

## Good people, good ideas, and the journey to gain traction



In June of 2022, the **Transform the Family Justice System Collaborative** was launched to mobilize a cross-sector coalition in British Columbia to advance the well-being of families through transformation of the family justice system. This launch represented the culmination of decades of work by hundreds of people who have dedicated their careers to the Canadian family justice system.

Where before the work was loosely-coordinated at best, now the academic departments, informal working groups, research groups, and large action committees are aligned and the work is finally gaining real momentum, thanks to strategy mapping. Using a variety of methods and the **InsightVision** platform, the coalitions are building momentum and taking system-changing actions.

Sixteen years ago, this level of momentum for change was just a dream for Diana Lowe, a lawyer and justice system reformer in Alberta, Canada. As the Executive Director of the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, she was already deeply involved in the deeper, structural work to evaluate the justice system and drive necessary change. With colleagues, she launched the Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters in 2008; she identified valuable members, wrote papers, and hosted meetings. Her work was influenced by thinkers like Donatella Meadows, and she wrote about how the concepts of culture shift and systems thinking applied to the problems in the justice system.

In Canada as elsewhere, the family justice system includes many independent organizations, from courts to lawyers to social service organizations. They are all involved in family restructuring issues (e.g. separation and divorce), though they have different priorities and responsibilities. This is a system of interdependence where change must involve everyone, and no one organization can force a change on others.

Over the past 20 years, numerous reports have described poor outcomes from contact with the family justice system, especially for children, and numerous organizations have been trying to reform the system to change this. Despite the many people working for change, it seemed that only incremental improvements could be achieved.

Lowe was frustrated by how difficult it was to create a meaningful transformation and she wasn't the only one; The Action Committee's 2013 wrote four reports outlined the harm being done by the family justice system, and one report that was meant to be a roadmap, but instead described the difficulty of making meaningful change in such an entrenched system.

One area that became a priority was to make changes to address the lifelong impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), of which divorce is one. Research shows that times of crisis have a major impact on a child's brain development and on their health and welfare later in life. It was clear to justice system reformers in Alberta that an understanding of ACEs could lead to a paradigm shift: moving away from a reactive, adversarial model to a proactive, well-being model.

With ACEs as their focusing issue, the Alberta coalition, now called Reforming the Family Justice System (RFJS) mobilized partners, studied theories of system change, and created innovations and pilots. They learned about methods for system change including Collective Impact, system thinking, and the Geels framework. They forged a shared understanding of what would be needed to improve the family justice system, and this shared understanding gave them a lot of optimism that the changes they wanted to create might be possible.

After some years of working in this way, however, they were struggling to build momentum. Many in the coalition were frustrated with the pace of progress. This frustration is familiar to anyone who has worked to build a movement, or create change in a complex system. Even a large group of ideologically aligned individuals, having the will and the resources to do what is needed, will struggle with these three challenges:

1. **Changing Mental Models:** Transforming a system means changing paradigms and culture, two things that are notoriously resistant to change;
2. **Wicked Complexity:** System issues can be intertwined with complex social issues like poverty, substance abuse and historical racial injustices;
3. **Managing Information:** Refining and implementing a strategy over several years means recording and retrieving the information generated by all partners, funders, innovations, and projects.

RFJS was doing reasonably well on the first challenge, although not at scale, but the other challenges significantly slowed the coalition's momentum. The leaders knew what needed to be done, broadly speaking, but were struggling without the tools to manage and lead participants in this large-scale undertaking.

Rowe kept looking for the process, insight, or tool that would push the work out of the mire. In 2019, she attended an InsightFormation webinar on the opioid crisis that included a zoomable strategy map, something she hadn't seen before. Excited, alone in her office, Rowe began waving her hands and exclaiming to her computer, "This is what we need!" What was missing from their work was not a new conceptual framework or better research; it was this method designed for complex, emergent system change. Strategy mapping seemed like it could get the coalition working as they needed to: interdependent, leaderless, and ambitious.

In British Columbia, a coalition called Access to Justice BC led by Jane Morley was doing similar work at a smaller scale, and in late 2019, Rowe suggested to Morley that they both attend a webinar on a strategy map template called the ACEs & Resilience Resource Commons for Communities (ARRCC). The intent was to explore the ideas in the template, but also to investigate whether strategy mapping and the InsightFormation method could help them get unstuck.

### The InsightFormation approach to strategy mapping

Strategy mapping is a practice that is growing in popularity in several sectors, and it is used for a variety of purposes. One of the most common forms is system mapping, which endeavors to create a full picture of a complex system, as it exists today. *System* mapping is about taking an accurate picture of the present.

