

APRIL 2021

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



Commissioner's Message

Prevention - A Conversation with Vice President Kamala Harris



"I've been really looking forward to this," Vice President Kamala Harris said to me as we exchanged a socially distanced forearm bump. "We've been talking about you."

I was humbled, honored and of course - *nervous* to meet the Vice President of the United States. In preparing to take part in a 45-minute conversation with her along with Governor Ned Lamont, Senators Chris Murphy and Richard Blumenthal, Secretary of Education Dr. Miguel Cardona and my close colleague Commissioner Beth Bye from the Office of Early Childhood--- *What would I wear? What should I say? What if I faint?* 😊 As a life-long social worker, my passion has been shaped by the children, families, students, coworkers and stakeholders I have partnered with for almost 30 years.... I decided to bring all of those into this experience and **JUST BE ME.**

Sitting around at table at the Boys and Girls Club in New Haven, CT, we talked about Connecticut's children, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) 2021. The Biden Administration's hope is that ARPA, in part, will lift at least ½ of America's children out of poverty. We would discuss this in the context of Connecticut's vision to *prevent* child abuse and neglect. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?510319-1/vice-president-harris-listening-session-haven-connecticut>

Children are best nurtured by supporting their **parents** and families are best uplifted by resourcing **communities.**

It is their strength and resilience which has motivated me each day; determined to empower and advocate for them. Here I was, speaking on their behalf, elevating their collective voice and telling **their** stories to the Vice President of the United States.

The conversation was simultaneously awe-inspiring and comfortable, and I caught myself mesmerized that VPOTUS was actually taking notes! Little did she know that my words were the representation of a workforce who, even in a pandemic, *show-up* for CT families every day....

What else did I tell the Vice President about Connecticut's children and families? What structural, societal and individual factors impact our vision for their future? **Read on.....**

Shift to Prevention

Nationally, child welfare agencies are shifting focus to child *well-being* while assessing safety. The State of Connecticut is finalizing our **Family First Prevention Plan** - a collaborative effort with the input from over 400 community partners



including youth and parents with lived-experience. This is Connecticut's plan, designed to enhance the lives of *all* of CT's families - not just those who come to the attention of the DCF.

Impact of Poverty

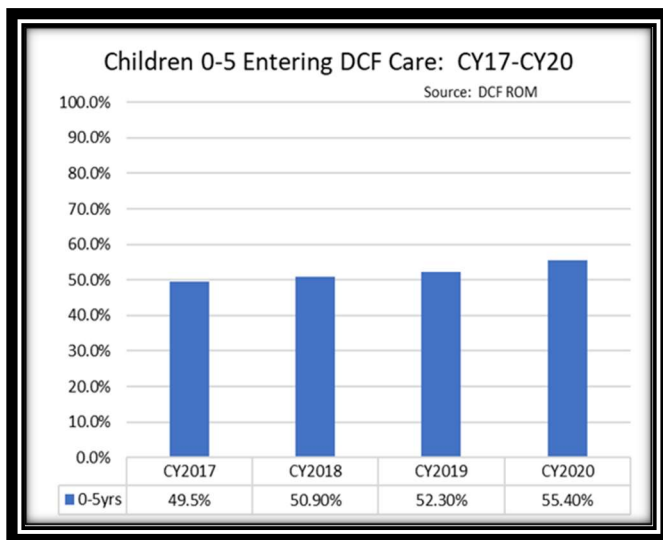
I emphasized that poverty and its insidious ripple effects, often masquerades in the child protective service reports we receive. Like every other jurisdiction in the country, Connecticut is not unique to this and we often find poverty hidden as a root cause of the crisis. COVID laid-bare for everyone to witness, what happens when limited resources are stretched so thin, they seem to evaporate.

We know that the vast majority of child protective services reports are categorized as neglect, not abuse. In 2018 and 2019, about 84% of all accepted reports involved at least one allegation of Neglect. This proportion increased in 2020 to 87.9%. During the same period of time, 25% of all accepted reports involved at least one allegation of Abuse (either Physical, Sexual or Emotional). This proportion dropped in 2020 to just over 21%.

When assessed, it is usually determined that the neglect allegations often times do not reflect child maltreatment but rather implications from poverty.

Listen to the Vice President talk about what she learned about the impact of poverty on Connecticut's children: <https://www.wtnh.com/news/news-8-exclusive/exclusive-one-on-one-with-vice-president-kamala-harris-during-her-visit-to-connecticut/> Targeting child poverty *IS* the answer to this country's pandemic recovery.

