



# the Chronicle

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## Social workers: Fostering love



Social worker Jennifer Benzie, left, listens while Tiffany Salkeld, right, talks about her job as a social worker in the Willimantic branch of the state Department of Children and Families recently. Roxanne Pandolfi | Staff

## All worth it

### DCF: Social work a difficult, but rewarding, profession

**EKATERINE TCHELIDZE AND CLAIRE GALVIN**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

**WILLIMANTIC** — Between interviews, family visits, check-ups and referrals, social workers at the state Department of Children and Families never know where they will end up each day.

They have calendars, but they rarely stick to them.

The Willimantic Office of the Department of Children and Families recently granted *the Chronicle* interviews with several social workers to offer a glimpse at their careers.

According to Jennifer Benzie, intake social worker at the DCF office in Willimantic, they respond to anything that happens in the region — which is the whole northeast corner all the way to the Massachusetts and Rhode Island borders.

“We are often running right from the get-go,” said Tiffany

Salkeld, an intake social worker at the DCF office in Willimantic.

Social workers enter into the position earning around \$40,000 a year, and can advance to \$60,000 within a few short years. The positions are unionized.

#### Recognition

This time of year is when social workers — and the services they provide the community — are officially recognized.

March was declared the National Professional Social Work Month through the National Association of Social Workers.

Meanwhile, May is recognized as National Foster Care Month, which former President Ronald Reagan established in 1988.

It’s a recognition many say is well-deserved.

Social workers have an immense impact on the fami-

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## Love a two-way street with ‘Bre’

**EKATERINE TCHELIDZE AND CLAIRE GALVIN**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

**WILLIMANTIC** — The Willimantic office of the state Department of Children and Families has become a home for 15-year-old Breanna Babbit.

And social workers have become her family.

Breanna, who likes to go by “Bre” and currently lives in Cromwell, has

been with DCF since she was 22 months old and has worked with a lot of social workers.

While she chose not to discuss the details of her fostering situation, Bre considers her DCF adolescent specialist Amy Gilman almost like a family member.

Gilman has been working with Bre for a few years now, making their relationship stronger each day.

“She calls me every day,” Gilman said. “And I’m not lying when I say this, she makes me smile every time.”

Gilman said, at times, when her job takes a toll on her, talking to Bre makes her feel better.

“She doesn’t make it all about her,” Gilman said. “She checks in on me too. Bre knows that I need her as much as

**LOVE, Page 4**

Last March was National Professional Social Work Month and this coming May is National Foster Care Month. As a result, *the Chronicle* spent some time with state Department of Children and Families social workers, as well as a teenager in DCF care, to learn about the trials and tribulations of a difficult profession that is also highly rewarding.

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**Around town**

Joshua’s Trust to host walk at Byles Sanctuary in Ashford Sunday. Info: 860-429-9023. See more calendar on Page 3.

**Lotteries**

**FRIDAY**  
Mid-Day 3: 6-7-1  
Mid-Day 4: 2-8-5-1  
**For more results, visit [ctlottery.org](http://ctlottery.org).**

## Coventry Cumbies hearing extended

**MICHELLE FIRESTONE**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

**COVENTRY** — Planning and zoning Commission members are now reviewing feedback on an application by Cumberland Farms to open a gas station and convenience store on Route 44.

That public hearing remains open until at least April 23.

Cumberland Farms is seeking to purchase property owned by Gene and Gail Dickenson, who own Memory Lanes Countryside Antique Center and Memories Too Antique Center on Boston Turnpike.

Cumberland Farm’s application involves building a store that is a little more than 5,000 square feet with a gas station.

Gene Dickenson, who is 79, said Cumberland Farms offered him a good price for the business, which has been there for almost 40 years.

“They came to me with a good offer and it was time for us to retire,” he said.

The Dickensons own the business and rent space to different dealers.

If the deal goes through, Dickenson said, Cumberland would buy the corner property, while the Dickensons plan to keep the land where Memories Too Antique Center is located.

He thanked the Town of Coventry and loyal customers for their support over the years.

Coventry Director of Planning and Development Eric Trott said less than 50 people attended a hearing April 9, with some bringing up traffic concerns and questions about underground storage tanks.

