

Department of Children and Families  
**SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT**



## A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

The profound connection to the children we serve is captured in this photograph of Social Worker, Sylquia Rodriguez. It tells a story...of dedication and ... commitment. Sylquia's visit to this home reflects not only a tender moment but is a testament to our innate abilities to work within barriers of social distancing; ensuring that those we care about, feel our presence.

The efforts of the DCF workforce are beyond simple tasks or just a job. Our work is a *calling*. The impact we have on others is immeasurable. This photo has been my pandemic screen saver -- a daily reminder of the privilege I have leading all of you through these unparalleled times!!!

Your actions exemplify a fundamental belief of our Department that children are best served when being raised in families - preferably their own. Removal is the last option. In fact, in over 91.5% of the time the Department becomes involved, with supportive services, **families remain intact**.

Given the perils of substance misuse, untreated mental health issues, and intimate partner violence; unmitigated safety factors may lead to a child's removal.



Then what? Children should not spend *one day longer* in out of home care than is necessary to keep them safe.

Perhaps it is in the next set of actions which are the heart and soul of our work - Reunification becomes the goal and the focus of our efforts. The coronavirus' impact on permanency will be felt for quite some time. What can we do to change that trajectory?

June is Reunification Month. Not widely acknowledged, the process of reunification takes into account resilience, strength, change and protective parental capacity.

**Over the past 18 months, the Department has reunified almost 1,000 children.**

This newsletter highlights four stories of reunification; two of which occurred **during** the pandemic. You will read about the engagement skills of our staff; trust developed between workers and families and overall - a belief in the individuals for whom we work.

Two of the stories pertain to reunification with Fathers, including one who will have his son with him for the first time, on Father's Day this Sunday! As a self-proclaimed Daddy's Girl, **Happy Father's Day** to all Fathers and Father figures -

In celebration of Reunification month -- **WHO'S NEXT???**

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## Despite A World In Crisis And Staff's Personal Challenges - A Little Girl Reunified



For the second time in two years, the family lost their home and again faced the difficult challenge of caring for two young children while navigating the stress of unstable housing.

Regrettably, this scenario is not uncommon among the families that the Department of Children and Families serves.

But what if the family is one that belongs to Department staff? It is an opportunity to see that the families we serve are not so different from our own.

Ryan Buzzell, a 10-year veteran social worker in the Hartford office, was reminded of this as he and his wife had to leave their Glastonbury home with their 5-year-old daughter and 7-year old son twice in two years due to flooding damage.

The second episode, which just ended with the family moving back home in late April, was compounded because of the personal and professional challenges that result from being a social worker in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic was just about to hit Connecticut hard when the family moved to a two-bedroom hotel with a kitchenette in February.

With all the uncertainty and anxiety swirling, the family faced a two-month ordeal in an unfamiliar and confined space.

Mr. Buzzell said his family got through it by virtue of the same dynamics that the families we serve experience themselves.

“It took some patience and some good family conversation,” he said. “It’s the same thing we expect from the families we serve. How do we handle stress and remain safe and happy?”

That Mr. Buzzell could face his family’s challenge while also serving families on his caseload during the pandemic is a testament to his dedication and skill, but also to his ability to partner creatively with his clients and his Department teammates. The pandemic has led the Department to change traditional ways of working -- including reserving home visits to situations that cannot be addressed remotely through online video conferencing, FaceTime, or phone.

Mr. Buzzell said this has not stopped him from conducting the most complicated parts of the work – including reunifications and supporting relative caregivers.

One family that Mr. Buzzell is particularly proud of included a single mother and her 8-year-old daughter. The mom was struggling with substance use, mental health needs, and unstable housing when the Department removed the 8-year-old in May 2019 and brought her to a kinship home. While initially resistant to working with the Department, the mother over time was able to understand what she needed to do in order to be reunified, Mr. Buzzell said. Mother bought into her substance use treatment, worked on her emotional issues and maintained her sobriety for 9 months. In January 2020, mother secured stable housing – just weeks before the pandemic would turn the world and the Department’s work upside down.

But that would not stop Mr. Buzzell from potentially getting the family back together. Nor would his own family’s housing challenge.

“We did a lot of good work with our legal team, my chain of command, management, the foster mom, and the Village for Families and Children to make sure everyone was on the same page,” he said. “A lot of the stuff was done through FaceTime calls, Microsoft Teams and so on.

