

Statewide Advisory Council Minutes

12/06/21

Attendees:

Myke Halpin*, Sarah Lockery*, Ken Mysogland, Dr. Irv Jennings, Chris Scott*, Deb Kelleher*, Judy Eisenberg*, Rachel Levine, Suprena Schuler*, Samaris Rose, Elisabeth Cannata*

(* indicates a voting member)

Guests

Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes, Anthony Gay, Johanna Schmidt, Stan Kasanowski, Jon Jacaruso, Malcolm Blue, Sarah Gibson, Sergio Alvarez, Sharon Davis, Steve Smith, Susan Cunningham, Theresa Fazio-Winters, Carmen Duarte, Martin William

Commissioner's Welcome

- Commissioner Dorantes attended the beginning of the meeting to express her appreciation to the SAC members. When her administration started, they discussed the RACs and SAC and have been happy to see them rejuvenated over the past few years. She is proud of the collaboration evident in the RACs' and SAC's work. She also gave a shoutout to the Systems PDs for their coordination. She is grateful for the community that has been built.

RAC Reports and System Development:

The beginning of the meeting is dedicated to RAC report-outs and discussions about developing the RACs. This meeting also included report-outs from the regional FELTs (Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team) as well.

Region 1 RAC

- The YAB continues working on getting youth 16+ access to bank accounts.
- They have also worked on recruitment for the Wilderness School and developing a social kit.
- DCF has participated in the Queen Esther Project, which is a faith-based initiative.
- Their RAC retreat is in development, but they are still looking for a venue.
- The RAC discussed the assessment and recommended adding local government and probation as partners. Sarah Lockery advised them to customize it to fit their needs.
- Ten people submitted responses about the assessment, and they also talked about it as a group.
- As a reminder, for the SAC retreat, each region will get 6 slots for youth/family that will receive a stipend. There will be a total of 20 slots per region, but they would not receive the stipend.
- FAVOR is hosting a coat drive, and there will also be a virtual auction.
- The RAC is excited to see the region coming together.

Region 1 FELT: Martin William

- Region 1's FELT meets monthly, and the offices each have their own meetings as well.
- They have focused on three areas: 1) supervisory oversight; 2) service delivery; and 3) permanency

- Supervision is addressed through a tip sheet that helps father engagement be brought up during supervision
- Additional tip sheets have been created for finding fathers, and the FELT did a training with Abdul about turning barriers into opportunities for engagement.
- The FELT has started working with providers in a mutually beneficial way. Service providers aid in finding paternal resources.
- They are also creating a tip sheet on assessing fathers' needs. Fathers have been integral in creating these tip sheets.
- Their enhanced service coordinator always asks about dads when she gets a referral, and they also review surveys of fathers and share success stories. Success stories are so important.

Region 2 RAC

- The RAC has been busy! In November, they had a presentation about the voluntary care management, which then came up in a discussion during their last meeting.
- They also worked through the "structure" portion of the RAC assessment. They used the poll feature in Zoom, and Judy recommends this for other RACs because it allowed for feedback in real time.
- The RAC has some areas of concern, such as updating marketing/informational materials, updating their network of care, etc. They also created a tip sheet for joining by phone, which has caused issues for their members in the past. They will also start meeting monthly and provide a guide to DCF acronyms.
- The RAC has some actional concerns, such as incorporating fathers into emergency planning. They have had challenges getting community members to the table.
- One member had a very important recommendation, which Judy will put into writing as well. Some parents seeking voluntary care management felt hurt and stigmatized by the outgoing message of the DCF Careline, which identifies as the portal for concerns of abuse or neglect. They feel uncomfortable that anyone seeking this care has to go through that gate and recommend changing the outgoing message so that people understand that you do not need to fall into that category in order to advocate for your child. Malcolm added that this is a good example of the RAC pointing out ways in which DCF can be more family-centered.
- Judy also mentioned a group of undocumented fathers and the ways they felt supported and unsupported in trying to care for their children. Ken welcomed the feedback and also encouraged them to put something additional in writing. Lived expertise is vital.