The InsightFormation approach is to do *strategy* mapping, which is about creating a path to the future. These strategy maps are built as a linked set of objectives, each of which describes an intentional change. The top of the strategy map shows the *outcome* objectives. Beneath that, a set of *strategy* objectives shows the interrelated changes that will lead to the outcomes. At the bottom of the map are the *asset and capacity development* objectives that describe how the coalition will build its capabilities to accomplish the strategy objectives. *System* mapping describes a current reality, but strategy mapping begins with aspirations.

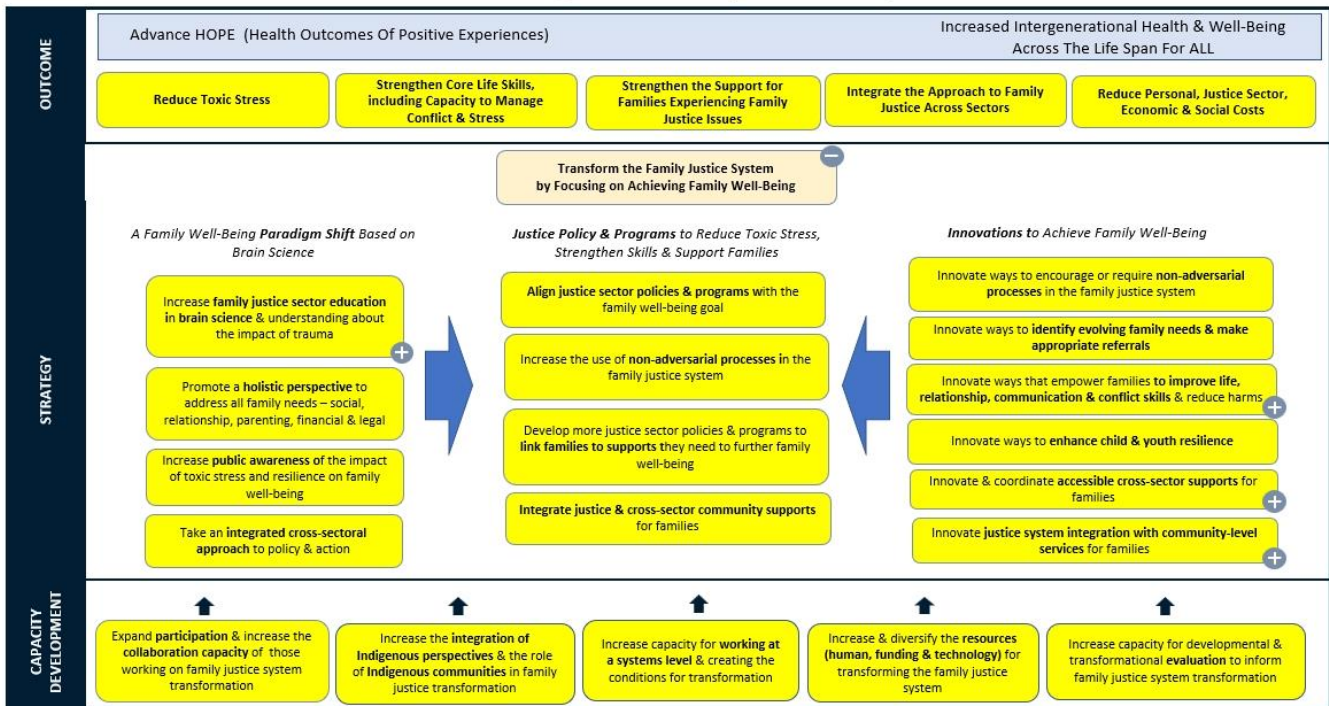
In an environment of wicked complexity, it is a fool’s errand to think you can design a strategy that will account for all the unexpected effects of the many changes that will be made. Basically, by the time you reach Step 3 of a plan, the effects of Step 1 will have made that plan obsolete. That is why InsightFormation’s method is unlike traditional strategic management, where the path from designing a strategy to managing its implementation goes only one-way.

InsightFormation promotes an emergent process. To transform a complex system, a successful process must iterate between the high-level strategy and the implementation. Goals are stated at the beginning, short-term actions are chosen to move towards those goals, and then the goals are revisited and clarified, leading to a new set of short-term actions. In this way, implementation blends with learning, refining the plans and expanding the coalition.