Commission members continued the public hearing to April 23, with the PZC meeting beginning at 7 p.m. that evening at Coventry Town Hall.

“We’re hoping to get some feedback from the (state) Department of Transportation before the hearing closes,” said Trott.

He said the PZC may choose to continue the hearing beyond April 23 to wait for input from the inland wetlands agency, which meets April 25.

Trott said the commission can have the hearing open for 35 days, until May 14, before it will need to request an extension.

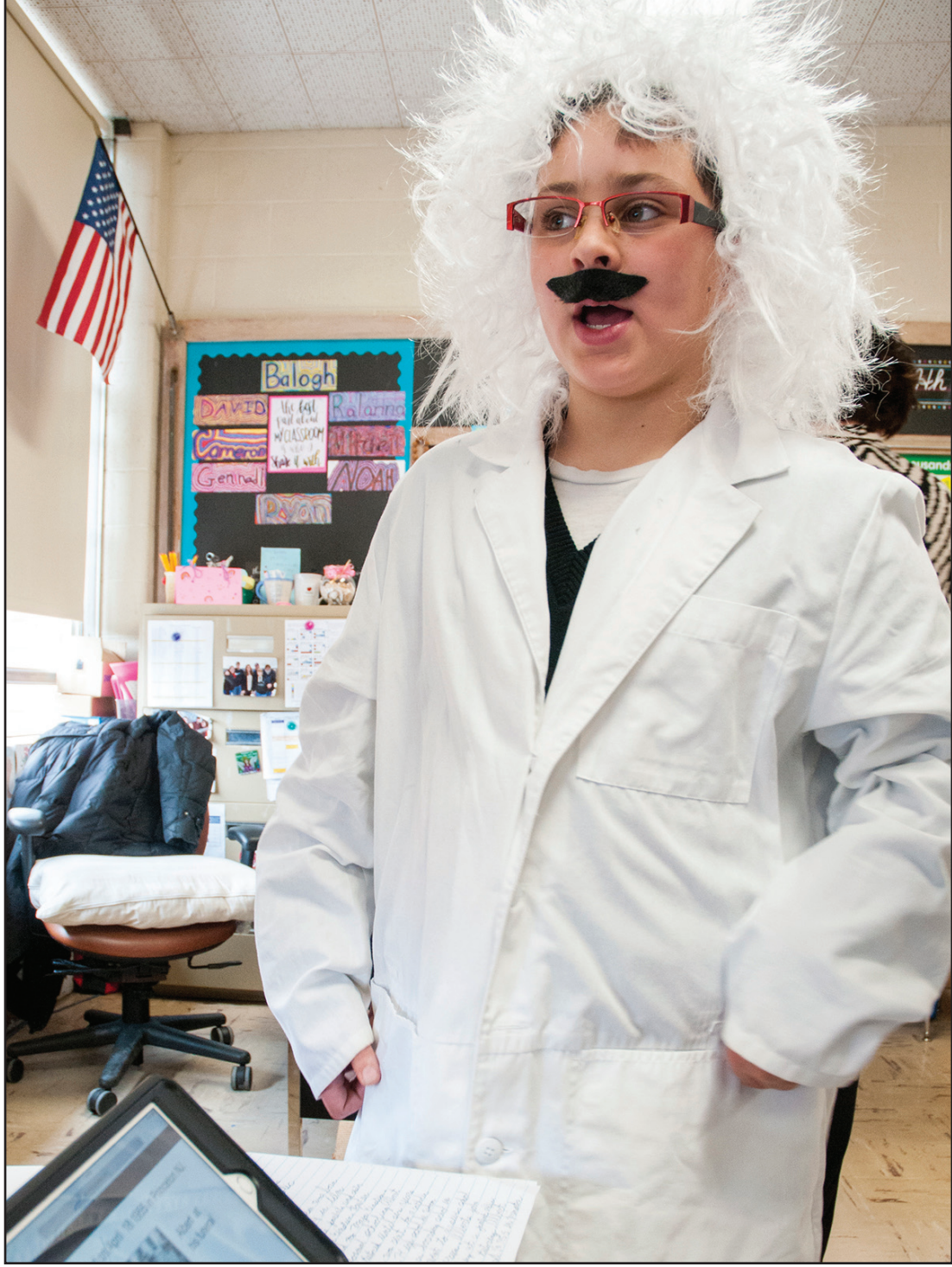
“Essentially, the use is allowed by a special permit application for convenience stores and sale of gas,” he said.

