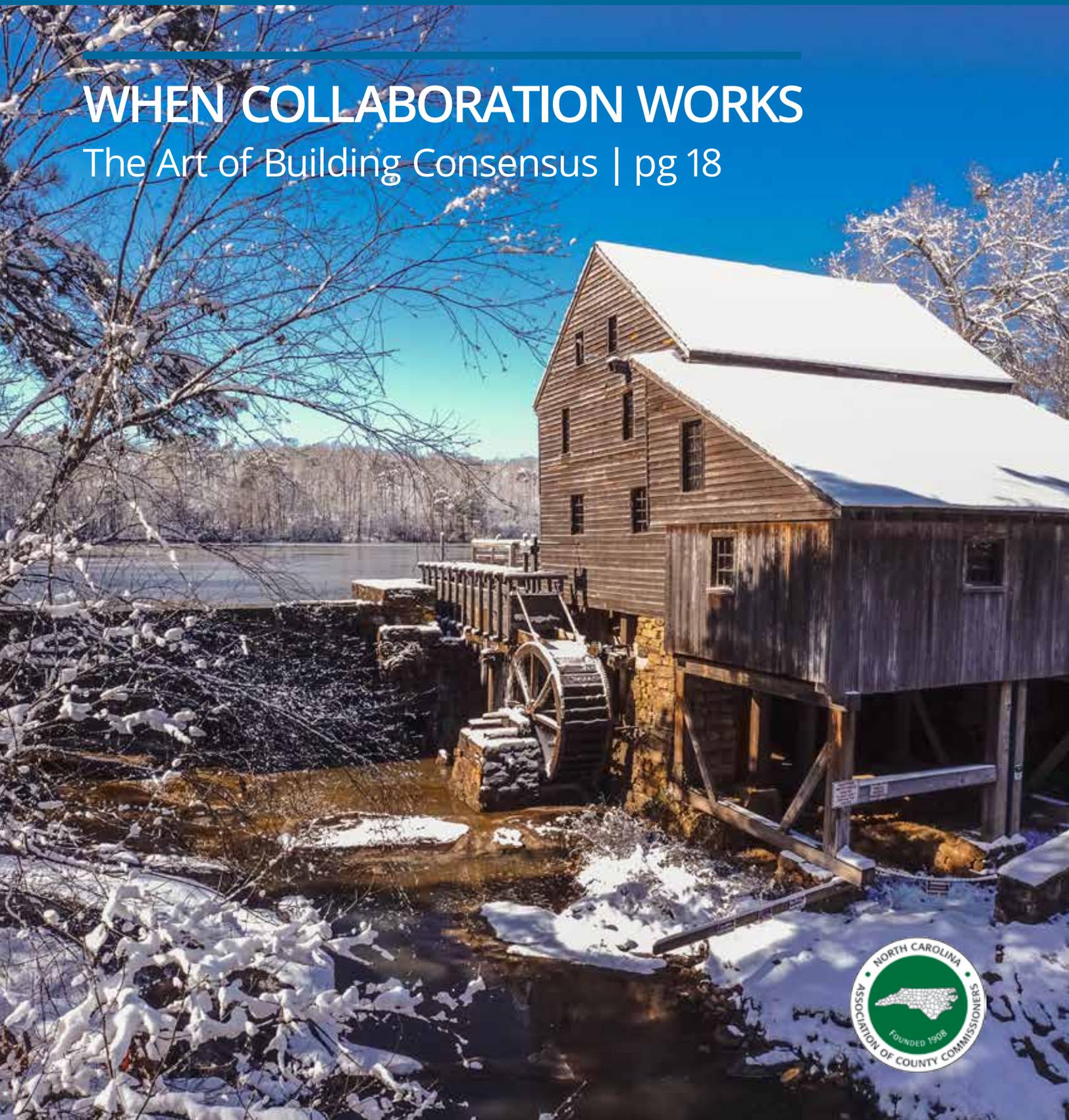


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The Story of North Carolina Counties
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WHEN COLLABORATION WORKS

The Art of Building Consensus | pg 18



When Collaboration Works

By Lacy Pate | NCACC Public Relations Manager

Last year, North Carolina enacted the Family/Child Protection and Accountability Act, also known as Rylan's Law, which establishes a framework for making system-wide improvements in child welfare services throughout all 100 counties in the state. The collaborative process that moved this important legislation across the finish line took a lot of hard work and challenging, yet productive conversations with various stakeholders, including North Carolina Senator Tamara Barringer, the lead sponsor of the bill; Dr. Mandy Cohen, Secretary of the North Carolina

