

OCTOBER 2019

Department of Children and Families  
**SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT**



The 5<sup>th</sup> Annual "Dads Matter Too!" Conference was held at Central Connecticut State University organized by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Region 5 Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (FELT). Opening remarks of the two day conference were provided by

Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, Provost of Connecticut State Colleges and Universities Dr. Jane Gates, Commissioners Vannessa Dorantes of the Department of Children and Families and Commissioner Deidre S. Gifford of the Department of Social Services. Dr. Zelma Toro, President of Central Connecticut State University, provided lunchtime remarks. [Read the entire article here](#)



Watch a video of Commissioner's Dorantes' Opening Remarks at the August 2019 [Dads Matter Too! Conference](#), held at CCSU



Representative Patricia Pheanious-Wilson, Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes, Senator Gary Winfield and Representative Robyn Porter

Special Thank You to [ChikePhotography.com](#)  
For photographing the "Dads Matter Too! Conference"  
(Contact: 860-980-2721 or [ChikePhotography@gmail.com](mailto:ChikePhotography@gmail.com))



Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz speaking at the "Dads Matter Too!" Conference



Central Connecticut State University President Dr. Zelma Toro speaking at the "Dads Matter Too!" Conference



Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes providing opening remarks at the "Dads Matter Too!" conference



Department of Social Services Commissioner Deidre S. Gifford speaking at the "Dads Matter Too!" Conference

## A Father's Love

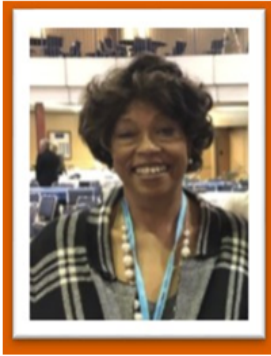
The picture of Anthony Gay holding his five-year-old son, Noah, allows us a glimpse into his life. The two are on a "Dads Matter Too" float displayed during a community parade. Little Noah is content, eyes closed after finding comfort on his Dad's shoulder. With strong arms around him, it is time to sleep.

Across the state, Fathers are experiencing these same touching moments with their own children – the result of focused efforts of the Department of Children and Families emphasizing the unique role Fathers play and empowering them to actively take part in their children's lives.



It took Anthony almost a decade of work to be at this place in his career, and most certainly, his life. [Read the full article here](#)





## Mother of the Fatherhood Initiative

It was a woman who had struggled as a young single mom who became the mother of Connecticut's fatherhood initiative. Rep. Pat Wilson Pheanious (D-53), during her tenure as the Commissioner of Social Services, found ways to reform a welfare system in which people can feel trapped and confused. However, a chance meeting between a new commissioner and a veteran legislator led to a new initiative that would alter the way state agencies would begin dealing with fathers looking for a way back into their children's lives. [Read the full article here.](#)

## Region 4 Community Field Day and Food Truck Festival

Hundreds traveled to Sharshon Park in Windsor for the Region 4 Community Field Day and Food Truck Festival! Families enjoyed live performers, poems and inspirational speeches, a picture booth, sporting events, awards, vendor exhibits, those great food trucks and the opportunity to turn on the lights and sirens in a Windsor Police car! A great event!



PS Joe Guion & PS Jeff Gold presenting Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad with the Region 4 FELT Team Fatherhood Engagement Award



Officer Tyra Taylor, DCF Social Worker Amanda Beane, Mayor Donald Trinks and Senator Douglas McCrory



Program Supervisor Joe Guion at the Region 4 Community Field Day



Program Supervisor Jeff Gold at the Region 4 Community Field Day



Hector Glynn (L) Chief Operating Officer for the Village for Children and Families and Beresford Wilson (R) Executive Director of FAVOR attending the Region 4 Fatherhood Community Day.



**HOMETOWN HERO** Thank you to Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad and My Peoples Clinical Services for bringing the "Ice Cream for a Dream" truck to Waterbury! The way Ice Cream for a Dream works is that an individual tells their dream in exchange for a free ice cream sandwich. Since 2012, over 60,000 ice creams have been given out in exchange for dreams! That's 60,000 dreams and counting!