Region 2 FELT

- Theresa spoke on behalf of the two FELTs for Region 2. They meet separate but also collaborate. Kareem Malcolm takes the lead on Milford's FELT, which meets regularly with internal and external stakeholder. They are working to get more foster care involvement.
- They have reflected on how we view fathers and how we work with/include them.
- They completed a self-assessment to hone some goals to pursue.
- They have reviewed best practices on finding and engaging fathers. They still want to improve their ability to identify fathers from the outset.

- They have improved their service delivery and referrals and are proud of this.
- Abdul has trained the teams, with a focus on each teams' specific cases and topics. He has been an amazing resource and great at inspiring discussion.
- They have been routinely reviewing their work with dads and looking at data.
- They also have a newsletter to keep momentum going in their region.

Region 3 RAC and FELT

- Jon spoke about the RAC and FELT as the co-chairs could not make the meeting.
- Prior to the RAC survey, the team had already been meeting to come up with a new strategy for the RAC. The survey itself helped to guide that.
- Several changes:
 - o One of the chairs, Regina Moeller will step down, while Erin Hagen steps in as the new tri-chair. She is the former supervisor of the DCF RRG and has also worked with a private provider.
 - o Youth and parent voice come first (although they are still struggling with the format). This engagement is still being built.
- Youth voice is difficult to include, but the RAC has found they respond best when prompted with specific topics/questions.
- A very impressive youth spoke at the RAC about CHAP, a supportive housing program. She and her social worker got her CHAP extended, and she was a great advocate for herself. The RAC is proud of her and her sharing her story.
- They discussed data and disproportionality.
- They also talked about fatherhood. The RAC receives FELT updates at their meetings.
- They will also discuss the racial justice initiatives and are looking for external partners to support that work.
- Their FELT was "rehydrated" as they had not been meeting since covid. The office directors and other key staff met and decided to have a regional FELT team led Yvette O'Brien, Ernsten Paul, and Mark Terrari. They rotate facilitating and notetaking, and they all meet with ODs and regional leaders to set the agenda. Leadership regularly attends the meetings, which shows providers and staff how important this work is.
- Myke is a regular participant, as are several providers.
- They have a subcommittee that looks at foster and adoptive fathers. This subcommittee did focus groups and will report out on that soon.
- FES is full, so they have started triaging cases to determine referrals.
- ACR data is reviewed quarterly; Region 3 is above the state average for father attendance. They hope to see that grow.
- A PS shared a program called "Fathers at the Table" that shared stories about engaging in fathers, including both success stories and stories that could have gone better. They got wonderful feedback and hope to do another in June with more providers.
- They will start working with Abdul and have both staff and providers participate in the training.

- They have a monthly newsletter that is shared with the offices, and they also share tip sheets and useful information. They hope to continue engaging providers and improving their skills in this as well.
- Sarah reminded the group that youth voice should inform our decisions, but youth do not necessarily have to sit at every table or participate in ways they are not comfortable with.

Region 4 RAC

- The RAC has finalized its membership needs in November. This had been delayed due to the pandemic, but they navigated this electronically. They added new members to the total number of 12.
- They continue to have strong parent representation and are pleased to report that their collaboration with Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) has resulted in three new young people expressing interest in joining with them. This includes one who will serve as the tri-chair.
- The RAC held a legislative update because a number of RAC members had expressed an interest in this. Principle Attorney for Hartford gave an overview of relevant inspiration.
- They continue to partner with and support the Youth Advisory Board (YAB), including financial support for some of their activities, like their Trunk or Treat and their Thanksgiving dinner for young people who did not have anywhere to go.
- The RAC discussed the RAC Assessment and discussed the intent behind it. They will send it out via a SurveyMonkey and in December, they will start on completing it.
- Their Network of Care is partnering with the Central Network of Care (Region 6) to have their quarterly December meeting focus on the legalization of cannabis. Many members had an interest in this. The meeting will be on December 8 (virtually) and include a community speaker, as well as Kris Robles from DCF.