Our Youngest are the Most Vulnerable



Parental substance use, unstable housing and untreated mental illness all negatively impact parental capacity. The younger you are, the more vulnerable you are to the adverse circumstances around you.

This age group is consistently at risk in **every** jurisdiction across the country. According to the most recent Connecticut data, Children <1yr old make up a third of the total entries into foster care with **children 0-5yrs old making up 55%** of the total entries into foster care last calendar year.

I was able to share that although Connecticut is below the national average, the typical entry rate into foster care is of 1.78 per 1,000 children. **For children <1yr old, this rate is 11.47 per 1,000.**

Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes



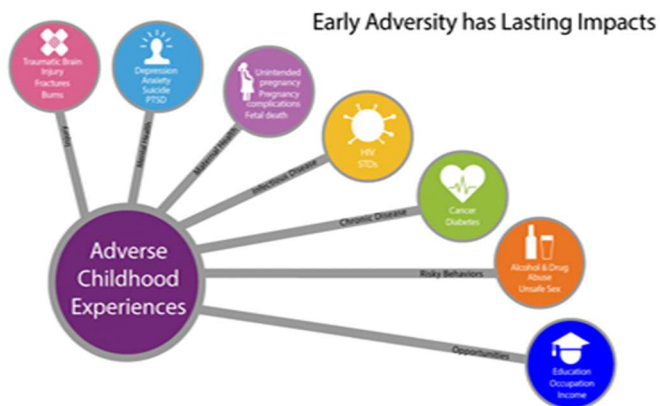
We could not talk about child well-being without talking about outcomes for *all* children. Children of color are reported more often to child protective services, their parents are substantiated more often (*with no empirical evidence that their children are victimized more*), they are more likely removed from their families of origin and are in care longer. By employing anti-racist strategies at the institutional level, **we can** change that trajectory.

In Connecticut, the entry rate into foster care is **3.50 per 1,000 for Black** children, **2.28 per 1,000 for Hispanic** and **1.21 for White** children.

I highlighted for VP Harris that her historic FIRSTs are not lost on me. As a sit in this role, too as a 'first' African American DCF's commissioner, not only am I accountable to equitable outcomes -- this is a responsibility of us **all**.

Upstream Approach of **Support** not merely Surveillance

The pandemic exacerbated stressors within families and communities resulting in prolonged toxic stress and generalized isolation of children. As families struggled to survive the uncertainty, the conditions are certainly ripe for the development of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) **ACEs are preventable.** (2nd graphic)



- Strengthen economic supports to families**
 - Strengthening household financial security
 - Family-friendly work policies
- Change social norms to support parents and positive parenting**
 - Public engagement and enhancement campaigns
 - Legislative approaches to reduce corporal punishment
- Provide quality care and education early in life**
 - Preschool enrichment with family engagement
 - Improved quality of child care through licensing and accreditation
- Enhance parenting skills to promote healthy child development**
 - Early childhood home visitation
 - Parenting skill and family relationship approaches
- Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk**
 - Enhanced primary care
 - Behavioral parent training programs
 - Treatment to lessen harms of abuse and neglect exposure
 - Treatment to prevent problem behavior and later involvement in violence

Our work as an Agency is evolving with a vision shifting from a system solely focused on child protection, to a collaborative child **wellbeing** system which places priority on prevention and early intervention.

We believe families need local support not government "gotcha".

Connecticut has reimagined its system to develop supports for families **upstream** with the goal of families being diverted from involvement with the child welfare agency while receiving supports right in their own community.

Collaboration - A Value of Governor Lamont's Administration

We were proud to underscore that it is an expected imperative that Executive branch agencies work together to support parents to raise resilient children who can thrive in CT's communities. All of our sister state agencies are necessary on the continuum to strengthen families. Collaboration and partnership are key to social-emotional learning and academic excellence.



I will remember this candidly honest conversation with Vice President Kamala Harris for the rest of my life.

*It is my hope all children across the country will benefit from the Administration's vision of taking a bold approach to address child poverty head-on. I left the roundtable beaming with pride to benefit from the leadership of Governor Ned Lamont, the supportive resources fought for by the CT Congressional delegation, collaborative efforts across the 3 branches, our provider network, community partner organizations and **THE BEST CHILD WELFARE jurisdiction in AMERICA!***



Chris Drake

Figure 1 (From Top to Bottom):

**OEC Commissioner Beth Bye;
Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro &
Congresswoman Jahana Hayes;
Attorney General William Tong**

Child Abuse Prevention month is a perfect time to reflect that

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul, than the way in which it treats its children."