Mr. Buzzell gave a lot of credit to the foster mother who brought the little girl to many unsupervised visits with mother and then back home again. He said he had enough experience with the family to properly and safely allow the unsupervised visits.

"I've worked with the family a couple years now, and I have a good vibe of them over time," he said. "Plus, I had the chance to get to the apartment prior to the COVID crisis, so I was confident in our decision."

The child went home April 17 – after the Department changed its practice, at least for now, to remote work whenever possible.

"That was the challenge," he said. "How can we do this and make sure we are doing this safely? We can still wrap services around mom, and we can communicate with the providers remotely, which is perfect."

Mr. Buzzell said the Village for Families and Children are providing mental health and substance use treatment services, and the Connection is supporting the housing for the family. CHR, another community provider, is giving the little girl counseling. All these services are provided through a tele-health model, Mr. Buzzell said.

"We're still able to do everything," he said. "It's just a little different." What's remained the same is the need to build trust and relationships. "I think about how I would want to be treated," Mr. Buzzell said. "It's about building that trust because we all have to work together. It's a two-way street."

Mr. Buzzell has stayed very involved – albeit creatively. He has two Microsoft Team meetings every week with mom and her daughter in their home. Some of these meetings involve good fun, he said. "I get to talk to the girl and see how she is doing," he said. "One time, mom and daughter were playing a card game that they were teaching me over the phone."

The 8-year-old has also used her phone to show Mr. Buzzell her room, her stuffed animal collection, and the new laptop her school provided her for remote learning. "She shares a lot of positive stuff with me," he said. "She seems very happy – just from reading her smile and her mood."

This is not the only family that Mr. Buzzell has had success in doing effective social work through non-traditional means while facing his own personal challenges and COVID-19 related stress. A two-year-old boy is living with her maternal aunt, and the boy's father is regularly visiting his son at the aunt's home. Mr. Buzzell talks with father two to four times a week and checks in with the aunt and the boy via FaceTime.

Mr. Buzzell said these new ways of connecting with children and families work so well that he expects them to continue after the crisis ends. "I can see some changes happening," he said.

Christine Lau, an assistant chief of the Bureau of Child Welfare, said Mr. Buzzell represents the ways our staff will do what it takes to get good outcomes.

"We cannot do this work alone," she said. "In difficult times we must rely on those around us, including our community partners, to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and families. Creativity and learning to navigate the virtual world in the midst of a pandemic and personal challenges is more evidence of just how resilient and passionate our staff really are."

Undoubtedly, that Mr. Buzzell could conduct his work so effectively during the crisis – and his family's own housing crisis – is a testament to the team he is surrounded by, he said.

"It helps to have a good team within the DCF family and our own families," he said, adding that his supervisor and other colleagues were tremendous supports as his family dealt with complicated logistics surrounding the move back home. That was a key to getting his work done while also taking care of his own family.

"We all have our own DCF families and that helps support our own families," he said with gratitude. "It's a two-way street."



## My First Father's Day with My Dad - Three Years Later



This Sunday, a 3-year-old little boy and his Father will be celebrating their first Father's Day together. Once separated by over 2,400 miles, today they share the same home. They are a family.

Who would have thought a selfie with a DCF worker, a Father, and his son in an airport would serve to represent what reunification at the Department of Children and Families looks like today!

"Engagement," Social Worker Paul Franco enthusiastically stated when asked about his approach to serving children and families. "Build a good rapport," he said. It is in those moments of trust the critical work of supporting and empowering families can be accomplished. Words which come alive when hearing the story of a boy and his distant father.

Paul has been with the Agency for 18 months. After spending time working with former inmates in a halfway house, he saw firsthand the plight of men who did not receive the right assistance in timely fashion and who were labeled as not contributing to society. Little did he know how valuable these experiences would be in the near future.

In one of his first cases as a new trainee, Paul was assigned to the family of a young child placed into foster care. The boy's mother was at an unidentified address in New York, after leaving her son in an unsafe situation. The exact

whereabouts of his Father were not clear. It would have been easy to establish a belief about a man who has a young child but is not involved in his life. It is workers like Paul who put those judgements aside. They put in the effort to do what is right - always from the child's perspective.