Region 4 FELT

- Via email, they shared updates on the plan to implement a Father Advisory Board to get direct input about their experiences.
- They will implement fatherhood engagement case coordination consultations for newly hired staff and a strategy to enhance participation at ACRs.
- They will increase Social Work Supervisors utilization of data to focus on trends.
- Abdul added that the FELT has focused on their self-assessment and PDSAs. PDSA stands for Plan-Do-Study-Act, and it is a framework for introducing small tests of changes. Several of the above initiatives are PDSAs, which will be implemented and analyzed; if they are successful, they will be implemented on a broader scale. PDSAs are part of what the Statewide FELT has been guiding.
- They also discussed the SWOT analysis, which studies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to their fatherhood work.
- Abdul wants to move from engagement to inclusion and equity--engagement is the beginning of the work. We need to move to a point where fathers have an equal shot.
- The Hartford Office is working with a local artist to do a mural in the front of the office. It will be in honor of fathers and represent a father interacting with his child. Their office is very excited about it.

Region 5 RAC

- Region 5's most recent meeting was very engaging. They applied for CRP funding and will be holding a training in February on LGBTQ+ language, trans issues, etc.
- They polled their membership on meeting frequency and will continue their same schedule of rotating monthly between a training and a normal meeting.
- They hope to partner with the YAB but this is a scheduling challenge.
- They received a presentation on the prevention services pilot. It took up most of the meeting because folks had many questions about it. The group discussed:
 - o Behavioral issues vary by grade and school
 - o How to bring down the temperature in school
 - o Mindfulness practices, like tai chi
 - o This gave the presenter a new perspective on working in a school. She firsthand saw the staffing challenges they are facing.
 - o They discussed how to help, including how to get kids things they need (supplies, clothes, etc.)
 - o DCF Staff is limited in what information they can provide about supports, and it was recommended that they be allowed to do a warm handoff to make sure families do not have to make the initial contact by themselves. They are very overwhelmed, and this would help reduce their stress.
- It was a fabulous presentation and they learned a lot.
- They sent out the self-assessment tool for comments and have received two back.

Region 5 FELT

- Region 5 has local and regional FELT meetings. RRG, foster care, administrative case review facilitators, attorneys, management, community partners, sister state agencies, dads, and foster parents are all part of the FELT.
- They discuss strengths and opportunities for improvement.
- Local meetings begin with consultations (about 15 minutes) where they discuss a case and strategize how to engage that father. An example of this was a moment when the public defender on the FELT provided suggestions for the father to work with his attorney. This was critical to improving his experience.
- The interns developed a directory of services in MA, CT, NY, and NJ.
- They developed an absent parent letter that provides fathers with an update about their child.
- The diligent effort tool is used for cases where they are struggling to engage fathers.
- There are strong community partnerships that have allowed them to continue educating on the importance of engaging fathers, including work with DOC to communicate with the CPS team. The FELT leads are cc'd and then send reminders to the CPS team to engage with that father, then checking LINK to see if it occurred.
- A month ago, they had a presentation on the FELT's work and FES programs.
- The FELT is working on a fatherhood fair and open house for early 2022.
- The next meeting will discuss racial justice and fatherhood.

- The region wants to restart their monthly newsletter using their new interns. The interns will also hopefully help implement a monthly review narrative, where they will report to the FELT leads if they do not see evidence of engaging with fathers. This will add focus to the cases the need improvement.
- Fathers' schedules do not often match with their meetings, so they will have a father advisory council that will offer suggestions to the FELT.
- They will start looking at intake cases and the process to make sure that children are placed with relative or fictive kin, including exploring the paternal resources. They need to complete the relative resource icon for fathers and mothers in LINK. They also will review case closing to make sure they are up to their standards.