Abdul recently promoted the Department's fatherhood work during an appearance on Channel 8-CT STYLE. It can be viewed here: <https://www.wtnh.com/ct-style/dads-matter-too-community-field-day-coming-to-hartford/>



## Region 5 Community Awareness Day

Fathers and their families attended the Region 5 Community Awareness Day which took place at the Police Athletic League fields in Waterbury. Featuring face painting, free haircuts, vendor tables and music and entertainment, the event captured the true spirit of fatherhood involvement. Nice work!



Representative Geraldo Reyes, DCF Supervisor Anthony Gay and Representative Robyn Porter supporting Fatherhood.



Region 5 Staff in the Waterbury Parade



Connecticut has been selected to participate in a **Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) for Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare**. The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) is a unique opportunity to bring together the expertise of key child welfare stakeholders using an established implementation and quality improvement methodology to test, spread, and sustain practice improvements. The specific focus of this BSC is to identify and engage fathers and paternal relatives to improve placement stability and permanency outcomes for children in care. What an honor!

(Pictured are from L to R: Assistant Chief Christine Lau, Program Supervisor Joe Guion Community Partner Abdul-Rahmaan Muhammad, Social Work Supervisor Denise Silva,

Social Worker Sarah Kalka and Don Crocker From the Village for Families and Children.)



## Region 4 vs. Region 5 Softball Game

And the winner is...

Region 5 – 25  
Region 4 – 12



## Mentoring

During the DCF Mentoring Program Professional Development Day Event, Mr. Gilbert Nieves spoke to the Department staff regarding his experiences as being a father in our system. The day also included a panel presentation from staff who provide contracted Fatherhood Engagement Services as well as an overview of how fatherhood work is embedded in the federal Program Improvement Plan (PIP)





## Family Backpack Building Event

Build back-to-school backpacks for DCF children & youth:



**August 2, 2019**

**7:00pm - 8:30pm**

Wintonbury Church  
54 Maple Ave  
Bloomfield, CT 06002

the **underground**

Thanks to the many volunteers from who made the Family Backpack building event such a huuuuge success! The churches that helped with this event: Cornerstone, Cheshire, CT; Holy Rosary Parish, Ansonia, CT; VOX New Haven, CT; and Wintonbury, Bloomfield, CT.

We packed 572 backpacks this year & served DCF CT, Love 146, NAFI, CIRI."



## "Thank you to our Connecticut Legislators"



Representative Lezlye Zupkus and Senator Joan Hartley attending the Weekend for a Lifetime Event



Representatives Robyn Porter and Patricia Dillon at the r'kids Family Center groundbreaking ceremony with DCF



Senator Marilyn Moore, Senator Gary Winfield and Representative Brandon McGhee at the "Dads Matter Too" Conference



Bureau Chief Ken Mysogland, Senator George Logan, Statewide Recruiter Jackie Ford and Kid Governor Ella Briggs at the CT Family Day event.



Connecticut Kid Governor Ella Briggs at the CT Family Day Poster Contest Celebration



Bureau Chief Ken Mysogland, Rep. Tami Zawistowski, Anne Fiyalka, Rep. Anne Hughes and Legislative Liaison Vincent Russo celebrating Amelia Earhart Day in Connecticut.



Executive Director of the Connecticut Alliance for Foster and Adoptive Families Margaret Doherty, Chief of Child Welfare Tina Jefferson and Assistant Chief Christine Lau at the Region 4 Weekend for a Lifetime Event

### "Our Award Winning Staff"



Congratulations to Valerie Miles for receiving the HART Shining Star Award



Congratulations to Emily Morse for receiving the HART Shining Star Award

(Attached are the articles referenced in the links included in this e-mail.)



## “Dads Matter Too!” Conference

The 5th Annual “Dads Matter Too” conference was held at Central Connecticut State University organized by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Region 5 Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (FELT).

Openings remarks of the two day conference were provided by Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, Provost of Connecticut State Colleges and Universities Dr. Jane

Gates, Commissioners Vannessa Dorantes of the Department of Children and Families and Commissioner Deidre S. Gifford of the Department of Social Services. Dr. Zelma Toro, President of Central Connecticut State University, provided lunchtime remarks.



