

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



Child Abuse Prevention Month A Message from Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.....

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. As we continue to experience limited social contact and daily telework, why are we putting out another "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter?

The reason is quite simple. This month, your efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect have been extraordinary and the stories need to be told.

We are faced with uncertainty in our state, country and world as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect millions. Yet, we will be defined by our accomplishments, strengths, the resources that we do have and how we are coming together as an agency and system to support one another and the children and families we serve.

Families are being empowered, they are receiving services and children are being protected. The way we conduct our work has changed, but not our overall mission.

My message to you and others around the state has been consistent - remain focused on what we know, what we are doing and what we plan to do. Be confident in our collaborative efforts and open to changes as new information evolves.

We are all working hard. A pace not seen before in our work or maybe even in our lifetime. Over the past number of weeks, your commitment and dedication to push through obstacles and do what is right has not gone unnoticed.

Times like these confirm that working for DCF is not a job. It is a calling.

We have joined together by unit, workgroup, office and facility to lift each other. We are thankful for the collaboration across the agency, with legislators, state agencies, union leadership, foster parents and community partners which have been strong and consistent. Because of those relationships, the entire child protective services system is strengthened.

We all have a part in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

As your leader, please know I am concerned about you and your families. Your ability to take care of yourselves while caring for others cannot be sacrificed. This is a delicate balance. Resources are available for you and are provided in this newsletter.

During our long days and nights, periods of concern and moments of greatest accomplishments. I stand right next to you.

I remain proud to say I am a Social Worker and I am your Commissioner.

Thank you!

Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes

Kevin Rennie: Some state agencies are stepping up during the coronavirus crisis



By KEVIN RENNIE
HARTFORD COURANT |
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Hartford Courant

The global coronavirus pandemic continues to reveal to Gov. Ned Lamont how well certain critical components of his administration are working under the pressure of a public health crisis.

Lamont will look back with relief on the day he asked Department of Children and Families veteran Vanessa Dorantes to become commissioner of the child protection agency, which had a history of troubles that grew worse under the previous administration. Isolation is a formidable enemy for an agency that runs on contact with vulnerable children and their erratic families.

Child advocate Sarah Eagan pointed out in a telephone interview this week that much of DCF's work cannot be done by FaceTime or Skype. Case workers need to find ways to have more direct contact with the children they are trying to protect and the adults they are monitoring and providing assistance to. Add to the list of the brave those case workers who get in their cars and find ways to visit children who are enduring the isolation of this jarring time.



You, reader, have likely experienced some of the emotional toll extended isolation inflicts on even the happiest families. Those are not the families DCF oversees and tries to assist. If necessary, they have to remove children from their homes. That's always a combustible prospect — more so now.

Our schools play a critical role in alerting DCF to children who may be at risk. Schools are also the place children are told how to reach DCF if they need help. With schools closed indefinitely, children have lost a safe place to find help before a crisis occurs. Dorantes is trying to address that by establishing "warm lines," phone centers that are part of a network of support for families under stress to receive assistance before a domestic crisis flares.

Dorantes is receptive to ideas and is working to transform good ones into action. Her practical knowledge of what caseworkers confront and try to manage each day has made her an effective leader. Some schools are continuing to provide meals for children who would normally receive breakfast and lunch at school during the week. Those locations may provide a place to let families know that DCF has services available to help.

Full marks to Dorantes and Eagan for working together to exchange ideas and meld their considerable but varied experiences for the benefit of children. Eagan was the frequent target of ugly abuse from DCF when it was headed by Joette Katz for eight interminable years. This new relationship, devoid of bureaucratic venom, will protect children.

Kevin Rennie is a lawyer and a former Republican state legislator. He can be reached at kfrennie@yahoo.com.

PRTF Spreading Positivity

Imagine yourself walking around the campus of a large facility and you see chalk art. Walk a little further and there is more. On another part of campus, additional images.

John Fontanez is a Recreational Therapist Assistant at the Solnit South PRTF. This is his second time working for DCF and in total, has dedicated 7 years to the youth with whom he works daily to "keep connected." Speaking to him is easy, it is understood how he can creatively work with the youth.

The chalk art idea grew out of pictures and messages John saw on Facebook. In Connecticut and across the country, individuals are leaving little positive messages to assist others in getting through the day. Could this be done at Solnit?

John decided that as a way to boost the staff's morale and to empower the youth, chalk art would be replicated at Solnit South.

Was it hard to engage adolescents to be creative and express themselves? According to John it "did not take much to get them engaged" and only a "little prompting" to start. The credit here rests with John and his abilities as well as the trust he developed with the youth.

With the chalk located and colors picked, the youth went to work detailing the steps to the entrances of each unit and even the Administration building. Staff received an uplifting surprise when they arrived the next day - a design, a quote and a colorful reminder of staff support - and youth empowerment.

When you look at the chalk art closely, you will see favorite inspirational sayings remembered by youth: *"It will be over soon"*

Ones they memorized and could recite off the top of their heads: *"Don't blend in when you are meant to stand out"*

Another quote in which the youth live by: *"We are all a little broken, but broken crayons color too"*

In times when we look to professionals for support, it is the youth voice which can support the professional. By giving back, the youth experienced a valuable life lesson that giving something positive forward can serve many purposes.