Region 6 RAC

- The Region 6 RAC has had two meetings since the last SAC meeting.
- They discussed the assessment on the RAC structure and have completed it. This was a great conversation with lots of honesty. It showed their gaps and challenges. Moving forward, they hope to develop actionable strategies to improve the RAC.
- There are a few big initiatives in progress, including a subcommittee dedicated to updating their promotional materials. They will then share with families and community groups.
- They are also looking at their regional leaders, who are often part of multiple groups. They want to better differentiate these groups because families (and even staff) are not always clear on the differences. They developed a brochure to clarify this.
- They are working with Region 4 to plan a joint event.
- FAVOR has established a new Facebook page for the RAC, which will hopefully bring more families and youth to the table.
- They are continuing their antiracist work. In February, they hope to bring police, hospitals, and other entities to work with them further on this issue.

Region 6 FELT

- The Region 6 FELT is regional and meets once a month. They work with New Opportunities and other providers.
- At staff meetings, they have added fatherhood stories where a social worker discusses a successful dad.
- When a case is transferred to ongoing services, they also submit a referral to fatherhood engagement services.
- New Opportunities joins their workgroup meetings and discuss challenges with DCF.
- The Region is going to start a newsletter with fatherhood highlights.
- They are starting a fatherhood round table to do searches to try to find fathers that the SW cannot locate. If they find them, they make a referral to New Opportunities.
- Working with dads is challenging but they believe that collaboration is key to their efforts. They have partnered with a number of organizations and divisions, such as the Diversity Action Team, racial justice, and foster care.
- Abdul holds them accountable and challenges them.

Statewide FELT

- Abdul and Steve joined the meeting. Chris Lau is the third tri-chair. The SFELT is comprised of local FELT representatives. They are working to establish effective strategies and bring them statewide, as well as offer learning and discussion opportunities.
 - o For example, the last meeting included a video by Leonard Burton on equity that aligns with the Department's vision for an anti-racist agency.
- The SFELT was formed around a collaborative change framework that Hartford participated in. They completed a self-assessment, identified areas for improvement, and are now developing small tests of change (PDSAs). Ultimately, we hope these tests will remove barriers and improve outcomes.
- The SFELT also facilitates data-sharing and reviews the data with everyone. This is intended to see whether the FELT activities are moving the needle and changing practice in a substantive, measurable way.

Dads Matter Too!

- The Dads Matter Too! conference was held in November. This marks the 7th annual conference. It went extremely well. Last year, the planning committee discussed staff's fear of fathers. This led to their concept of viewing fathers as resources rather than risks. What can we do to create this mindset shift? Dynamic energy, the participation of partner agencies, and the Exec Team's support contributed to its success. The evaluations were very favorable. These conferences are motivating and cause inner reflections on one's own biases. This year included breakout sessions that were very helpful. They have already started discussing next year's conference and are looking for others to join their planning committee, including both DCF staff and external partners.

Minutes

- Myke motioned to accept the November minutes and Samaris seconded. The SAC accepted them.

Membership

- Rachel Levine has been appointed by the Governor and is now an official member of the SAC.
- Whitney Rodriguez, a youth attending Central and working with Sun's Scholars, will pursue her appointment with the SAC.
- Two openings remain for caregivers with children involved with the Department or in Juvenile Justice. For those involved in the FELTs, anyone who knows of a man with this experience can reach out to Myke or Sarah. The SAC would love to have a dad at the table.

Legislative Updates

- Sammy has been in touch with Vinny Russo on this. There are no updates yet, as DCF is waiting on OPM's (Office of Policy and Management) feedback on their bill drafts.
- She is wondering the best way for the RACs to review and provide feedback to bills. March is a busy month that will involve lots of testimony. Sammy put her email in the chat so that the FELT leads can provide a link to dads for feedback.

- Sarah added that Sammy has stepped up to start this Legislative Committee. She will let everyone know about opportunities to testify and bring the voices of family and youth to legislators.

SAC Budget Reports

- The SAC budget is currently at \$15,096.26 and they anticipate about \$5,000 of that will go towards the retreat, with another \$5,000 going towards family stipends.
- Sammy is doing a lot of extra work cochairing the legislative group, so we should consider how we can recognize Sammy with some stipends.

