

Commissioner Statement for *Juan F v. Lamont* Exit Plan Status Report

The last 6 months have challenged this state like never before. The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (CTDCF), as with all other child welfare jurisdictions across the country, has been met with the enormous responsibility of navigating child protection while in the clutches of an international public health crisis. I continue to be in awe of the steadiness of Governor Ned Lamont as he shepherds the state through these uncharted waters. He has demonstrated the precision of a surgeon in his decisive leadership. This unwavering commitment has positioned CT as a forerunner in many of the key metrics being followed in responsiveness to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lamont administration's directive, from the very beginning of its tenure, was to collaborate, work across sectors and operate with transparency and integrity. This expectation has prepared us for the unimaginable storm we are currently navigating. Honesty and responsiveness to the relationships we have cultivated has afforded CTDCF the opportunity to find our way through mission critical work expectations while simultaneously attending to the health and safety of our workforce.

The well-being of children is paramount to the ultimate strength of a society. In the context of the *Juan F.* Exit Plan, I am humbled that the Court Monitor can pre-certify that CTDCF has worked hard to maintain quality investigation standards. This measure reflects the 'front door' of the timeline that starts the trajectory of our involvement with families. Likewise, to jurisdictions nationwide, the CTDCF Careline has had to adjust to a significantly lower call volume and continued to work around the clock in responding to the reports of child maltreatment after normal workhours. Attention to the components of differential response processes equates to improved safety decisions, more consistent risk assessments and comprehensive intervention. CTDCF partnered differently with our provider community to offer a warmline to any CT parent experiencing pandemic related stressors.

As we partner with providers across our service array, we have steadfast commitment to improved outcomes. Along with appreciation to Governor Lamont, the Office of Policy and Management, and the Connecticut Legislature for their continued support, we thank the provider trade associations, foster parents, families & other stakeholders who together have prioritized the safety of CT's children.

Although tested during this crisis, the vision of this CTDCF Administration is to reinforce clear and simple values:

- Keep children ***safely at home*** whenever possible;
- Place children with relatives (including maternal and paternal family) or someone they know, to ***maintain kinship bonds***, if they must enter state care. As of 9/1/20, 44.3% of children are in placements with extended family members as of this writing.
- If they cannot be safely placed with someone they know, children ***will be in a family*** setting through our strong networks of foster family homes. On 9/1/20, over 90% of children in care are living with a family.
- We have also steadily ***reduced the use of institutional care*** for those children who require out of home clinical treatment. Although only 6.5% of children in our care on September 1, 2020 are in group care settings, the congregate care providers we entrust have worked tremendously hard during the pandemic and also are owed a debt of gratitude.
- Efforts to address ***timely permanency*** have also been compromised by the impact of the shuttering of courthouses in response to this state of emergency. CTDCF is also very thankful to the Judicial branch, the Assistant Attorneys General and Public Defender's office in their pledge to work with the Dept's Legal division to keep the priority work of the court moving, which they all have done consistently. This attention has resulted in completed adoptions, the establishment of remote hearings and a process of prioritizing pending court actions where feasible.
- Multidisciplinary assessments and Enhanced Service Coordination serve to ensure children are ***better off*** following Department intervention. These components more accurately identify root causes of familial strife and match to the appropriate services to address those needs.
- ***Academic & vocational preparation of older youth*** served by CTDCF continues to be a priority of Departmental reform. The governor's Emergency Declaration allows for the enactment of specific actions to be authorized by agency Commissioners. I have authorized suspension of '*aging out*' during the pandemic, permitted re-entry with more flexible criteria, and made extra efforts to reconnect with young people who had recently transitioned from care to try and ensure their stability. Staff in our *Transitioning Youth for Success* and *Education* divisions work diligently with area office social workers to ensure teens and young adults have technology to stay virtually

connected to remote learning. This same collaboration worked to bring our committed students back from college campuses safely to continue their coursework here at home. The unpredictability of this virus' transmission has resulted in the extension of these protections through the remaining months of 2020.

- While the pandemic has slowed progress in so many areas, this aspect of the work has demonstrated what can happen when systems invest in young people. Our teens have been vocal in their representation of CT in regional & national focus groups and youth-oriented summits. They have continued active participation in well-established quarterly Commissioner meetings and in topical Teen Town Halls designed to afford DCF committed youth forums to discuss pandemic coping challenges and strategies for law enforcement interaction.
- This quarter has also reflected young adult involvement in curriculum review with the DCF Workforce Academy but also representation in a fiscal process to offer perspective on expenditures that directly impact this age cohort.

