

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



## "She Needed Me to Say Yes"

At a time of such uncertainty, when a merciless virus has become the invisible enemy, a little girl and her brother found themselves in need of a loving and kind individual - Heather Kjos, a foster and adoptive mother from Westbrook, became just that.

In Mid-March, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading throughout Connecticut, Heather received a telephone call at 2 o'clock in the morning from our Department. A one year old little girl and her two year old brother were in need of a placement. The children were at a local hospital with their Social Worker who tirelessly tried to find them a family.

There was more to this story.....

The Social Worker explained to Heather that one of the children was sick and it was suspected that she may have the COVID-19 virus.

Heather stated, *"it was a little scary to hear this, but a little girl needed someone to take care of her and she needed me to say yes"*. Heather, who has been licensed for 9 years and has 3 biological children and 2 adopted children, said "yes" and warmly welcomed the children into her home.



They have now been with Heather's family for almost 2 months and both are healthy and doing well. Heather said it was a risk she felt she needed to take and with beautiful humility, she said she would do it all over again. Heather said the ongoing communication with the children's parents is going well. The children visit virtually with their mom three times a week for one hour each time. Heather said *"it's been a great opportunity for me to build a strong partnership with mom and has created some great trust"*.

Thank You Heather from the adults who know you, on behalf of two little children, who may not be able to articulate those words!

## CAFAF Celebrates 25 Years Of Support For Foster And Adoptive Families



Child welfare systems don't function well without families to care for the children who are removed from their homes due to neglect or abuse so serious that it endangers child safety. Without foster and adoptive families, the system would be entirely institutional - children living only in group settings operated by organizations whose staff come at the start of a shift and leave at its end. Children would have no family to live with.

"Without foster parents, we would only have children living in institutions," said Margaret Doherty, executive director of the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF), which is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. "Kids should not have to live like that, if it can be avoided."

Indeed in years past, the Department had grown reliant on institutional settings -- with about one in five children living in congregate care or about the same share that lived with relatives or kin. A shift toward moving children to live with relatives and kin has reversed that trend so that now only about 7 percent of children in care are not living in a family, and more than 40 percent of children are living with relatives and kin.

For the Department to continue to build on that success, the families who foster and adopt must be supported in what is often a complex and challenging role of caring for a child who has experienced loss and trauma.

That's where CAFAF steps in.

Incorporated in 1995 under a different name and granted non-profit status later that year, CAFAF opened an office in Hartford, established a newsletter and offered meeting and training opportunities for foster parents. The next year, the organization expanded services to include post-licensure training, a 24-hour telephone support line, and a "Buddy Program" that uses experienced foster parents as mentors for new ones. That year, CAFAF also hired liaisons assigned to Department regional offices to help support foster parents locally. In 1998, CAFAF moved to its current location in Rocky Hill.

Services continued to expand as the years passed:

- Providing support groups, home studies for respite care, an annual conference and satisfaction survey, retention events, and helping the Department host open houses (2003);
- Serving as the point of contact for the Department's KID-HERO recruitment line (2005);
- Hosting the "Avenue of Dreams" prom event for adolescent girls (2009) and co-hosting the Department's first statewide Kinship Care Conference (2015); and
- Expanding post-licensure training to include several online modules (2019).

Despite taking on so many responsibilities, Ms. Doherty said the organization has slimmed down staffing since she took the lead role in 2012 after representing CAFAF as one of her private law practice clients. There are now 23 staff members with one vacancy, and nearly all of them have experience as a foster or adoptive parent.

"We know what it's like," she said. "If you are having a hard time, you can call us and unload, and we can honestly say we know what you are feeling."

That real-life experience is present on the CAFAF board of directors as well. Gary Gizowski, the CAFAF board president, is an adoptive father who himself received the organization's support.

"CAFAF was an invaluable source of support and guidance during the adoption process for my daughter, Brynn," Mr. Gizowski said. "They made the experience very human and personal."

He said serving families needs to continue to be front and center going forward. "My vision for CAFAF is to strengthen its ability to be that 'one stop shop' for all foster and adoptive families in Connecticut -- giving them the necessary advocacy, education and support they need in caring for Connecticut's foster and adoptive children."