DCF Report

General

- The Annual Report is coming up; we sent it to the Commissioner, Governor, and Chairs of the Appropriations Committee and Children's Committee. If you have anything to include, send an email to Sarah. She will then connect with you and write the summary. This is a summary of the SAC's work in 2021.

Family First

- Sharon Davis shared that the Children's Bureau had feedback on the plan, and they have convened several workgroups to help provide response to their questions.
- The plan is nearly ready for resubmission. DCF is hopeful it will be approved for 2022.
- There has been a soft launch for QRTP and training will be offered as early as January.
- Most states have received comments back from the Children's Bureau, so this is nothing unusual. Connecticut feels its plan embeds supports in the community and will help families avoid coming to the attention to the Department. DCF feels that the plan's upstream approach is innovative, which is probably why there are more questions. They are excited to move from planning to implementation.

Reunification Article

- This article highlights the Department's 19% reduction of children in care. The article is great because it includes the experience of a mom who had been involved with the Department and had been highlighted in our Spotlight newsletter.
- DCF appreciated them engaging with her and the DCF staff who helped.
- DCF would love for the SAC to be part of media interviews and testimony because they offer the consumer testimony, rather than the Department's perspective.
- Ann, the subject of the article, provides such a valuable viewpoint and another angle on the story. DCF is the child protection agency but not the child protection agency; they hope for more voices to be shared.

Adoption Day

- 52 children were adopted on Adoption Day alone, bringing the total for the year to 450.
- Adoption is only one form of permanency. DCF has also reunified 500 children this year and almost 1,000 in their pandemic response. DCF is not a foster care agency, although that is a temporary measure used. About 1,300 kids this year have achieved permanency--and there is still a month left to 2022.

- For kids in care, DCF is working with parents to obtain parental consent for the children to be vaccinated. If a parent objects, they can file for an administrative hearing that allows them due process to explain their objections.

Afghanistan

- Ken is on a committee that receives regular updates on the Afghanistan Evacuation. These families do not come to DCF's attention unless there is possible abuse or neglect.
- These families need housing. Over 400 arrivals have been coming, about half of which are children. Most settle in the Bridgeport or New Haven areas.
- CIRI (Connecticut Institute for Refugees and immigrants) and IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services) oversee resettlement and support. If you know of any housing options, please contact these organizations as it is a vital need.

Other Thoughts

- Ken is impressed with the fatherhood work.
- When you have events that you are considering collaborating with DCF on, please let Ken know. We will share these on social media and promote the events.
- Ken also wants to have a broader discussion on virtual meeting etiquette, rules, and expectations. This is something the Exec Team has discussed due to the continuation of covid and the integration of telework as a permanent method of communicating. Ken would like the SAC to discuss how everyone has established expectations (break times, videos on/off, chat management)
 - o One suggestion is to lean into technology. DCF especially has many ways to improve, like using secure electronic servers to share documents. They can also use collaborative documents more often (like Google Docs or OneDrive).
 - o How do we be most effective with our use of technology?
 - o DCF would love to learn from other agencies and organizations in our January meeting.

SAC Retreat

- Jerry Milner is not able to invoice for a deposit, but he is confirmed to join on the 29th. Regina has made a deposit to the venue on the SAC's behalf.
- Each RAC will have 20 spaces, 6 of which the SAC will provide stipends for (youth or family members). The RAC may also provide CRP stipends to the additional 14 participants.
- Jerry will present his ideal image of a state implementing Family First. Then the group will discuss action steps and make realistic goals that can be accomplished in the next year.

Other Discussion Points

- One member had a question from a board member about residential treatment. The Commissioner wrote an op-ed about the need and importance of congregate care, but SFITs have been eliminated. This felt contradictory
- This was co-written with Alyssa Goduti (Adelbrook) and Lynn Bishop (NAFI). DCF has maintained that a vibrant set of supports ranges from in-home to out of home. Its message is never full elimination of congregate care. The op-ed supports the Department's belief that Connecticut has an array of strong services. For children who cannot be cared for at

home, they may be treated in residential facilities. There is a national language/movement to eliminate congregate care; however, DCF hopes to eliminate the *need* by continually assessing what is needed to keep children safely at home. DCF will reduce congregate care beds if there is excess capacity due to children being able to stay at home with different services. DCF has experienced a reduction in congregate care, including cutting or repurposing programs.