### Making a strategy map for family justice

Beginning in February, 2020, RFJS and A2JBC began work on a shared strategy map, which they titled Transforming the Family Justice System. They began, not with an exhaustive audit of the system, but with ambitious goals, seen below in this top-level view of the shared map:

## Transforming the Family Justice System



This strategy map is larger than a typical Theory of Change; it is what Michael Quinn Patton calls a *theory of transformation* (Patton, 2019; see also Bryson, et al., 2021). The objectives in the strategy section are “stacked” for each theme rather than having the more traditional cause-and-effect arrows between individual objectives. Each objective names an intentional change that will be accomplished by the collective work of many organizations over the next several years.

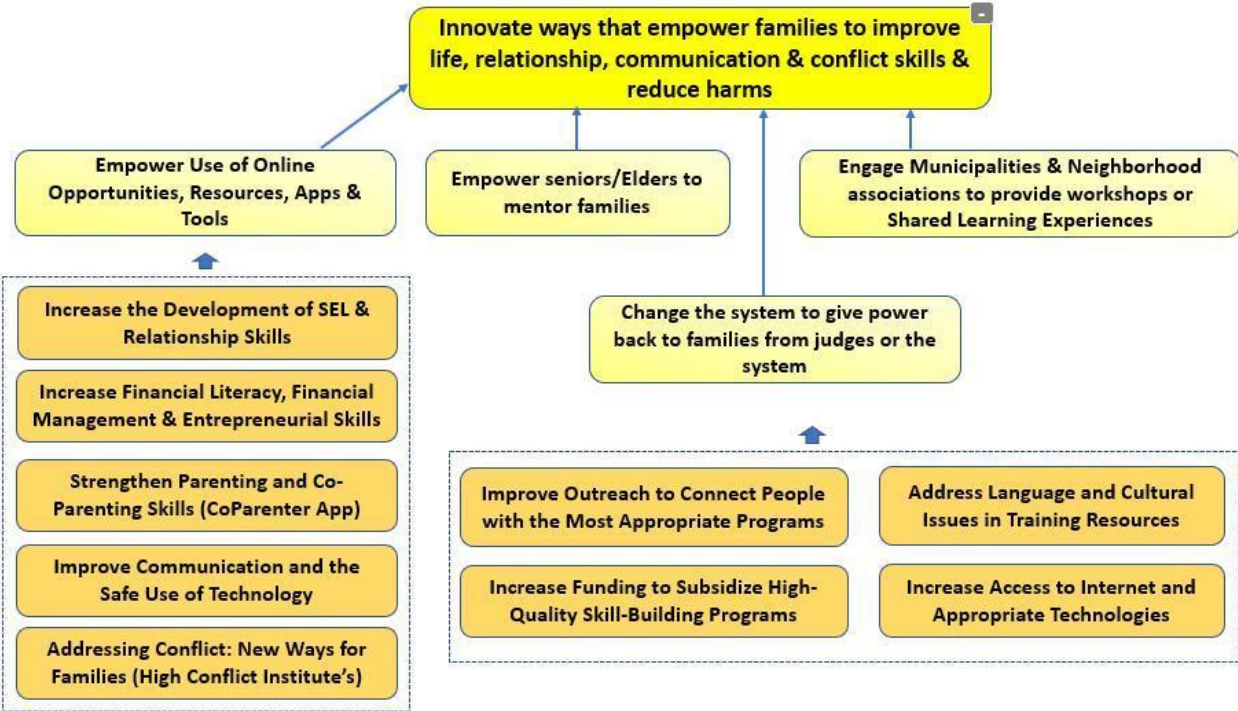
A key step for refining the strategy objectives is to build out “zoom maps,” which are more detailed strategy maps that allow a user to zoom in from the high-level objectives to the more detailed *driver objectives*. These are objectives that, if achieved, would facilitate achieving the high-level objectives.

The Alberta and BC groups had consensus about the high-level objectives, which put them in a better position to identify which driver objectives could best accelerate progress. At this point in the process, the two coalitions saw that they needed to diverge their maps. They had consensus on the higher level template, but their province-specific strategy maps grew in different ways.

In 2021, the RJFS coalition in Alberta focused much of their work on advancing a pilot in one community, Grande Prairie. In online workshops, they worked primarily on the innovation theme of the Geels framework, where the goal is to define and launch prototypes that can realistically be implemented, evaluated and refined. The coalition engaged people from many organizations and sectors, including integrating Indigenous communities and perspectives, which is a capacity development strategy.