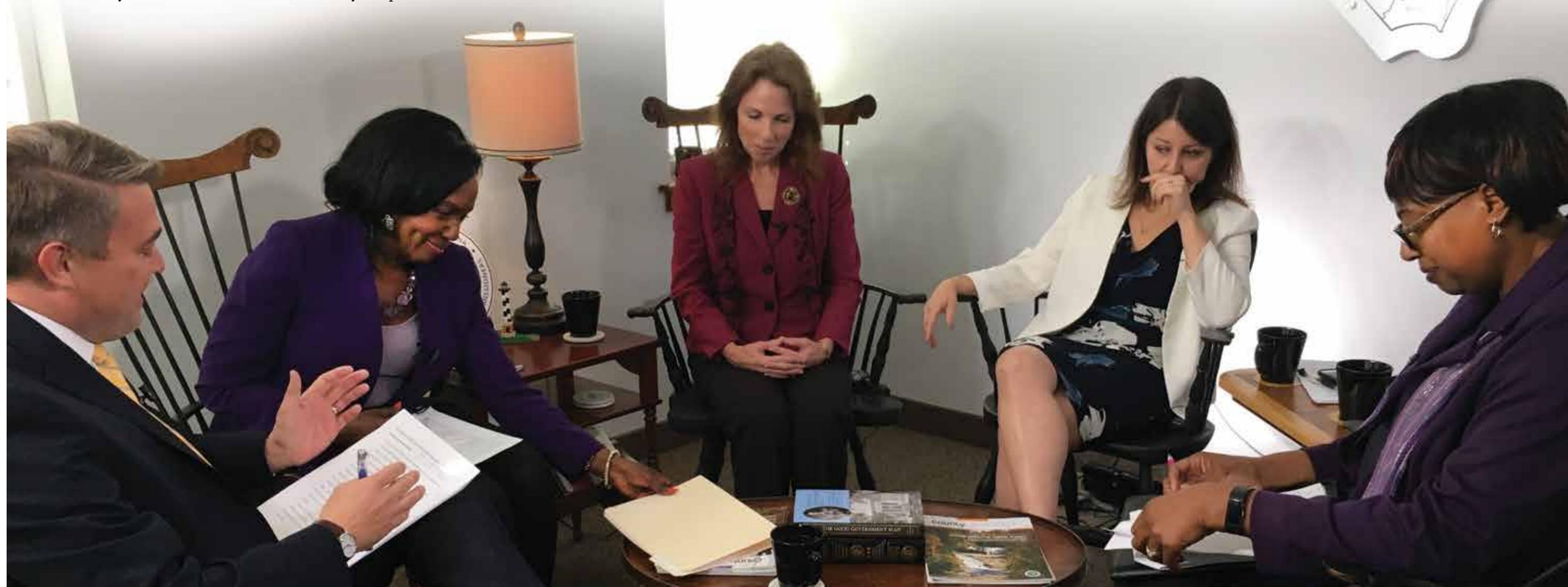
Department of Health and Human Services; Kevin Leonard, Executive Director, North Carolina Association of County Commissioners; and Brenda Jackson, who was serving as the President of the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services.

NCACC recently hosted an in-depth roundtable discussion with the key stakeholders to explore the collaborative process that brought Rylan's Law to fruition. The discussion revealed that although there were points of disagreement along the way, everyone persisted toward the shared

goal of improving child welfare, and the hard work paid off. During the roundtable, NCACC President Brenda Howerton also discussed her initiative, "100 Counties: Helping our Children Thrive," and her role as a member of the social services working group, which was established by Rylan's Law. The Working Group is tasked with developing recommendations for regional supervision and interagency collaboration. The reports are required by statute to be submitted to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the

Department of Health and Human Services by April 15, 2018 and February 1, 2010 respectively.