In addition to leadership and staff with lived experience, Ms. Doherty also credited a strong relationship with the Department as a basis for the organization's success. She said the current administration under Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes has a strong appreciation of how difficult it can be for a family to live with the bureaucratic rules and processes that come from licensing and oversight by any government institution. Ms. Doherty also said she knows from foster family support organizations in other jurisdictions that many do not receive a lot of help or assistance from their government child welfare agencies.

"There are states that don't give any support to their foster parent organization," Ms. Doherty said, noting that some jurisdictions don't even share information regarding who is licensed or whose license has expired with the support group.

She also noted that Department social workers are committed to the children on their caseloads. "I know of a lot of kids in DCF care who are emotionally connected to their social workers," she said. "I want to give credit where credit is due."

Foster and adoptive parents have their own stories about life-long connections. Some former children in care of a foster parent will connect with them again years later - including some who are now parents themselves.

"It's amazing, the kids who were their foster kids and are now adults who keep in touch with them and seek their advice," Ms. Doherty said. "It is very endearing. Relationships matter. We can have systems. But what really makes it all work is relationships."

CAFAF also strengthens Connecticut's foster care system by building relationships through the "Buddy" program that offers 30 to 40 experienced foster/adoptive parents to serve as mentors for newly-licensed parents. The mentors are assigned to the new families for six months, which can be extended, and the "buddies" check in with them once a week to see how things are going and if they need any assistance, advise or just understanding.

This is CAFAF's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of providing such support, and, like everyone and everything else, the celebration of this landmark is being altered by COVID-19. Its annual conference, normally celebrated in May to coincide with National Foster Care Month, is being

postponed until October. CAFAF is celebrating the anniversary by posting stories about foster and adoptive families on its website, and it also launched a new logo commemorating 25 years of service.

CAFAF keeps its focus not on itself, however, but on the families it serves. It is not easy to find new families, and CAFAF wants the public to know that there is no requirement that foster/adoptive parents be married.

Especially because it is not easy to recruit new families, Ms. Doherty said existing foster/adoptive families should be treated like precious gold.

"These are wonderful people who say 'I want to take care of kids and make sure they are safe so that relatively soon this little kid can go back to be with mom or dad or both of them,'" she said. "You will always need families who can tell kids that they can be in our home and you will be safe."

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## **The Mandelburg Family - Two Generations of Foster Care**

Carried across two generations, with a life line to extended family, the Mandelburg's from Waterford, are making a significant impact on CT's foster children. Their stories are astonishing and their influence on others is evident.

Meg and Gary Mandelburg have four adult birth children, one adopted son and eighteen grandchildren. They were licensed as Medically Complex Foster parents in 2005 and have been providing care for the past fifteen years. When they were initially licensed, Meg's daughter, Kaye-Leigh, was 16 years old, and developed a relationship with a foster child who was placed as an infant. The baby lived with Meg and her family for four months before being reunified back home.

When this same child was placed back into foster care, Kaye-Leigh, who was now an adult and living on her own, was licensed to care for this baby. Kaye-Leigh and her husband, have been licensed since 2018 as an Adoptive Resource and adopted this little girl. Ironically, both Meg and Kaye-Leigh were licensed by the very same social worker, Karen Kiely Smith, 13 years apart. The longevity in staffing brings Meg and her daughter much comfort in the work that they do.

(Click on the Easter Bunnies above to watch a short video or visit: <https://youtu.be/UY2Fb-H3t7I>)

The foster children in the Mandelburg's life are treated as their own and spend time with them traveling across the state, sharing holidays and family traditions. Meg's niece and nephew, who live in Virginia, fell in love with two foster children placed into their home. They had become acquainted during holidays and family gatherings throughout the years. When reunification was no longer a viable option for the two children, Megan's niece expressed an interest in being an adoptive resource. With approval from the Department, they began a visitation arrangement with the children with an Interstate Compact agreement in place. The plan is to have the children move to this new home in the near future.