By use of the LexisNexis search engine, a phone number was obtained for a man who potentially could be the Father.

One phone call. The Father was located. The complication? He lived on the other side of the country.

It takes unique skills to work at the Department. Balancing visits and court work, provider meetings and collateral contacts. When engagement between families and the Department works well, children can safely remain at home or have their permanency expedited. With Paul, that initial discussion with this Father turned positive.

They engaged over the phone. Paul stated, "I am one of the youngest staff in the office." The Father himself was young which Paul believes was a point they both had in common and used in their work together. They talked about the Father's current situation, where he was, the strained relationship with the child's Mother and his need for supports. They also discussed being a Father and navigating the multiple systems which come with parenting a child. Paul focused on moving forward, the Father agreed. A plan was made.

Quickly, the Father came to Connecticut to visit a child he had not seen in years. He took parenting classes in his home state and confirmed he had stable income. One barrier was the uncertainty the Father felt when the local CPS agency wanted to visit and confirm the conditions for DCF. He was apprehensive.

According to Paul, men interacting in the system may tend to be more skeptical of an Agency's efforts. Feeling as if they are scrutinized more tightly by staff who hold onto past perceptions of the role a man can play in the life of a child.

It was Paul who explained the process, mentored the Father in his interactions and showed patience in answering his questions. They discussed supports and services. Phone call after phone call, they formed a bond.

Meanwhile, a little boy waited to be reunited with his Father. The wait was finally over. The selfie of Paul was taken at the airport right before the Father and son boarded a plane. Permanently together. That was on Valentine's Day, a day before Paul's one-year anniversary with the Department. It was his first reunification. Already not his last. What is the message here?

For an agency that fundamentally believes in the strength of individuals and families, understanding someone's full potential takes time with mindset of what someone *can* do versus what they *cannot*. It starts with engagement - regardless of whether or not the Agency is working with a Mother or a Father.

History has shown relationships between Fathers and the child welfare system have been strained. The Agency has made great strides in the inclusive nature of our work with Fathers. More work to be done with them and Paternal relatives.

Ironically, Paul Franco is supervised by Rodney Moore. Sound familiar? Rodney was also featured in this "Spotlight" for his reunification work as well with a Father who resides in another state. An example of how the policy and procedure of an Agency, embedded within the culture and reinforced in supervision, lead to positive outcomes.

Happy Father's Day to a Father who embraced the system and is now providing a permanent home to his son.

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## **"Oh, I've heard so much about you"...**

When 18-month-old Natalie boarded a plane to North Carolina with her Social Worker, Rodney Moore, falling asleep on his chest made perfect sense. So did the comment from a woman who looked over and said, "She loves you. You are so good with her."

What would this same child say to her Social Worker 5 years after being reunified with her father, and being reintroduced to this Social Worker, whom she does not remember, yet who changed her life?

Read on....

For Rodney, on the job training took a new meaning when he was assigned to his first case in 2015. The structure of formal knowledge and supervision helped to prepare this young worker for the challenges ahead. Yet, it was his innate judgement, optimism and genuine respect for a particular family, his colleagues and the child welfare system that created this emotional reunification story. A perfect, happily ever after.

Early in his career, Rodney was assigned to a case involving a mother who loved her one-year old little girl yet struggled with the perils of life's challenges. She had relocated to Connecticut with no family or friends to support her through her difficulties. The end result was the child needed to be placed.



The one person missing from this little girl's life was her Father. Where was he and what did he know? Utilizing social media and other forms of technology, information was found that led the Department to believe the Father may be unaware of the situation. He resided in North Carolina and was contacted by Rodney. One phone call changed two lives. The Father was elated to hear from the Department and eagerly acknowledged his relation to this little girl, faxing over a paternity test confirming that he was this little girl's Father. He had no idea where his girlfriend had taken his daughter and had been worried about her for months.

The Father and his Mom drove over 12 hours to visit and remained in contact with DCF over the next several months. He flew to Connecticut every two weeks, trips that were paid for by the Department. He and his daughter visited in parks, libraries, bookstores and the mall. According to Rodney, "There was a natural engagement between him and his daughter, there was a beautiful bond."

In between visits, the Father initiated parenting classes in North Carolina, had his fingerprints taken and complied with background checks. He participated in court hearings and visited as often as he could. Father initiated all he could, as well as sending photographs of his home in hopes to show his continued efforts to have his daughter reunified to his care.