Trott said the applicant did

*They came to me with a good offer and it was time for us to retire.*

*Gene Dickenson*

**CUMBERLAND, Page 4**



### A spitting image

St. Mary-St. Joseph School fourth-graders in Kathryn Balogh’s class had its 11th annual ‘Wax Museum’ Thursday afternoon at the Willimantic Catholic school. This is when pupils dress up like their heroes of history and pretend to be wax figures, coming ‘alive’ to talk about their legacies. Here, Noah Curtis-Gray comes to life as Albert Einstein. Roxanne Pandolfi | Staff

**Obituaries**

**Bruce M. Stave**

The Celebration of the Life of Bruce M. Stave, who died on December 2, 2017 will be held on Friday, April 20, 2018, from 4-6 p.m. at the Alumni Center of the University of Connecticut.

**Allies attack Syria**

REUTERS

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Friday night during a 9 p.m. address that he had ordered “precision strikes” on Syria in retaliation for the suspected poison gas attack that killed at least 60 people on April 7.

“A short time ago, I ordered the United States Armed Forces to launch precision strikes on targets associated with the chemical weapons capabilities of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad,” Trump said in a televised address from the White House.

The attacks reportedly included the participation of allies Great Britain and France. A year ago, the U.S. launched a similar attack due to a prior chemical weapons incident.

**Cumberland Farms hearing is continued**

Continued from Page 1

a traffic study, but the town had its consultant, Fitzgerald & Halliday Inc., which has an office in Hartford, do a separate traffic study because the town wanted “additional feedback.”

The “looming concern,” he said, is the Route 44 curb-cut — a ramp cut into a street curb at a corner for wheelchair access or at a driveway for vehicular access — noting the applicant did move that as “far away from the intersection as possible.”

“We are expecting a follow-up report,” Trott said.

Cumberland Farms representatives declined to comment on their application.

Coventry PZC Chairman Bill Jobbagy and Coventry PZC Vice Chairperson Christine Pattee could not be reached for comment Friday.

Follow Michelle Firestone on Twitter - @mfirestonetc.

**Accused killer’s case continued**

DANIELSON — The case of a brother charged with the murder of a Willimantic man in November 2016 was continued to June 1, the clerk’s office at Danielson Superior Court confirmed Friday.

Juan Chach, 25, was charged with murder and tampering with or fabricating physical evidence in relation to a murder of Francisco Delacruz-Coj, of Willimantic. Delacruz-Coj, 34, was killed Nov. 12, 2016.

According to the medical examiner, Delacruz-Coj died from stab wounds to the neck and torso in his apartment at 38 Pulaski Court in town. Chach’ brother, Ignacio Chach-Aperez, 27, was charged with accessory to murder and tampering with or fabricating physical evidence in connection to the incident. He will appear in Danielson Superior Court June 1. The brothers lived at 136 Pleasant St. in Willimantic.

**News in brief**

**Willi police to host event against abuse**

WILLIMANTIC — Willimantic police and the Willimantic Police Benevolent Association are participating in the annual “Take Time To Play” event from noon to 3 p.m. today.

The focus of the gathering, set to take place at Memorial Park in Willimantic, is the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It will be hosted by the Windham Task Force to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect and social work interns. The event is free and open to the public, including children. Food and refreshments will be provided.

**Ask the Chronicle**

**Question:** Who is the Saxton B. Little Free Library in Columbia named after?

**Answer:** According to “The Story of Columbia,” a publication published by the Women’s Guild of Columbia Congregational Church and posted on the town website, the library was named after Saxton B. Little, who was born in Columbia in 1813. Little taught school in several nearby towns, according to the publication, and made many monetary and book gifts to the library.