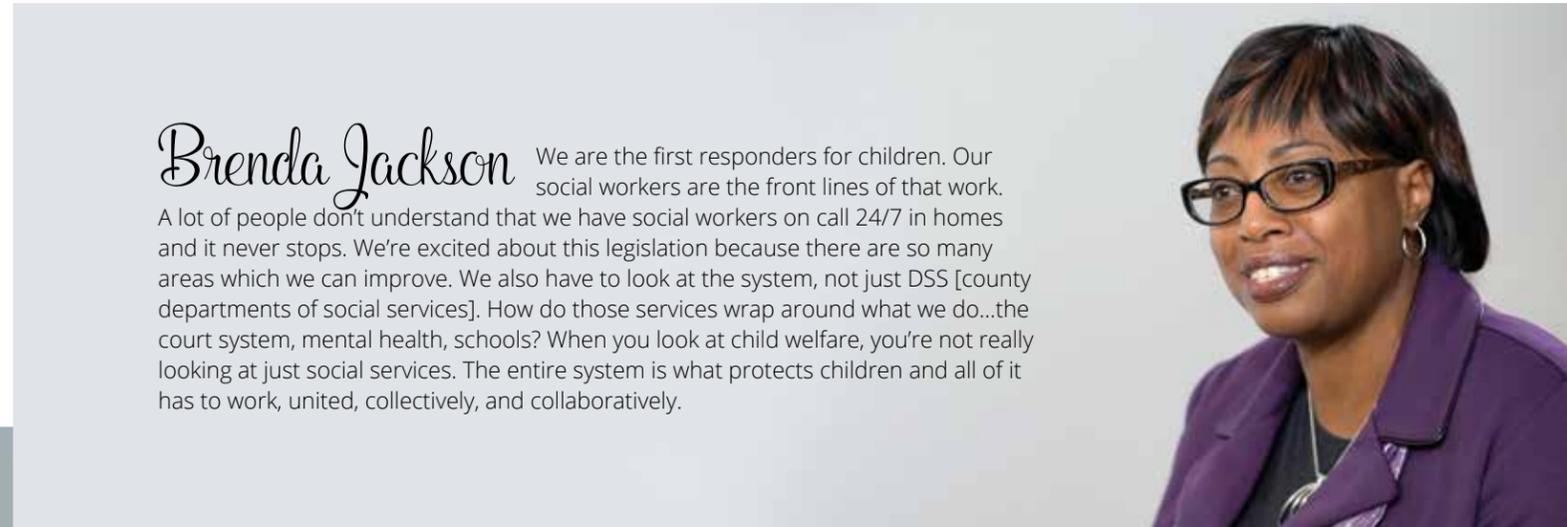
We encourage you to watch NCACC's new video program on the roundtable discussion, *When Collaboration Works* at www.ncacc.org/collaboration. The program, which is the first of its kind ever produced by NCACC, recounts the achievements that are possible when collaboration works. What follows is a sneak peak of the program, *When Collaboration Works*.



“I think we all agree that we have to have a high standard of quality for every child in this state no matter what county, no matter what family, no matter what situation.” – Senator Tamara Barringer



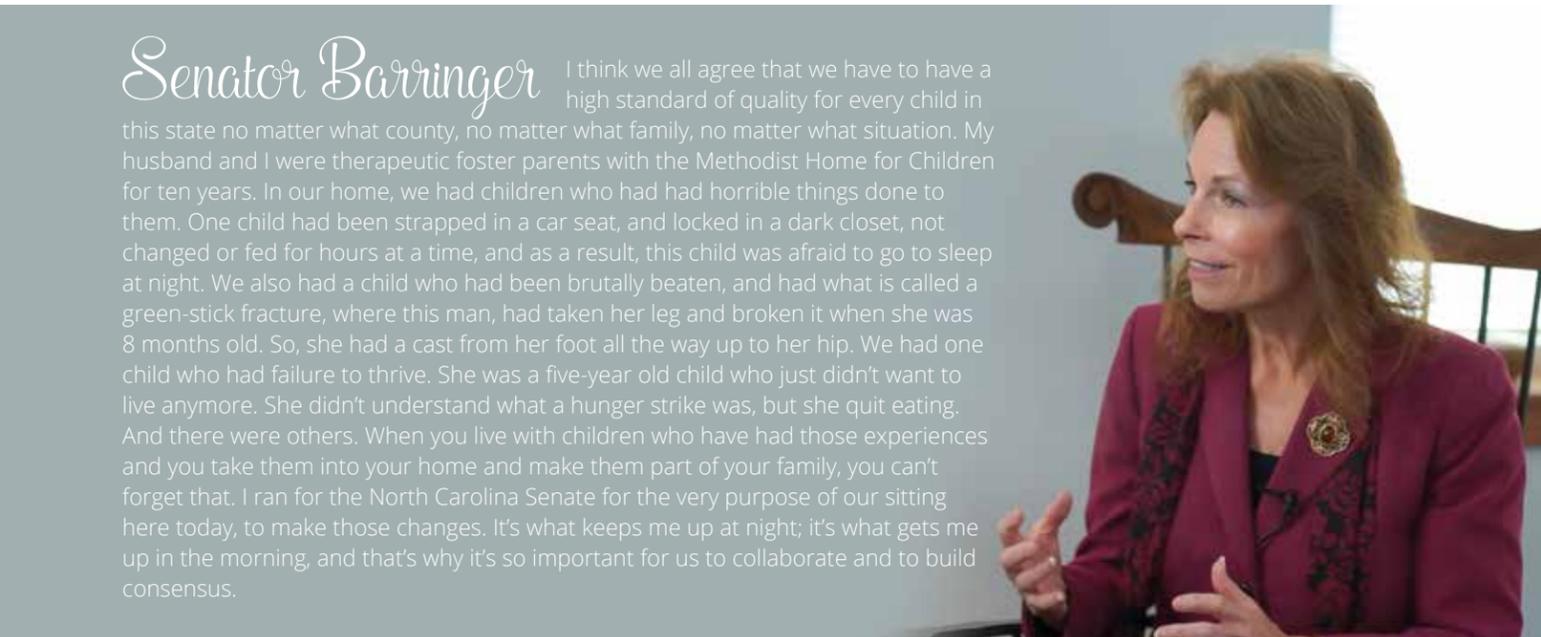
Kevin Leonard I think this is a really important story for us to tell especially when there is so much in the press about disagreement and people angry at each another. The evolutionary process that paved the way for Rylan’s Law involved rigorous discussion and debate, which occurred almost daily. We were on the phone at 7am in the morning and 9pm a lot of nights. NCACC sits at a critical spot as collaborator and convener. What we can offer is creating that conversation between county and state and others. We do that well.