The permanency plan for the children now is to be adopted by Meg's niece and nephew. Meg is delighted and ever so grateful that she will continue to have a relationship with the children, a true happily ever after for the Mandelburg family. It is through Meg and Gary's natural way of life that others have been influenced to follow in their path and provide a home for children in need.

This past Easter Meg said that she was feeling discouraged about social isolation and was missing her children and grandchildren. Determined to bring a smile to all of her Grandchildren's faces, she and her husband dressed up as bunnies and visited their children and grandchildren throughout a day that spanned travel to three towns. In the spirit of innocence, the children believed that their Grandparents were in fact the Easter Bunnies and received candy and tender loving care through the closed windows. Meg said that their little faces were simply precious, an image that will not soon leave her mind.

*Meg and Gary Mandelburg, from Waterford, are currently licensed and caring for two foster children and their adopted son, age 13.*

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## **"Gratitude and Humility" for Therapeutic Foster Parents**

Nicole McKelvey-Walsh is a 19-year veteran of the Department of Children and Families and a compassionate advocate for children and families. With close to 30 years' experience in the field, Nicole took oversight of the Department's Therapeutic Foster Care Program (TFC) in July of 2019. She saw some early successes in those beginning months, most notably the level of commitment that the 16 TFC agencies share of the overall vision of ensuing high quality clinical services.

Nicole's long-term goal for TFC is to implement Evidenced Based Practices which are interventions proven to be effective after withstanding rigorous evaluation. This past week, The Children's Bureau has been talking about foster families as support to families, not as a substitute for parents. According to Nicole, "this concept resonated with me and is in keeping with our overall vision of a TFC redesign." When children enter foster care, they do not enter alone. They bring with them connections and relationships which must be nurtured and supported. Foster parents do not care for children in isolation, they care for them within the context of the child's larger family system. As Nicole stated, "when we bring foster parents and birth parents together, spectacular things can happen in the life of a child." She shared a recent experience where a foster mom and birth mom worked together to celebrate a sweet 16 birthday. The two planned a birthday car parade to drive by the foster home, celebrating a big milestone together. This is a wonderful example of foster parents as a support to children and their extended families.

With May being National Foster Care Awareness Month, we find ourselves in a position to not only call attention to the foster care system but it is an opportunity for us to celebrate the foster parents who so selflessly give of their love and their time and commitment to the children who need them most.

In reflecting on the celebratory month, two words come to mind for Nicole, "gratitude and humility. During this global pandemic I have been humbled by the endless dedication of foster families." Last week, one of our foster parents passed away from COVID 19 and the adult children of the parent stepped in and pulled the foster child in, even closer. Nicole said that "there was seemingly no difference between the foster child and everyone in the household who grieving. It's a testament to the life and legacy of the foster parent that everyone is has equal family membership regardless of biological connection.

Nicole McKelvey-Walsh is the Clinical Program Director, Therapeutic Foster Care Program

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## New Department Foster Care Director Sees Opportunities To Strengthen Inclusive Approach To Benefit Children

A "family systems" approach to helping vulnerable children strives to strengthen the family in order to benefit the child.

So, when a child is removed from his or her family and taken into foster care, how do you take a family systems approach? We are going to find out.

Deb Borzellino is a licensed marriage and family therapist whose first day as the Department of Children and Families' statewide director of foster care was March 13, 2020. That was right when the COVID-19 pandemic slammed fully into state government – shutting offices and turning state business on its head along with everything else in Connecticut.

Now Ms. Borzellino is looking to turn foster care in Connecticut on its head too.

Obtaining her master's degree in family therapy from Southern Connecticut State University, Ms. Borzellino said the basic premise of this discipline is "looking at the family as a system instead of seeing the child as the client."

Ms. Borzellino said, "When the family gets better, the parents and the child get better together. That's the direction we are going in."

She said the Department will maintain its focus on the use of relatives and kin (others who know the child) for children who must enter state care. The Department now has more than 40 percent of children in care living with relatives and kin -- more than double what it was a decade ago. "My vision is to increase the number of children living with people they know," she said.