Samantha Diaz - Essential in Many Ways

While most 12-year-old girls are wavering between playing with dolls or having school boy crushes, keenly aware of social media platforms that seem to define a "tween", Samantha Diaz was spending her pre-teen days in a real-life story of survival. Ironically, over a decade later, she finds herself in another story of survival. While battling the Covid-19 pandemic as a DCF Investigator, this front-line worker is submerged in the work while adapting to this new norm.

At just 12 years old, Samantha felt compelled to take care of her three younger sisters ages 2, 5 and 10 years due to a complex set of family circumstances. One night, in order to ensure everyone's safety, Samantha packed a bag for herself and her sisters and walked down the busy streets of New York to her grandmother's home. This began her journey into foster care. In the middle of the night, Child Welfare workers found her and her sisters and took them to what Samantha remembered as a large tenement. There were many children, separated in different rooms by age and gender. She and her sisters were initially separated and within a few days they were placed into two different foster homes with limited sibling visits. Samantha recalls a defining moment where she met a teen boy named, "Alexander", who was frantic because he was separated from his siblings and felt so helpless and all alone. It was at that moment in time when she became emphatic that she would never allow any system to separate her from her sisters.

Samantha recalls those years in foster care as difficult while she remained concerned for her siblings and the care they were receiving. She often questioned if they would live together again. Samantha easily recalls how she looked after them, worried for her siblings and yearned to be placed together again. Two years after placement, Samantha, together with her three younger siblings, moved to CT and were placed into relative care, ultimately being adopted and raised with her cousins. When asked about life with her extended family, Samantha explained *"they did the best they could"* but family stressors and other factors again surfaced. Samantha felt that she and her adoptive mother struggled to form a relationship because Samantha was a parentified child and felt an obligation to care for her sisters. Samantha said, *"those were my babies and I just couldn't let that go"*.

While Samantha was in her senior year at Southern Connecticut State University, pursuing a degree in Social Work, a series of family tragedies took place. This required her once again to become the protector of her young siblings, and now cousins. Samantha moved back home after graduation, caring for all her siblings and cousins while applying for a position at DCF. When asked to leave the home, Samantha, now considered homeless, was allowed to move back onto her college campus for the summer months. That summer, she accepted a job at DCF and started to plan a new life for herself and her siblings.

After beginning her position at DCF she was able to afford the rent for a small apartment where her siblings would visit together every day, eat dinner and shower and return back to their home. "Siblings" now included birth siblings and her cousins. Samantha vividly recalls leaving work each night at 5 p.m. to make double trips back and forth to her apartment because she couldn't fit everyone in her small car. Soon after, Samantha was able to afford an even bigger apartment so that all her siblings and cousins could move in with her, that's when *"we became one"*. When Samantha was 23 years old, she petitioned the Probate Court and received legal custody

of her younger sister and cousin. In her home now resides these youth along with three other relatives who are young adults. Samantha said, *"I had no choice, but I would have it no other way"*.

Samantha is, extraordinary. Selfless beyond measure. She is a devoted "mother" to all her siblings and cousins and has their best interests in mind. She worked tirelessly her whole life to nurture and to guide and to provide reassurance to her family members. A role model, a giver. A shield and an advocate. Fiercely protective. When asked why she chose to become a social worker, Samantha said *"because I wanted to make sure that no child ever had to go through what we went through"*. She *"understands all the emotions that a foster child has"* and feels that she can help, even more so because of her own story.

Samantha also remembered Alexander, that teen she met many years ago, who lost touch with his siblings. His words have resonated for over a decade and reminds her of the significance of the sibling connection. Samantha is ever so grateful for the kindness of strangers, *"all of the angels that were in my path"*, referring to her teachers, Resident Assistants at the SCSU dormitory, her DCF Training Supervisor and colleagues.

This past summer, Samantha purchased her own 3-bedroom house. She became engaged in December to a remarkable young man who embraced her journey and has become a father figure to her siblings. He was the one who originally taught her how to drive a car years ago, prepped her for all her interviews and has been a constant support for the past four years."

In a world that has been rather unkind, Samantha shows no bitterness. She spoke with sincere forgiveness for her parents and a depth of gratitude for adoptive relatives for opening their home so that she could live with her sisters. She spoke of her family with undeniable pride.

Samantha lost her own childhood for her sisters. She is a beautiful example of courage and self-sacrifice, gifted with sincere humility.

Samantha Diaz is our unsung hero, not only because of this story but because of the work that she is doing now as a DCF Investigator. Then, and now, this selfless young woman has the best interest of others in mind.

Samantha Diaz is 26 years old.

"Mother" of six children.

She is an Investigations Social Worker in the New Britain DCF Office

She has been employed by DCF for 3 ½ years and said

"I love the work"

Her future ambition: to be a foster mom.