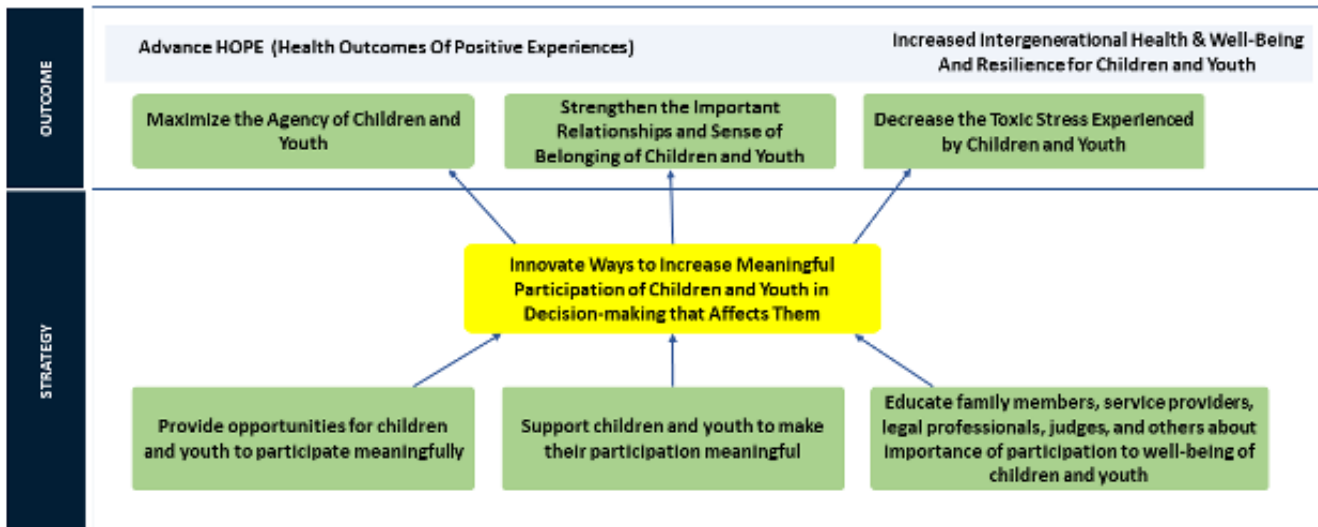
Below is a zoom map of the RFJS in Grande Prairie:

**Zoom Map for Innovate ways that empower families to improve life, relationship, communication & conflict skills & reduce harms**



In parallel, the coalition in British Columbia worked with what they called a Community of Action, made up of children and youth champions, to co-create the details of a different part of the strategy:

**Zoom Map: Meaningful Participation of Children and youth in decision-making that affects them**



The graphics above are captured from InsightVision, which is the software platform developed by InsightFormation to support its approach to strategy mapping. Its functionality includes zoomable, interactive strategy maps that give all users a line of sight to the high-level objectives and the ability to both view and update the objectives, measures, targets, actions, and stories that support the strategy.

With zoomable strategy maps, everyone has a line of sight to the different areas that work together to achieve large-scale change, so they can place their own work within that larger strategy. The “zoomability” is a key feature that improves engagement and alignment. This robust framework enables sustained progress over several years on the many details of accomplishing system transformation.

**Managing implementation**

A key benefit of using the InsightVision platform is that the work done by a variety of people at different times is built into a consistently structured, emergent, and dynamic strategic plan. For managing the implementation of an emergent strategy, it’s invaluable to have the right tools. InsightVision is a tool that becomes more robust the more it is used: the more detail is included in each map, the more it becomes a resource that can be used by everyone in the coalition, and the more engagement is created.

In the public sector, much of the work being done towards an agreed-upon transformation is done by companies that depend on grants and donors for funding, and the funding organizations require proof that their money is being spent well. For that reason, measurement is an important part of implementation.

The problem is that, in a lengthy transformation process, progress can’t always be measured in a way that is both quantitative and meaningful. It can be measured in a way that’s quantitative but *not* meaningful, and often is. And it’s sometimes possible to have quantitative metrics that are meaningful, but identifying them and tracking them consumes so much of the available resources, that this kind of measurement is more of a detriment than a value.

InsightFormation recommends measuring and monitoring progress in a way that is meaningful but not onerous. In addition to carefully selected measures, the aspirations for each objective are described using *From-To Gaps*, which are pairs of statements that describe the *current state* and the *desired state* for the objectives. Just as quantitative measures have a numerical baseline and a target, the From-To Gaps express a *qualitative* baseline and target.