Rodney's efforts continued towards reunification with the Mother. Unfortunately, due to her issues, reunification was not a viable option.

On the last day of the Commitment trial, the Father traveled back to North Carolina to await the court's decision. While he was in route home, it was decided Rodney would make an immediate home visit assessment and a flight to North Carolina was arranged for that night. Landing shortly after the Father arrived, it was learned his home looked exactly like the photographs that the Father had shared with the Department. It was child-proofed and the little girl's room was exactly how she had left it. There were piles of clothing folded and arranged according to size and her decorations remained in her room. Portraits of Natalie were lovingly displayed on the walls of the home.

The family never gave up hope she would come home. Three days after Rodney returned home from North Carolina, the Judge granted custody of this little girl to her Father and arrangements to fly her home were made. Rodney called the Mother and made plans for a lengthy visit so the two could spend time together. He conveyed the Father's message to the Mother - encouraging her to relocate back to North Carolina and continue supervised visits with her daughter.

Reflecting back on that day, nearly five years ago, Rodney remembers arriving at the home and taking the little girl out of the car seat. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she saw her Father and all his extended family waiting for her on the porch. She ran and ran as fast as she could into her Father's arms. He stated, "That is when I knew for certain, she was home."

Rodney Moore is now an Ongoing Services Supervisor in the New Haven DCF Office. He shares this story with his trainees because he feels it is so important for his staff to understand the work and especially, fatherhood engagement.

Rodney has stayed involved with the family for the past five years and was invited this past August to be a surprise guest at the Father's wedding. Rodney made the decision to attend the wedding on his own time, to support this next chapter in the family's life. When the Father saw Rodney get out of his car, he was shocked, and they shared an emotional reunion.

Extended family members thanked Rodney for all he had done to bring this little girl home.

Now, it was Natalie's turn to say hello. The little girl, who was just a toddler at the time of our agency's involvement, did not remember Rodney, but finally met the man again, who changed her life.

Her words....."Oh, I've heard so much about you,"

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## Reunification - Virtual Style

A national pandemic may impact the way that our work is done but learning creative ways to adapt was second nature for Lisa Miller, a Social Worker from the Middletown DCF Office and her Supervisor, Marie Levesque.

The case of an infant placed into foster care was met with some unforeseen challenges on the path towards reunification. The Mother, who is originally from out of state, gave birth to her child in Connecticut. Due to many complicating factors, she could not care for the baby, who was placed into foster care.

That served as a turning point in her life.

Expressing her desires to care once again for her child, the Mother began visiting regularly, traveling from her home state to Connecticut and met all of the expectations agreed upon with the Department.

She was motivated and determined.

Despite the pandemic, this Mother took part in a mental health evaluation, substance use screening and secured housing.

Here was the barrier..... the pandemic placed travel restrictions between states impeding the ability for DCF to verify her current living conditions. When assistance was sought from another CPS agency, the response was they were unable to visit the home until the baby was actually in their state.



Only one piece of the assessment was needed in order for reunification to occur.

Now what?

Lisa using the #wegotthis mentality, did not allow barriers to delay reunification. Through the use of modern technology, she made her assessment through FaceTime. With the support of her parent advocate, the Mother took Lisa on a guided tour of her apartment and was able share the lease agreement and evaluations electronically.

With all this in place, the custody order was vacated, and the Mother and her baby were reunified.

According to Lisa, "The foster mother was wonderful. She brought the baby to the Middletown office, where she met me, the mother, and the advocate for the reunification." Great compassion was shown by the foster parents.

The Mother continues to receive supports and the CPS Agency in her state has now visited the home and provided a positive report on everyone's progress.

The reunification was truly a joyous occasion for the mother, and she was appreciative of everyone's efforts. My chain of command was supportive and willing to think outside of the box. It seems all of the pieces fell into place," Lisa stated.

Thank you, Lisa, and thank you to your entire team in the Investigations Unit including Kim Natoli (ISW) and Jamie Isaacs (ISWS) for managing this case with respect, creativity and unrelenting effort.

Thank you to Office Director Lisa Sedlock and Program Supervisors Michelle Peterson and Skye Garofalo for leading these innovative efforts.