Hearts for Superheroes

Beautiful hearts hang on the outside wall of the Central Office building in Hartford. Each day, as hundreds of cars pass by, these hearts serve as a calming visual during uncertain times. Who made them? How did they get here? What is their purpose?

The hearts were created by youth at Solnit South - But there is more to this story.

"Art heals," says Solnit South Rehabilitation Art Therapist Heather Cassella. With enthusiasm in her voice, this 5-year DCF employee spoke about her work and seeing youth "develop strengths" by engaging in this non-traditional form of therapy. Art therapy allows an expression of emotion and the gaining of insight into yourself that for some, is elusive via other therapeutic means.

In Heather's art therapy group, the decision was made to create hearts to show gratitude for the healthcare workers at Hartford Hospital. According to Heather, activities such as giving back allow a "sense of control in uncertain times."

Quickly, the shapes were cut, colors picked, and one by one, the youth personalized their work. With vibrant reds, to softer blue colors, each heart was unique. For one youth, she described the emergency medical technicians and healthcare workers as "superheroes." Her heart was a way to help those who help take care of others.

For the staff at Hartford Hospital, seeing colorful hearts while traveling to and from work, serves to lift their spirits. The hearts help them heal from their long days and trying times.

For the youth at Solnit South, creating colorful hearts serves to lift their spirits. The hearts help them heal from their long days and trying times.

Thank you, Heather Cassella and the youth at Solnit South!

When it Builds Up, Talk it Out

To further our efforts in supporting and empowering families, we have collaborated with the United Way and community providers to establish a "*When it Builds Up, Talk it Out*" campaign.

All communities need help right now and we must recognize the additional stress and impact these times present, especially to communities of color, families with young children and parents of children with specialized needs.

Any parent who wishes to access supports are invited to call 833-258-5011 and engage with trained professionals who will listen and speak with them about their concerns. If additional help is needed, they will be referred to community-based services.

The support line can also be accessed via cell phone by visiting www.talkitoutct.com and clicking on the link to be connected to the same caring professionals.

The "*Talk It Out Line*" is available Monday through Friday from 8 am to 8 pm and on weekends from 1 pm to 8 pm and has both English and Spanish capacity.

These public service announcements are currently airing on television: [TalkITOutCT.com TV PSA](http://TalkITOutCT.com) as well as radio: [TalkItOutCt.com Radio PSA](http://TalkItOutCt.com)

We encourage you to actively discuss this with the families you serve and provide them the contact information. Please know this line is also a support to each of you.

All parents need support during this time.

"What We Know, What We are Doing and What We Plan to Do"

How are we managing the daily operations of the Department? What are we doing to ensure clear communication across the system as key components of our work are completed? With whom are we consulting and interacting? Please read here for more information....

- Consult with the Governor's Office, other state agencies, child welfare jurisdictions across the country and community partners to be informed of and develop best practices in our work.
- Provide written guidance and video recorded messages to all staff, including community partners, clarifying new procedures.
- Deployed over 1,800 Tablets, including approximately 600 in one week alone, leading to over 80% of staff teleworking.
- Engage with children and families using innovative and creative methods via remote technology such as Face Time and Microsoft Teams.
- Respond in-person to those circumstances which cannot be resolved remotely while staff utilize personal protective equipment.
- Continue to monitor services to vulnerable populations such as older youth, children with specialized needs and children and families in disproportionately impacted communities.
- Established the "*When it Builds Up, Talk it Out*" campaign which includes a phone line staffed by community providers whom parents can call when in need of support.
- Conduct a contact tracing process guided by DCF Medical Director of all COVID 19 positive diagnosis.

- Presented twice at the Governor's Council on Women and Girls Health and Safety Subcommittee regarding health and safety resources available to support Connecticut children and families and how to access them during the pandemic as well as services for survivors of intimate partner violence and their children.
- Developed and regularly update a COVID-19 website at <https://portal.ct.gov/DCF/COVID-19/COVID-19> which has resulted in over 10,000 unique individuals accessing the information.
- Established a specific e-mail address for internal DCF staff and external partners to ask specific questions relating to the pandemic: DCF.COVID-19@ct.gov.
- Produce a daily newsletter with information regarding supports available for children, families and staff as well as highlighting positive efforts of the workforce.
- Encourage staff to utilize internal supports, including the Employee Assistance Program, ensuring a healthy work/life balance.
- Established a foster parent contact database so communications can be quickly and consistently delivered and confirmed backup childcare plans with each caregiver.
- Engage in weekly conference calls with key legislators to provide Department updates and resolve issues brought to their attention.
- Met with leadership from 8 different state employee labor unions to answer questions and clarify operational procedures for staff throughout the department.
- Conduct weekly videoconferencing with the Children's League of Connecticut (CLOC)
- Outreach occurs daily from our Licensing Division to private providers caring for our children in congregate care facilities and program leads to trouble-shoot concerns with maintaining virtual connections to families they serve.
- Follow up on inquiries from contracted and fee-for-service credentialed providers from our Fiscal Department.
- Solicited PPE need from nonprofit provider community and submitted through the Essential Support Function process.
- Presented the Department's planning on a national call with over 200 representatives from jurisdictions across the country.