Here are the From-To Gaps that were described by A2JBC for one of their objectives:

**Objective Presentation**

FJS: Support children and youth to make their participation meaningful

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Description | **From-To Gap** | Current Activities | Youth Voices | Ideas

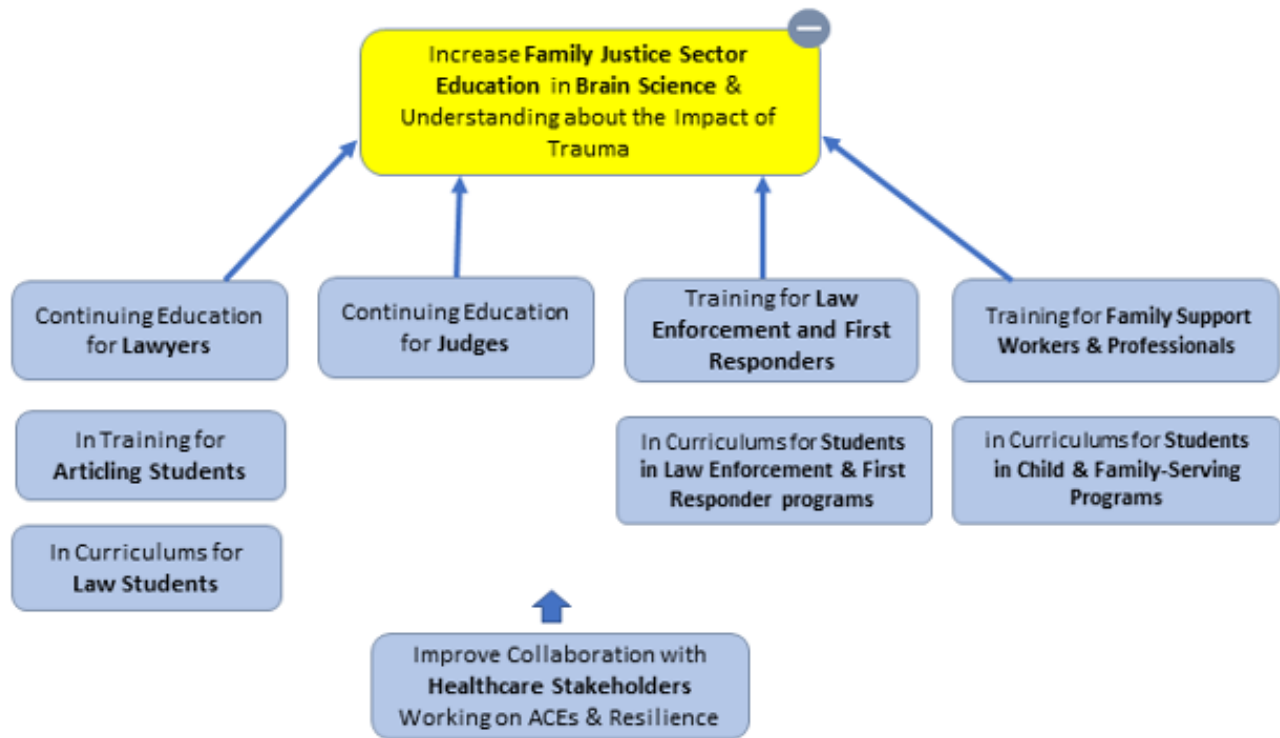
| From (Current State) in 20xx   | To (Desired State) in 20xx   |
|--|--|
| Children and youth think that their exclusion from family justice decision-making is a given that they cannot do anything about. | Children and youth are made aware that meaningful participation in decisions that affect them is their right from birth and across all aspects of their lives.                           |
| Children and youth feel alone and unsupported in making their views known.   | Children and youth are connected to at least one person trusted by the child or youth who takes on the responsibility of supporting them to participate meaningfully in decision-making. |
| Participation processes are rule bound, and designed to fit with the system.   | Participation processes are tailored to meet the needs of the particular child involved.   |
| Children and youth often do not share their true thoughts because of fear of repercussions.                                      | Strategies are routinely in place that address the individual child and youth's risks and fears of repercussions.  |

Measures

Some changes are easily quantifiable. Consider the objective in the lower left corner of the above zoom strategy map for BC: “Provide opportunities for children and youth to participate meaningfully.” This is about developing prototypes that can be implemented, evaluated, refined and scaled. The measure to monitor progress is *# of children & youth engagement processes defined in the "menu" of innovations*. It’s not a complex measure, nor is it time consuming to collect data for. But it is powerful because it will communicate to everyone if progress is being made. If that measure sits as zero or stalls out, then new actions will need to be launched.