Do you have a question about your community that you’d like answered?  
email: [news@thechronicle.com](mailto:news@thechronicle.com)

[@thechronicle](https://twitter.com/thechronicle) [facebook](https://www.facebook.com/thechronicle)

**State offers the tools for adoption**

**EKATERINE TCHELIDZE AND CLAIRE GALVIN**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

Although the process of fostering and adoption might seem cumbersome, the state Department of Children and Families offers training and assistance to help those looking to help a child in need.

According to recruitment and support worker A. Howie Zimnoch, from the Willimantic DCF’s foster and adoptive services unit, there are three processes: fostering, fostering to adopt and adoption.

Those who want to become foster or adoptive parents should start by contacting the Connecticut Alliance of Foster

and Adoptive Families, where they can talk to social workers and get details about an upcoming open house.

An open house is an informational session that will explain the details about fostering and adoption.

Then, those interested will fill out a pre-application form that gives permission for a background check and house check. People looking to foster or adopt should provide proof of their stable financial situation.

Prior to fostering or adoption, potential caretakers will go through a 13-week class, which includes lessons on how to deal with child trauma, child care, health and CPR training.

Then, they will get a license for fos-

tering or adoption.

The whole process takes time, which is based on the case.

People that foster or adopt do get a state stipend in the amount of anywhere between \$700 to \$800 a month to help cover child care expenses. The amount is larger if a child is older. Children also get health insurance and college benefits.

For more information on fostering or adoption, visit the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families at [www.cafafct.org](http://www.cafafct.org) or call 860-258-3400.

Follow Ekaterine Tchelidze on Twitter - @KtchelidzeTC.

Follow Claire Galvin on Twitter - @CgalvinTC.

**Breanna Babbitt, 15, and her social worker, Amy Gilman, right, have a special bond. Here, they are talking and laughing together recently at the Willimantic office of the state Department of Children and Families. They regularly get together and share their time with one another.** Roxanne Pandolfi | Staff



**Love is definitely a two-way street with ‘Bre’**

Continued from Page

she needs me.”

Bre said Gilman understands her like no one else.

“She is so special,” Bre said. “She makes me laugh.”

And their relationship goes beyond the regular DCF check-ups.

Gilman tries to attend Bre’s basketball games and visits her at her group home in Cromwell. They go out to lunch and dinners or simply

drive around town, singing their favorite tunes to the radio. It’s hard to say what Bre enjoys more: playing basketball or savoring freshly-made sushi.

She loves both wild and domesticated animals. Whether dogs, ferrets, horses or coyotes — animals have a special place in her heart.

“I like to laugh a lot, and I’m very funny,” Bre said. “I’m very good at helping people get back up on their

feet and make them laugh.”

Gilman said Bre instantly makes connections with people because she “is so eager to be connected” and it’s easier for her to build relationships with social workers because she knows “they are not going away, but if they do — it’s expected.”

Although Bre has a lot of support from DCF, she is still looking for her “forever family.” “I really want a nice foster family to care for me,”

Bre said.

She is looking for a family that is as active as she is, likes wildlife and enjoys food as much as she does.

Gilman said Bre is easy to love.

“She is so insightful about her needs and desires,” Gilman said. “She tells you what is important to her.”

More information about Bre is available at [www.porttal.ct.gov/dcf/ctfosteradopt/heart-gallery](http://www.porttal.ct.gov/dcf/ctfosteradopt/heart-gallery).

**Social work can be a difficult, but rewarding profession**

Continued from Page 1

lies they work with and, often, a positive one.

For example, Benzie said she once interviewed a young girl of about 6-years-old, who revealed she had been sexually abused.

During the interview, the girl was reserved, making it harder for Benzie to communicate with the girl.

“It was a tough interview,” Benzie said, both for her and for the girl.

After the interview, though, the girl doodled a few drawings.

She drew a before-and-after picture of herself meeting with Benzie, looking much happier after the two had talked.

Benzie hung that drawing on the wall outside her office.

**Help and sacrifices**

The process of helping families is long, and begins with a “reporter,” a person who first notices and responds to the problem.

Then, the supervisor assigns a social worker to a family who meets with the parents, children, relatives and the reporter.

“Even though we may have one issue, it’s a comprehensive evaluation,” Salkeld said. “We touch on everything when we assess a family.”

Thoroughly listening to a family and showing respect is an important part of the job.