The goal of “Dads Matter Too” is to increase the involvement of fathers in those families who come to the attention of Connecticut’s child welfare system. The FELT team is a group of dedicated individuals committed to increasing the overall engagement of fathers, and their families, within all systems and communities throughout the State of Connecticut.

This year’s conference presented the unique opportunity for DCF to collaborate with the Department of Social Services - the lead state agency for the “Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative.” This work includes collaborative efforts of state and local partners focused on changing the systems that can improve a fathers’ ability to be fully and positively involved in the lives of their children.

The DCF portion of the event began with Commissioner Dorantes delivering a beautiful heartfelt speech about her own father, “Pops”, and the significant influences he made in her life.

Participants then viewed the documentary, “120 Years”, a portrayal of Scott Lewis and how his relationship with his two boys, Scott Jr. and Tamaji, was negatively impacted after he spent over 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Scott and his sons later took part in a panel discussion which included fielding questions from the audience.

Another documentary, “Tre-Maison-Dasan”, was viewed which highlighted the stories of three young boys each who grew up with a parent in prison. Told through the child’s perspective, the short film explores the realities of when a parent is absent due to incarceration. The audience heard from two of the boys, Tre and Maison, during a panel discussion.

After a recognition ceremony, the conference ended with Dr. Maysa Akbar’s presentation entitled, “Urban Trauma: Father Hungry” which focused on childhood trauma with a specific focus on urban and culturally diverse children, adolescents and families.

## A Father's Love

The picture of Anthony Gay holding his five-year-old son, Noah, allows us a glimpse into his life. The two are on a "Dads Matter Too" float displayed during a community parade. Little Noah is content, eyes closed after finding comfort on his Dad's shoulder. With strong arms around him, it is time to sleep.

Across the state, fathers are experiencing these same touching moments with their own children – the result of focused efforts of the Department of Children and Families emphasizing the unique role father's play and empowering them to actively take part in their children's lives.



It took Anthony almost a decade of work to be at this place in his career, and most certainly, his life. By chance, he attended an "Engaging Fathers in CPS Training" at the Academy for Workforce Development back in 2009. As a Social Work Supervisor, and father of two children, the content moved him. He realized gaps in his own work, and that the Department did not "Do great with fathers we did not connect with." Anthony realized, "I did not have my own biases in check," and left the training determined to make change.

Three months later, a position opened at the Academy and the student now became the teacher. As the lead for fatherhood engagement training, his influence was received by internal DCF staff across the Agency. Concurrently, regional offices commenced structured activities to promote the key roles of fathers and to develop strategies for inclusion in case planning.

Upon returning to the Waterbury Office in 2012, Anthony was asked to take over the Region 5 Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (FELT) by then Office Director Patti Zuccarelli. Originally, the role was "supposed be given to someone else," according to Anthony, yet it was Patti who advocated for him to be the lead. "The legacy will always be connected to Patti," Anthony states regarding the success of this work, "She never told me 'no' and always helped me figure out the how."

The initial FELT work commenced with a staff survey regarding their impressions of fathers and to clarify outcomes. Involving community stakeholders and locating a "community dad" who could assist in changing the perception of DCF in the community soon followed.

The efforts were tireless.

Having passion does not always mean results are easy to achieve. Despite a newsletter created to hear the "phenomenal stories" about fatherhood engagement, many staff remained resistant to embracing this new way of thinking. When a particular worker was proud of their efforts, he told Anthony, "I would share my story but my peers would get upset" or another disclosed, "I trust this - but I do not."

The work identified that one key barrier to fatherhood engagement and involvement with their children actually rested with the mothers. Anthony states, "Mothers can be the gatekeepers to provide information on the father which might not necessarily be true. This may negatively impact his relationship with his children." This scenario was personal for him. Anthony knew what it was like to be excluded from periods of his own daughter's life.

The work did not stop.

Listening forums occurred with fathers across the Region. An office "lead" and community "lead" were established to provide insight internally and externally to enhance the message forward. Momentum was growing.

Then tragedy.