- The member responded that their organization has seen reductions since 1999 (5 to 1). Their perception is that DCF wants to minimize the number of beds available. They have heard from various DCF folks that there is a definite wish/pressure to not make referrals for congregate care.
- Ken reiterated that DCF has been very transparent and meets regularly with provider organizations. DCF also states to legislators that children are best served in families, preferably their own. Children will continue to be placed in congregate care, but only with an identified need.
- Ken added that Family First also includes QRTP (Qualified Residential Treatment Program) components that require court approval for reimbursement. The court needs to agree that the treatment is best for that reimbursement.
- Pressure that DCF line staff can be eased by RRG clinicians, Beacon, and behavioral health partners.
- The member also brought up an article that said that 200 juvenile justice-involved youth should be placed in a treatment facility due to their behavior. Ken highlighted that DCF does not oversee juvenile justice; DCF is involved with alleged abuse and neglect. Beacon handles identified behavioral health needs.
- Another member pointed out that we sometimes forget how much things have evolved. In the past, children coming to residential programs were often considered in "pre-placement visits," while now they are coming for evaluation and treatment. There are efforts from the beginning to discuss permanency, whereas before children would be placed in a 24-hour program and then not continually supported. Things have evolved quite a bit.
- Ken reflects back to the foster care shift from CORE to kinship care. Frontline staff then also sometimes felt pressured to pursue kinship at all cost; this is an issue with messaging from the top down. Sometimes messages are not interpreted accurately.
- If you know of a child who is in need of more support, please let us know of this gap in services.
- Sarah L recommended discussing this in the RAC. They have discussed the SFIT situation in the RAC, but not this general point. She felt that it would be useful to get broader feedback from the RAC. Members agreed to discuss it and bring back outstanding questions.
- Another SAC member from DCF provided additional perspective on congregate care. They have worked in many positions over the past few years, and they have never heard anyone from the community on any level take issue with DCF's wish for kids and families to remain intact and strengthened in their communities. Most support and even applaud this goal. This administration and the previous administration have boldly put forth that vision. We also have to own that when this mandate was not in place, children were often placed in

residential without treatment needs and were raised there. We changed this. Key community stakeholders seem to appreciate this change. There may be others who really endorse and appreciate that DCF does not want to put kids in congregate care when it is not necessary. The children who used to be placed in these facilities were predominantly Black and brown kids who had not committed violent offenses. The community would rather these kids remain with them rather than what is essentially a jail.

- Another member added that in their professional circles, especially with young people, there is an abolish child welfare and abolish congregate care movement. There is a strong belief that we should avoid congregate care when it is not necessary. There are benefits to these facilities, but many youth who have experienced it did not feel it was good for them. His current foster daughter has been in a group home and it has been better to have her with his family instead. It is not the right place for many youth; there is no way to build relationships in the same ways. It is necessary sometimes, but we should prioritize kinship, reunification, and great foster parents to reduce the need.
- A final member added their perspective as a foster and adoptive parent. One of their kid's older brother was placed in congregate care and was there for ten years. He did not learn how to be in society and act in community, so he ended up homeless within a year of exiting, then incarcerated a few months later. He is now going to be in federal prison until 2034. This is our fault. No one starts at 8 years old not being able to be salvaged. They think about him so often because this was not the proper place for him, and his life has been damaged as a result. Family First will hopefully make a big difference due to its emphasis on support at the beginning of a family's journey and avoiding the need for congregate care. We will see then that we do not need as many beds in congregate care.

Next Steps and SAC Assignments

- Sarah Lockery shared that she is so hopeful for the future due to everyone's great work and passion so far. We have an opportunity to build on our past momentum and further evolve.
- She will draft the SAC's annual 1-page report.
- The "Structure" section of the survey tool will be the focus of the January meeting, which will be on **January 3, 2021 from 9:30 am - 12 pm.**