Salkeld said one referral can end up turning into a 12-hour work day.

“It ends when it ends,” Salkeld said. “It’s child safety, so you can’t just say, ‘OK, well I’m going home now.’”

Benzie and Salkeld said there are a lot of personal sacrifices involved with the job.

“Having a good support system is crucial,” Benzie said of her loved ones. “My family comes to realize that there are nights when I call up and say ‘I’m not going to be home until 2 in the morning.’ And I have younger kids, so that can take its toll. But they do understand.”

Salkeld said it is sometimes hard to find balance, but balance comes with experience.

“It’s hard to raise a family, take care of yourself and be 100 percent here to take care of other families,” Benzie said.

Salkeld, who’s been with DCF for 18 years, said DCF for her “was certainly an awakening,” throughout these years.

“When you go to school and plan your path and then you get a job doing something like this, you

have no idea what’s out there,” Salkeld said.

She said “it’s been quite interesting” learning the dynamics of various families and “the level of dysfunction that they function in.”

Benzie, on the other hand, knew what to expect.

As a University of Connecticut graduate, Benzie interned with the local DCF, where she’s been working for 16 years now.

She said she always wanted to work with families.

“So I knew what I was getting myself into,” Benzie said. “It’s a challenge every single day.”

**Hard times**

According to Salkeld, interviews with children who have been sexually abused account for some of the hardest moments in her career.

This is because with that disclosure comes trauma services, medical exams and psychological help to ensure the child is safe.

Apart from the long hours and hectic work schedule, there are also stereotypes that are very hard to break.

“There are a lot of stereotypes that go along with DCF and I think people assume the worst as soon as they see us coming,” Salkeld said.

Some of those stereotypes are that DCF workers are there to intrude, break families apart and take their kids away.

“Not everybody likes us,” Salkeld said. “I’m not there to make you happy. I’ll certainly work with you, but it’s my job to make sure your kids are safe.”

Those stereotypes often come from the media and television, Benzie said, which portray DCF in a negative way.

“People see a lot of the negatives, but that’s not real life,” she said. “I’ve seen a lot more positive changes.”

**Functional families**

In fact, the responsibilities of DCF workers are to keep families functional and healthy.

Benzie said when her children are asked what their mom does for living, they respond “my mom’s job is to make sure that kids are safe.”

According to Salkeld, the structure and operation of DCF have changed a lot over the years.

“We are not the DCF from 10 years ago,” she said.

There’s a lot more of collaboration and support both within the department and outside of it.

Benzie said the department tries to bring in any support the family thinks might be helpful to create

a more comfortable atmosphere.

Instead of simply interviewing a family, workers collaborate with each other to apply each worker’s strengths to best address the issues.

Salkeld said it’s hard to break those barriers when interacting with families for the first time.

But, she said, once they get to know each other, they warm up and families are thankful for DCF’s involvement.

For example, many might not know DCF annually provides care packages and Easter baskets to families in need.

They also provide a lot of love and moral support to the families they work with.

**Taking a toll**

Nonetheless, DCF workers are people too.

Dealing with the types of situations they encounter everyday takes its toll.

“We don’t have easy times with removals,” Salkeld said. “That’s not an ideal situation. It’s trauma.”

A removal is a situation when DCF has to take a child away from a family that cannot provide proper care and place them into a better environment, either permanently or temporarily.

This is when the image of a social worker can suffer.

If a child is pulled from a family, the social worker is seen as a destroyer of a family unit.

But if a child isn’t removed and ends up injured or worse, the social worker is seen as not taking the proper course of action.

Salkeld said looking back at the removals she has done, she has never been left with hard feelings toward the family or vice versa.

Working for DCF can be “overwhelming,” Salkeld said, and the department has a high turnover because of that.

In fact, Salkeld said there are times when they work with a family for days with no progress, feeling completely useless.

**Rewards**

The rewards usually make up for the sacrifices, though.

Salkeld said making a family a little bit better gives her satisfaction.

Benzie said, sometimes, a family will call months later to say, although they didn’t like her when she first came out, they realized her value.

According to Benzie, many clients are thankful to get to a place where things are much better.

And that, social workers say, is their job.