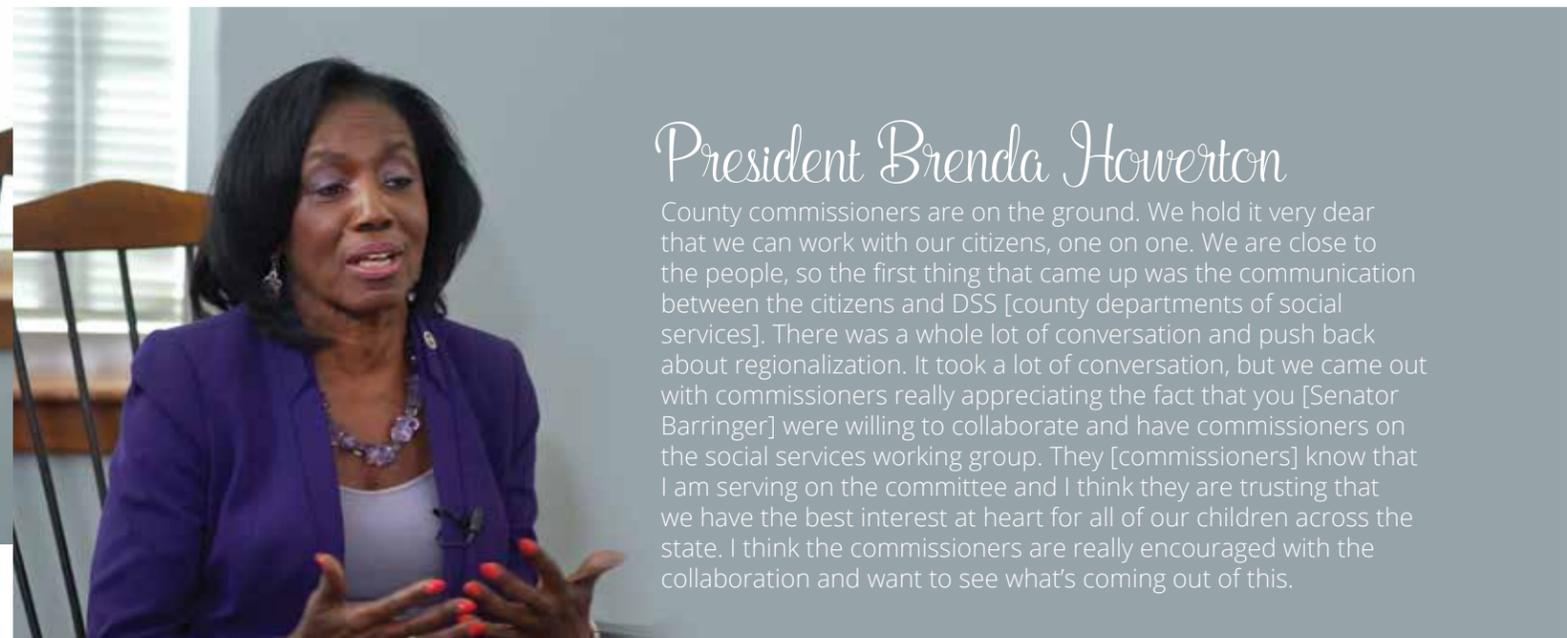
Brenda Jackson We are the first responders for children. Our social workers are the front lines of that work. A lot of people don’t understand that we have social workers on call 24/7 in homes and it never stops. We’re excited about this legislation because there are so many areas which we can improve. We also have to look at the system, not just DSS [county departments of social services]. How do those services wrap around what we do...the court system, mental health, schools? When you look at child welfare, you’re not really looking at just social services. The entire system is what protects children and all of it has to work, united, collectively, and collaboratively.