In January 2014, Anthony's son, Damion, was fatally injured in a car accident at 23 years of age. This man who enriched the lives of so many Fathers and children, our leader, was now in immense pain. A "Storm was inside me," he would recite. "Every day was rain". Through tears, Anthony talks openly about his relationship with Damion and his regrets of not being at more of his son's events. The school plays and sporting contests. Enjoying those quiet moments where it is just you and your children. "I missed a lot," he would say. Parallel statements he has heard time and time again by other Fathers.

Anthony's actions as a Father were influenced by his relationship with his own father. A hard working man with only a 3rd grade education, he worked 2 full-time and 1 part-time jobs to support his family. As the provider and protector, he was not frequently home, enjoying quality time with his children or seeing them participate in activities. He was doing what he thought was best for his family.

After his Father's death, Anthony assumed part ownership of his parent's house. Attached with it came the financial burden requiring him to take care of his mother and siblings. Being a young father and facing financial strain, Anthony's mindset was to repeat what was modeled for him in his own family – a familiar scenario with those men Anthony meets in his daily work.

Anthony was intent on "not being a burden," to Damion. He did not want Damion to feel the financial strains he did so his actions became one of provider and protector, in the way he thought best. "Work, work, work is what I did." He stated. Well intended, yet not without a price. He looks back now and recognizes what he did was what he knew at the time, not unlike the thousands of fathers who have come to the Department's attention since this work began. They repeat the behaviors of their own fathers.

"Be present" he will say when asked about the biggest meaning in Damion's loss. With your children he emphasizes, "Be consistent in their lives."

Powerful words Anthony now imparts to Fathers now across the state. At a time in his life when it would have been easy to step away from the work, Anthony's loss only intensified his passion. It also impacted his relationship with his newborn son.

Almost 10 months after Damion's death, Noah was born. In biblical terms, "Noah means re-birth," Anthony states. A new beginning. "The storm over me lifted after he was born and I became more at peace."

"I wanted to create a sense of security for him."

In Anthony's office, pictures of Noah are proudly displayed as well as the drawing of a fish his buddy made for him in pre-school. "For the first two and a half years, I walked him to sleep at night. I don't miss anything of his," he states.

Anthony has been at every medical appointment, school function, party and event with Noah. At the end of the day, Noah "runs and jumps into my arms when he knows I am there." Anthony points out. "He holds my hand when we walk into school, all the way into the classroom." Statistics are clear on the outcomes of children who have two involved parents; they perform better academically, socially, emotionally and psychologically.

How does one truly measure a child's sense of security with a loving father? Maybe the best insight into Anthony's relationship with Noah rests with these words. "He is Linus and I am his blanket". Anthony has a calmness surrounding him when he speaks about his life. Constantly deflecting the credit to others for the success of his work. Using his own experiences as motivation, he desires to do even better for other fathers and recites plans to re-brand the fatherhood work, of a newly developed mission statement and the creation of a diligent search tool social workers can use to locate fathers absent from a family.

Social media is now widely utilized to spread the awareness of fathers. Messages on the "Dads Matter Too" Facebook page come from fathers not only in other states, but other countries. Men are referred to him by individuals he has never met. "I received a call the other day from a man who was calling on behalf of his friend in California. He wanted some advice." Anthony states. "People recognize the Dads Matter Too t-shirt when I wear it in grocery stores."

The principles of fatherhood are now embedded in the Department's values, seen in the daily interactions staff display with families and have been acknowledged nationally. Because of who he is as a person and a professional, Anthony Gay has moved this work forward, despite the barriers, obstacles and personal pain. Perhaps the true legacy of our work may rest in the impact it has on those individuals who will never know our name. They will never turn and thank us, but because of our efforts, they live more productive and healthier lives.

Fathers and children who do not even know Anthony Gay have felt his impact. He has done his part to change their lives. The impact is intergenerational.

On behalf of those children who can now rest their tired heads on the strong shoulders of a father and on behalf of the men who can truly be present in their children's lives, let us take this opportunity to say.....to you.....Anthony.....

