



How did Connecticut's Department of Children and Families and the state Legislature advance a strong relationship to the benefit of children and families?

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Partnerships among the three branches of government are critical to a state's ability to create policies and practices that effectively support families and keep children safe. State legislatures provide a policy framework, oversight, and funding for child protection agency services. As such, a strong partnership between a child protection agency and a legislature is essential for meaningful and lasting systems change. Legislators can help advocate for the budget and policy alignment necessary to build a 21st century child and family well-being system, in which child protection

agencies work seamlessly and effectively with other human services systems to prioritize the needs of children and families and strengthen communities. In the nearer term, state legislators are key partners in developing a comprehensive Family First prevention strategy.

Leadership at the Connecticut State Department of Children and Families (DCF) has actively worked to build effective partnerships with its state Legislature over the last year. DCF serves the state's child welfare and child behavioral health needs, overseeing the work of 14 field offices and 3,200 staff. Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and her team began conducting proactive outreach to legislators immediately following her appointment in early 2019. This has enabled the agency to establish and maintain open and constructive relationships with key policymakers — even during the COVID-19 crisis — and create a platform to share important context and key stories behind the data DCF reports on a routine basis

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When DCF's legislative liaison retired, the previous administration recruited a seasoned legislative liaison with the judicial branch to consider applying for the position. This outreach proved to be the perfect match as the transition to a new administration was taking place. An experienced legislative program director, Vincent Russo, became the agency's formal point of contact with the legislature, leveraging more than a decade of established relationships with state legislators and respect from policymakers on both sides of the aisle. His appointment sent a clear message that Dorantes and her team value their relationship with the Legislature and are committed to working together effectively.



DCF's legislative program director provides daily updates to a distribution list composed of legislative leaders and their staff, reaching all key leaders, Republican and Democrat, in both the House and Senate. As interest in the emails has spread, the list has grown significantly.

The legislative program director also takes frequent opportunities to talk with legislators one on one about DCF's work. "We cannot underestimate the value of strengthening individual relationships with legislators proactively, before issues arise," Russo notes. "Those connections are built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect that leads to support and advocacy in the Legislature."

Read the full report from Casey Family Programs:

<https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/20.07-QFF-HO-CT-legislative-outreach.pdf>

