reflect a broader ecosystem of community-rooted innovation taking place across Ohio.

Looking Ahead

The examples described here represent only a fraction of the creativity and problem solving underway in communities across the state. Agencies are experimenting, adapting, and building new approaches because families need solutions that are flexible, relational, and grounded in local strengths.

Our role at the Ohio Children's Alliance is clear:
to amplify what's working in our communities, connect organizations and leaders to one another, advocate for supportive policies, and propel Ohio-grown innovations into the spotlight they deserve.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about this work. Whether you are a partner, policymaker, community member, or someone newly connected to our mission, we're glad you're here. In the months ahead, this newsletter will continue to highlight the stories, ideas, and innovations shaping the future of care for Ohio's children and families — and to advance the message that the solutions we need are growing right here at home.