*"Thank you."*



## “Mother of the Fatherhood Initiative”

It was a woman who had struggled as a young single mom who became the mother of Connecticut's fatherhood initiative. Rep. Pat Wilson Pheanious (D-53), during her tenure as the Commissioner of Social Services, found ways to reform a welfare system in which people can feel trapped and confused. However, a chance meeting between a new commissioner and a veteran legislator led to a new initiative that would alter the way state agencies would begin dealing with fathers looking for a way back into their children's lives.

In the early 70's, Pat Wilson was a sophomore at UConn with a college sweetheart, Eddie Coker. She planned to look for a job and spend the summer with Eddie and his family in New Haven. Before he could join them, tragedy struck. Attacked in his home, Eddie killed a man in self-defense. That same day, Pat learned she was pregnant. Eventually Eddie was found guilty of having used excessive force in his defense. He received a 2-4 year prison sentence.

Reflecting back on that time, Pat said, “I often think back to that split second, when he decided to use a gun. It changed everything forever. It ended one life and killed the dreams of so many others.” That bad decision began a 5-year saga where Pat would learn to deal with the difficulties of being a single mom, struggling to work, finish school, find child-care and transportation while navigating the state's welfare system and a tangle of complex resources.

Pat and Eddie married just prior to his incarceration. Pat started living in the Hamilton St. Projects with her mother-in-law. She had grown up in a secure, middle class family in Ashford that left her unprepared for this new life. How quickly unexpected events can lead a family to need state assistance! “I was shocked to learn that there was help for women with kids—as long as there was no father in the home. I had never known anybody who relied on welfare and I'd never needed help before. When I learned I could sign up and get help paying for an apartment, furnishings and medical assistance it sounded like the answer to a prayer.

She would ask Eddie's mother to watch her son, Cheo, when she took the bus to the local welfare office to meet with a caseworker. Pat recalls, “It wasn't long before I began to see some of the problems inherent in the system. Crowded waiting rooms that weren't uniformly clean and were never private. Dozens of questions that seemed like nobody else's business, with built in suspicion that I wasn't being truthful or that I might be found undeserving.”

Pat learned that programs designed to help people get back on their feet sometimes work against those they were meant to serve. Stigma, self-doubt and dependency can come with the help. On the bus ride back home, Pat began to understand the downside of needing to seek assistance.

“The act of becoming officially dependent was like a weight hanging around my neck. It took a while for me to grasp why I was unable to look other passengers on the bus in the eye. I vowed that Cheo would never have that experience or even see the inside of a welfare office. He never did. Application day marked my first adult experience with shame.”

Eddie's release from prison months later didn't make things any better. His incarceration, along with remorse for killing a man, was demoralizing. The family couldn't live together without losing the state check that supported Pat and Cheo. Now with a criminal record, Eddie couldn't find work. Almost immediately, child support enforcement was after him to pay and repay the money spent on his family while he was in jail. He began to drink, became depressed and angry. Pat witnessed the system break her husband down and denigrate the paternal relationship. Eddie's became undependable and his relationship with his son deteriorated. He was angry at child support and blamed Pat because he thought somehow that she could “call them off”. Of course, she couldn't. When his anger turned to violence, Pat saw no option and filed for divorce.

Eddie lived in terror of being arrested as a deadbeat and sent back to prison. He left Connecticut to escape demands for child support that he couldn't meet. Unfortunately, this led to a near complete severing of his relationship with his son. Pat recalls, “Cheo's dad didn't feel like he had any value...like presence in his son's life wasn't important enough by itself. He didn't understand that his role was more than financial. He thought he had nothing to give but in reality he only needed to give of himself.

Having struggled with work and school part-time, Pat knew what the odds would be for her and Cheo unless she went back to school full time. She made amends with her parents and moved back home with her son. When she completed her undergraduate degree, she got off welfare. She went on to earn graduate degrees from UConn in social work and law. She became an attorney in 1981. Looking back on those days, she said, “Even as I was leaving the welfare system I felt as though I had to fight my way off. My caseworker— with the



best intentions begged me to stay on assistance. How would I afford to live and stay in school without the check? What if I didn't succeed? What about my son's medical coverage? Was leaving welfare really in the best interests of my son?"