That, Ms. Borzellino said, can open the door to healing relationships with biological parents and, often, lead to reunification.

"From the beginning, we need to encourage and support biological and foster parents to work together, in conjunction with the child, so the child does not have to choose one family or the other," she said. "It is also important that there are good relationships between the biological parents and the foster parents so that the biological parents know who their child is with and that they know the child is safe."

Ms. Borzellino said, "Our child welfare system is moving to an inclusive system where foster families and biological families work together in the interest of the child.



"Parents involved in child welfare have the same aspirations all parent do -- that our children are safe and well cared for," she added. "By being inclusive and treating parents with respect, openness and kindness, we are proving the support that all parents need from time to time." Ms. Borzellino recognized that "we have to focus on child safety and welfare," and that in doing so the Department also will enhance family safety and welfare.

She said another point of emphasis needs to be making the first home the child goes to upon removal the last one he or she lives in - until the child returns to the biological family or attains permanency through other means.

Ms. Borzellino came to the Department after a number of years of private practice and then worked in the Connecticut nonprofit sector for organizations serving children and families. Her most recent role was with The Connection, Inc. as director of family support services overseeing its therapeutic foster care program, supportive housing and several other mental health and substance use disorder treatment for women and children. She also worked for Community Mental Health Affiliates as a program officer managing multiple programs funded by the Department, including Intensive Family Preservation, Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time and a substance use treatment program designed to keep children out of foster care, known as Family Based Recovery. Ms. Borzellino also worked as a probate court officer in the Waterbury Probate Court.

In addition, Ms. Borzellino served on the Statewide Racial Justice Workgroup for approximately five years before coming to the Department, and she said this experience has been a highlight of her professional career. It also gave her the opportunity to become acquainted with the current Department leadership when they were regional administrators, including Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and Child Welfare Bureau Chief Tina Jefferson.

So, when the chance arose to serve as the Department's foster care director, it was very appealing. "I gained such respect in watching the Department transform itself," Ms. Borzellino said. "I wanted to be part of it."

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## **COVID-19 Testing for Foster Parents and Youth (18+)**

Beginning in May, COVID-19 testing was made available to youth in care over the age of 18 and to foster parents. Dr. Linda Dixon, the Department of Children and Families Administrator for Transitional Supports and Success said both core foster families and therapeutic foster care families can receive the testing, which is offered at a CVS location at 60 Sargent Drive, New Haven.

Families and social workers for youth in care over age 18 simply need to outreach to [DCF.PROVIDER-TESTING@ct.gov](mailto:DCF.PROVIDER-TESTING@ct.gov). Dr. Dixon said there are 100 slots available daily, and the tests are administered the next day. She extended thanks to team members -- particularly Luz Lozano for coordinating the sign ups.

Dr. Dixon also credits Dr. Nicole Taylor, the Department's medical director, for her guidance and leadership in achieving wider access to testing so as to combat the spread of COVID-19. Dr. Taylor has been instrumental in conducting contact tracing when a DCF staff member, youth, foster parent or contracted provider has a positive diagnosis in order to assist the Department is both notifying and supporting those individuals.

Those persons who are experiencing symptoms are prioritized first with the second tier of prioritization being those individuals who are asymptomatic but are pregnant, have been exposed to an individual who has a positive COVID-19 diagnosis or have a compromised immune system.

Dr. Dixon said the testing is important for both the physical and emotional health of the youth and the families.

"We want to make sure the kids and the families who love them get the proper care they need," she said. "Of course, the testing also provides psychological re-assurance, which is so important -- especially now."

Dr. Dixon also recognized Department of Transportation Deputy Commissioner Garrett Eucallitto for facilitating the process. She also said the Department's Vinny Russo, the agency legislative program director, first raised the idea within the Department

Mr. Russo said the concept grew out of an effort by a number of agencies, including the Departments of Developmental Services, Mental Health and Addiction Services, and Corrections, to extend the testing of essential state employees to staff for private providers. That in turn led to the idea for extending testing to youth in care over 18 and foster parents.

"It opened the door for foster parents and kids over 18," he said. "It was a group of people problem solving together."