But not everything that is important can be measured. In the early stages of a transformation, one of the best ways to show progress, reinforce priorities and align people is to simply share stories. To overcome the challenge of creating a paradigm shift, it is vital for a coalition to have a tool for gathering and sharing qualitative results alongside the quantitative, which is why InsightVision includes this feature. The zoom map below shows the range of objectives that RFJS identified as necessary for this paradigm shift, and the story tab below that shows the earliest signs of progress on this shift.

*A Family Well-Being Paradigm Shift  
Based on Brain Science*



The story tab:

## Objective Presentation

**FJS: Increase family justice sector education in brain science & understanding about the impact of trauma**

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Description

From-To Gap

Current Activities

Stories

Potential Measures

Notes Edit

Stories of progress for this objective

Brain Story Certification Recommended for Alberta Judges

The Chief Justice of the Court of Queens Bench in Alberta has supported judges in Alberta to take the 19-module Brain Story course offered by the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Progress is being made in increasing brain science education in continuing judicial education for judges so they can become Brain Story certified. While this is currently voluntary, it is an important step to advance this Objective.

Brain Science Training becoming a Priority for Educating Lawyers

RFJS has run programs for lawyers on brain science for the Legal Education Society of Alberta. The RFJS is also working with Law Society of Alberta and the Centre for Professional Legal Education to incorporate brain science education into the family law curriculum for articling students (the preparation after law school, for the Bar exam).

Measures ▲

At any given time, work on refining the strategy, developing actions, and monitoring progress will be going on at different speeds for different parts of the strategy. In InsightVision, the assets and information are visible to all, as is the progress, and so the tool grows steadily more robust with use.

## Undeniable momentum

The formation in 2022 of the Transforming the Family Justice Collaborative is significant because it represents a confidence in the strategy mapping process. The BC and Alberta coalitions saw that they could maintain their distinct priorities in their respective provinces, but still use this process and tool to assist each other in areas where their common goals can be better met collectively. Before, the relationship was informal and collegial, but now it's institutional.

Jane Morley from A2JBC and the lead in laying the foundation for the Collaborative, commented, *“The TFJS Strategy Map was an important factor in engaging leaders from across the justice sector and from other sectors. I was able to show that the strategy mapping approach and the work we had already done with InsightFormation and Diana Lowe provided a well-thought-out strategic framework for the Collaborative and a tool to tame the complexity of our ambitious initiative.”*

Solid progress is being made on the three challenges faced by a system-level transformation of the family justice system: changing mental models, challenging complexity and managing information. The use of strategy maps and InsightVision is allowing the coalition to make a plan for the first, visualize the second (even as it changes and changes again), and handle the third.

In the early years, system transformation initiatives rarely can demonstrate easy-to-understand results, even if things are going well. But those who have been in this movement for decades are saying that now, as a result of the recent work with strategy mapping, the work has shifted from high-level discussions, driven by only a few people, to a collaborative process that is beginning to drive itself.

The coalition is attracting more people and has done more practical planning in the last 12 months than it did in the previous 12 years. Organizations and stakeholders, both central and peripheral, are actively contributing workable implementation ideas, and reporting a sense of optimism that their work will benefit the goals they believe in.

News of this success is spreading. In jurisdictions across Canada, justice system reformers are beginning to see that a well-defined cross-sector strategy for transformation is possible with this method and these tools. Furthermore, these strategy engagement techniques are spreading to adjacent work on family violence, poverty, and community resilience.

One group in the TFJS coalition in Alberta, led by Dr. Nicole Letourneau at the University of Calgary, incorporated the use of strategy maps and InsightVision into a large grant application for reducing family violence and adversity as well as transforming the ways that academic training and research is done for social sector-related programs across many universities in Canada. This application received \$2.4 million (CDN) to fund the work over 6 years, with over 150 partnering organizations. This is a major expansion of the depth and breadth of the TFJS work.



Finally, the upper echelons of the court systems in these provinces and at the national level are increasing their support for this effort. One of the coalition's members, Justice Rod Jerke, will be starting a 9-month academic leave with the University of Calgary to focus on strengthening this transformation movement.

The wicked complexity of the family justice system remains. Fortunately, the strategy map—a rich and thoughtfully developed “*common agenda*”—is bringing about a shared vision for mutually-reinforcing changes that lead to dramatically improved outcomes for the children, and their families, who find themselves involved with the courts at one of the most trying times of their lives.