Secretary Cohen Counties and the state are one team. It’s one and the same. We wanted to bring together the passion and the on-the-ground know how to help our kids. Our role as the state is to provide the underlying infrastructure to make everyone successful and do right by our kids no matter what their zip code. The new law accelerated work at the Department [NC Department of Health and Human Services] to make sure the state is living up to our responsibilities.



Senator Barringer I think we all agree that we have to have a high standard of quality for every child in this state no matter what county, no matter what family, no matter what situation. My husband and I were therapeutic foster parents with the Methodist Home for Children for ten years. In our home, we had children who had had horrible things done to them. One child had been strapped in a car seat, and locked in a dark closet, not changed or fed for hours at a time, and as a result, this child was afraid to go to sleep at night. We also had a child who had been brutally beaten, and had what is called a green-stick fracture, where this man, had taken her leg and broken it when she was 8 months old. So, she had a cast from her foot all the way up to her hip. We had one child who had failure to thrive. She was a five-year old child who just didn’t want to live anymore. She didn’t understand what a hunger strike was, but she quit eating. And there were others. When you live with children who have had those experiences and you take them into your home and make them part of your family, you can’t forget that. I ran for the North Carolina Senate for the very purpose of our sitting here today, to make those changes. It’s what keeps me up at night; it’s what gets me up in the morning, and that’s why it’s so important for us to collaborate and to build consensus.



President Brenda Howerton County commissioners are on the ground. We hold it very dear that we can work with our citizens, one on one. We are close to the people, so the first thing that came up was the communication between the citizens and DSS [county departments of social services]. There was a whole lot of conversation and push back about regionalization. It took a lot of conversation, but we came out with commissioners really appreciating the fact that you [Senator Barringer] were willing to collaborate and have commissioners on the social services working group. They [commissioners] know that I am serving on the committee and I think they are trusting that we have the best interest at heart for all of our children across the state. I think the commissioners are really encouraged with the collaboration and want to see what’s coming out of this.



*“Bottom line is all of you folks made a good bill better...
it’s all about respect, it’s about building relationships,
and it’s about listening to others... it’s that simple.”*

– Senator Tamara Barringer

Senator Barringer I truly believe the best government is closest to the people. North Carolina has a very rich culture and very diverse population and no one knows better what your folks need than the people that are there on the ground. But we also need to share our resources and knowledge across lines.

Brenda Jackson Having a good implementation process that rolls things out very systematic and strategically is so important. If I get a policy tomorrow, I have to train 300+ social workers and that doesn’t happen overnight. I would agree that transparency and communication is important, but how you implement is so critical. We find that social workers have to document and complete five forms just to show that they did one home visit. And so when you start talking about change, especially in the practice, you have to have social workers that can do the practice and not be too bogged down in bureaucratic paper work and bureaucratic systems.

Secretary Cohen Let’s all have the same expectations so we all know where we’re aiming and can hold ourselves mutually accountable. We’ve been very collaborative with our partners at the county-level to give more transparency and accountability for our work. The thing we need the most is transparency and communication. Help us now to understand what the work flows are - what are the biggest challenges that we need to solve? Tell us now so that we can build it into the work. There is no problem we can’t solve if we know about it.

Senator Barringer Bottom line is all of you folks made a good bill better. I am a consensus builder and that is not a compromiser. So, for me to invite the stakeholders to the table was a natural part of the process. It’s about respect, it’s about building relationships, and it’s about listening to others and that’s all it is. It’s that simple. And I don’t find it threatening. I found it to be very positive and I was so thrilled that when I invited people to the table they actually came and they stayed until we got the bill done. This is an ongoing process and we’re going to continue working on this. We’re not finished. The legislation was just the beginning and it’s really critical for us to stay engaged and respectful with our eye on the goal.

Kevin Leonard Moving forward, I think we have demonstrated that we have worked really hard to set a collaborative effort in getting the legislation, which is going to be the foundation for the conversations, which might even be more difficult moving forward, but at least we have these relationships built so we understand they can withstand those hard conversations. ■