Welfare recipients can feel locked. Once you stop accepting benefits it's incredibly difficult to get them again. In Pat's case it was will and determination...but most especially her ability to go back to the encouragement and support of a stable family that allowed her to escape and bounce back from what might have been a lifetime of dependency.

Throughout this time, Cheo was growing up without his dad. "Present in absentia," Pat calls it. "He was not there, yet he was alive somewhere and ever present in his son's mind. Disconnected. Eddie viewed himself and his situation as a liability to his son. Unable to provide, he felt helpless and chose to stay away, never realizing how important he remained in the eyes of his child." Cheo did have strong men as role models in his life, being mentored by Pat's father and Cheo's uncle. But he knew about his father and longed for him. For years Cheo fantasized that one day his dad would return.

Many years passed, and Pat dedicated herself to teaching and helping those in circumstances like what she'd lived through. She taught at St. Joseph college, worked at DCYS, and then at DSS where she administered the TANF program during welfare reform. Her experiences helped her understand the pain points throughout the system and to put in place reforms that provided staff with training and people with dignity when they sought assistance. Instead of calling out people's names in the waiting room when it was their turn to be served, she had a DSS regional staff supervisor greet and triage people then call their worker to escort them into the back offices to fill out their paperwork. Her staff worked to create better spaces for children so interviews could be conducted more privately. She worked with schools and work force development programs to remove barriers for men and women trying to get the help they needed to move their lives forward. Pat's efforts to humanize service systems when she was the regional administrator impressed Governor John Rowland who appointed her as DSS commissioner in January of 1999.

After serving as commissioner for just a few months, a New Haven state representative scheduled a meeting with Pat. John Martinez was interested in developing public policy to support fathers. He saw a number of children in his community whose fathers were absent from their lives, many times due to incarceration, substance use or their inability to be a parent. He attended numerous conferences where this topic was discussed. Now, the legislator wanted to pay a visit to the new DSS commissioner.

Pat and John hit it off right away. They discussed their own experiences and those of people they had spoken with. They saw that social services, children and families, corrections, labor and child support enforcement weren't working together. With state agencies in their own silos, they would be contradicting each other and at odds, leaving fathers in an abyss with no clear direction forward. The half hour meeting lasted all afternoon, and when they finally parted, they had outlined policies that would become the Fatherhood Initiative housed at DSS.

Pat and John examined how to resolve issues such as: connecting state agencies so they can collaborate when a person requires assistance from multiple agencies; have the agencies look at the men as fathers, not convicts or addicts; exploring how child support enforcement could work with welfare to give fathers, and their families, a chance to get out of the hole; recognize that even fathers in bad situations can still have a connection with their children and that should be supported because children want to know their fathers.

They were successful in getting a pilot program passed legislatively. Although it was technically only authorized for one year, Pat knew that once she embedded their philosophy into the policies and practices of her department, they would continue to grow. And she was right. Agencies to this day see fathers from a very different perspective and collaborate in ways that didn't exist before. The importance of the multifaceted approach to the fatherhood initiative remains evident. Through the work of so many people the concept and perspectives of the initiative continue to expand and grow throughout the multiple state agencies whose missions interconnect. Helping fathers helps families.

As Pat was rolling out the fatherhood initiative, her son Cheo, then a freshman at Stanford University, received a call from his father. It had been years since they had spoken or seen each other. Eddie was dying. Even though Cheo was in California, and only recently licensed, he drove across the country to Ohio to spend the last days of Eddie's life together. Despite the separation for nearly his entire life, the connection between father and son was never completely broken. Cheo and Eddie had the chance to reunite at a time when it truly mattered to them both. Years later. But then, fathers always matter to their sons. Even "in absentia" fatherhood matters. There may be sad, bad or inconvenient circumstances, but that relationship can still hold special, persistent meaning.

In closing, Pat offered, "Twenty years ago representative John Martinez and I used our life experience to envision an initiative to bring men who needed help information and support for their role as dads, to grow their understanding of their value in the lives of their kids, and to nourish their capacity in their community to "teach, love and inspire." John would be so very proud of your progress. I know that am!"