When these priorities were tested by this ever-present (*im*)perfect storm of COVID-19, societal unrest and economic devastation, the racial justice evolution of CTDCF has also been enhanced to introduce an antiracist framework with attention to leadership coaching and specific disparity outcome improvement change initiatives. I am very proud of the statewide racial justice workgroup continued development. The Bureau of Strategic Planning has developed and stood up review tools to measure the efficacy of work product in this remote environment. The CTDCF Senior leadership has made significant strides in refining the strategies in each of the identified target areas to maintain focus on the Dept's mission while navigating the unpredictable challenges of a global pandemic.

The pandemic has made the deployment of tablets and other technology imperative for the Department to stay connected. The Academy for Workforce Development (AWD) along with CT-KIND, Information Systems and the DCF HELPDESK has been an incredible collaboration to pivot the work of CTDCF into the virtual space. With the assistance of Human Resources, new staff have been on-boarded and trained during this precarious time. AWD has established an entire virtual platform of course offerings. With the partnership of a local college, AWD, the Dept's Health and Wellness Division have developed a series of instructional videos on the proper use of personal protective equipment and workplace rules. The Dept's Medical Director has valiantly led CTDCF through this public health crisis with exemplary aptitude. A contact tracing protocol has been effective at keeping the workplace virus transmissions very low across the Department.

Along with managing the Department's fiscal solvency, monitoring and adjusting the continuity of operations plan and all of the tremendous physical plant modifications to ensure continued workplace health and safety, Administrative divisions have also conducted the CTDCF's first virtual LEAN events to continue the efforts to streamline Dept processes. Tabletop exercises and an internal replication of the governor's unified command structure resulted in more seamless cross Dept information sharing, collaboration and troubleshooting.

Fiscal Services have also worked alongside the System Development division to keep the provider community involved in the Dept's reopening efforts. Although CTDCF has never closed, these divisions, have continued to develop plans of consistent strategies to safely resume full functioning and service to families. I continue to be amazed at the tenacity of each of the divisions to support the work of CTDCF in these harrowing circumstances to ensure children youth and families are supported.

During this period under review, CTDCF's External Affairs Bureau stood up a dedicated COVID 19 mailbox and website to make available information on statewide resources to over 20,000 unique URL's. This effort coupled with weekly Commissioner update videos, regular newsletters and even the Dept's first ever Virtual All Staff Meeting -- keeping CTDCF's workforce informed with accurate information by which to serve families most effectively.

During the previous quarter, the planning stages of developing our CT state plan in response to the federal *Family First Prevention Services Act* began. It is these established stakeholder relationships that have proven very valuable in navigating the service delivery to families. The state plan development timeframe has been extended and the workgroup leads of this endeavor have been re-engaged to resume the work of the identified subcommittees.

CT DCF is committed to continuing progress even in the grips of an international crisis. Along with maintaining aforementioned contacts with the legislative and judicial branches, CTDCF is solidly incorporated with the other health and human services agencies across our state. We actively problem solve and collectively seek guidance from our public health experts, and the Department of Administrative Services' Office of Labor Relations. The CT Comptroller's Office has provided opportunity for state employee testing. All of this has prepared CT to be as safely responsive to the families and communities we mutually serve. Leaders across CTDCF participate regularly in cross jurisdictional forums on regional and national levels. Not only do we learn from other states, but we have also been frequently called upon to share our innovative strategies on legislator advocacy, fatherhood engagement and racial justice over this quarter.

We greatly appreciate the support of the Office of the Court Monitor and the Federal Court in maintaining our efforts towards approaching an exit from *Juan F*. If our work over the last quarter has taught us nothing else, we have realized that the capacity of a system is not really known until it is stretched beyond its perceived boundaries.

The CTDCF Executive team is grateful to the DCF workforce who make us exceedingly proud as they continue to do this work while making every effort to keep themselves and their own families safe. We thank the thousands of partners in communities across Connecticut standing with us. Service providers, educators, law enforcement officials, court personnel, medical providers and others are all making sacrifices to support children and families through these unprecedented times.

Most of all, we thank the children and families for their active engagement-- even in the face of perilous uncertainty.

We are truly all in this TOGETHER.