



## AIDED BY CT DCF STAFF, INFANT, MOM REUNITE DURING PANDEMIC July 9, 2020

By Cassandra Day - Middletown Press (Re-printed with permission from the author)

TheMiddletownPress

MIDDLETOWN — Local social workers recently reunited an out-of-state mother with her infant who was under the care of the state Department of Children and Families, despite myriad roadblocks attributed to the pandemic.



Lisa Miller, DCF Social Worker

After several months of hard work on both ends, the mother, who lives in New York, now has custody of her baby, according to the state agency. It was a team effort, complicated by interstate travel and other restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Staff at the Middletown office, at 2081 S. Main St., helped facilitate the baby's return home after the child was born in Middlesex County.

To maintain social distancing, there was heavy reliance on virtual platforms as DCF workers helped guide the mother through the process in Connecticut as well in the New York court system. The mother, who was not identified to protect the baby's privacy, had an advocate who worked alongside her, according to social worker Lisa Miller.

That was accomplished in a timely manner, Miller said, despite having to supply proof of adequate housing with a lease agreement, virtual tours of her home inside and out to be certain the mother had enough supplies to care for the baby, and other requirements.

There was also a language barrier. "Between the two of us, and the advocate, we were able to communicate fairly well," Miller said.

The work also was accomplished despite that courts, DCF offices and states were closing down. "It really did really take a team approach with this mom," said Marie Levesque, DCF social worker supervisor. "She really looked out, not just for herself, but the staff and baby. As much as she wanted to see that infant, she was coming from a state where we thought the border could shut down."

"This was (starting) in the very early stages of the pandemic, when everything was shutting down and there was such a crisis. It still is," Levesque said. The mother had to meet each goal in a state hard hit by the virus.

Parents with children in state care are tasked with completing a series of steps through the court as the reunification process moves along, Miller said.

"We are part of the solution. Connecticut has been successful in mitigating the pandemic, and that requires everybody's participation, including the department's. We've been able to maintain our functioning despite those constraints, and this is an example," said Gary Kleeblatt, communication director for DCF.

A "plethora" of circumstances send children into DCF care after the agency obtains custody of the child, he said.

In most instances, these cases do not involve child abuse. "It's not nearly as common as neglect cases, where families are struggling to meet the needs of the child and to care for the child," Kleeblatt said.

Some involve unstable housing situations, an inability to provide for health care, health issues, include mental health and substance abuse; and domestic violence, he said.

Reunification is a top priority. "If a child has to be taken into care, the first thing we do is reunification as soon as it is safely possible," Kleeblatt said.

The foster care support team is routinely very involved and supportive during the process, Levesque said.

"These foster parents give their hearts and love to these little ones, especially these infants. How can you not fall in love? The infants are bonding with you, even if you know they're leaving," Levesque said. "Our foster parents go so far above and beyond when they open their homes, even when they have biological or other children in the home."

The surrogate parents understand that in most cases, the child will be returned to the family, Kleeblatt said. In the instance of the New York mom, the fosters are hoping to adopt one day, but were very supportive of sending the baby home.

The foster parents also were more than willing to keep the mother in contact with her baby through photographs and other means. "That made our job so much easier to navigate through this," Levesque said.

The mom was very understanding of keeping everyone involved in the long-distance process safe, Miller said. "She was not pressuring in-person visits, because she didn't want to put the baby in jeopardy. She put the baby's needs first."

The agency expects some measure of the videoconferencing, Facetime interviews, virtual tours, and electronic exchange of paperwork to continue long after the pandemic ends.

"If parents can safely care for their children, that's where they belong. Also, we're having increasing amounts of success placing children with kin if they have to be placed into foster care," Kleeblatt said.

That includes relatives as well as trusted family friends.

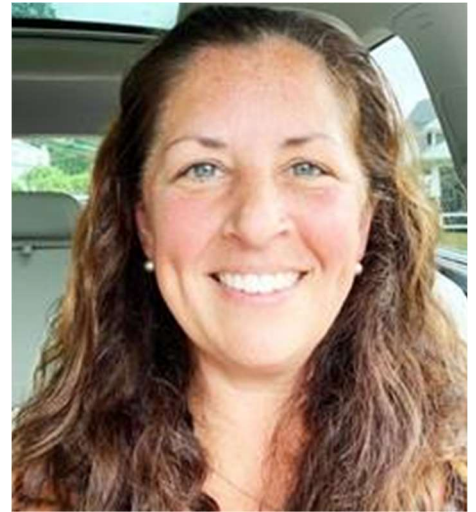
Parents being able to take custody of their children is a point of pride for everyone involved. "Our responsibility is to serve these families as best we can, so if we have an unfortunate circumstance where a child has to be in our care, we're really pleased when we can reunify the family," Kleeblatt said.

"Children belong with their family," he said.

"There's probably little else that's as difficult for a parent and child being separated like that. That's why we do it with extreme care, only when it's absolutely necessary, and for a short period of time as possible," Kleeblatt said.

"Whenever we can return the child safely to the parent, we do that," he said.

For information, visit [portal.ct.gov/dcf](https://portal.ct.gov/dcf). To learn more about foster care and adoption go to [CTFosterAdopt.com](https://CTFosterAdopt.com)



Marie Levesque  
DCF Social Work Supervisor