N Mandela

DCF and DOAG Partner to Prevent Child Abuse and Animal Cruelty



People who hurt animals do not stop with animals and there is mounting evidence that a connection between animal cruelty and human violence exists. Referred to as "The Link," professionals in a variety of human services and animal welfare disciplines have established significant correlations between animal abuse and neglect, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, elder abuse, and other forms of interpersonal violence.

"The Link evidences that it is critically important that animal cruelty be taken seriously by law enforcement, and by society at large for the sake of the animals and humans," stated Phil Arkow, renowned in this field of work and the coordinator of the National Link Coalition.

Connecticut has taken proactive steps to address these issues. A law was implemented in 2011 requiring state, regional, and municipal animal control officers (ACOs) and Department of Children and Families (DCF) employees to report to the Department of Agriculture (DOAG) Commissioner when they reasonably suspect that an animal is being treated cruelly, harmed, or neglected. As part of this law, DOAG is mandated to forward all animal cruelty reports to DCF for assessment and possible commencement of an investigation to determine the safety of children in the home who may have been exposed to the animal cruelty.

"Animal abuse is a warning sign that can be linked to child endangerment," said Bryan P. Hurlburt, Connecticut Department of Agriculture Commissioner. "Connecticut is one of a few states in the country with a cross-reporting requirement. This is a critical communications tool between agencies to identify issues in a timelier manner to provide the necessary assistance for both animals and people."



Through DCF's initiative called Paws for Kids established in 2019, education and awareness about the LINK is being offered statewide and a comprehensive Cross Reporting training was developed for community providers, and DCF staff.

Diane Rosell, a DCF Program Supervisor who has been working on advancing this work, reports the agency, "began ramping up our investment in cross reporting work with DOAG in 2019, marked by a conference that sold out in June, showcasing the work of Phil Arkow and the Link. After the initial launch, we began developing materials for DCF staff and the community to assist in better understanding why there is a Cross Reporting law and the significance of the Link between animal and child cruelty."



A Cross Reporting survey was also completed by DCF staff in 2019 which evidenced that there was a clear interest in learning more. Of 325 staff that responded, 69% reporting they wanted more information about Cross Reporting. In early 2020, the educational materials were complete but, due to delays during COVID, the Cross Reporting training did not launch until February 2021 for DCF staff. To date, approximately 1600 DCF staff have taken the training, and with 138 satisfaction survey responses. Included in the survey results were the following: 77% of 138 staff said that they had no or limited knowledge of Cross Reporting before they took the training. Following the training, 82% stated they had a good understanding of what Cross Reporting and the LINK are and 74% felt that learning about Cross Reporting was valuable

and/or useful to their job. In addition, 93% reported that they were comfortable making a report to DOAG as a result of the training.

DCF's 2019 and 2020 annual Cross Reporting report to the state legislature, documented a noticeable increase in reports received by DCF, concerning animal cruelty. There was an increase in reported cases from 69 reports in 2019 to 120 reports in 2020. In 2020, of the animal cruelty reports received to the Careline, 25% of those cases had prior DCF history. This increase in reporting can be attributed to the collaborated efforts and partnership between DCF and DOAG.

"Maltreatment within family settings can manifest itself in many forms. These collaborative efforts between the Department of Children and Families and Department of Agriculture demonstrate a proactive approach to protecting children and animals. We should be proud of Connecticut's approach," stated Department of Children and Families Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes. "We are very appreciative of Commissioner Hurlburt and his staff for their partnership."

Social Worker, Liz Burne from the Torrington DCF office, has experienced firsthand the collaboration between DCF and the Department of Agriculture. "I received a frantic call from (Ms. Smith) a relative foster care provider," Ms. Burne explained. "Mrs. Smith had just learned that her daughter was being incarcerated directly from an afternoon court date and was not able to make a rehoming plan for her pets. She was concerned about the emotional stress this worry was placing on her granddaughter, who was already upset about her Mother's incarceration." Together, DCF, the police and the ACO connected with the landlord who gave them access to the apartment. Within a couple of hours, a plan was put in place so that the little girl could visit her pets while she was safely placed with her grandmother. "Despite the added emotional upset for all involved, one positive outcome is that this little girl witnessed adults responding to her distress," Ms. Burne said. Adding, "we validated her attachments to her pets while creating a safe plan for her beloved animals."





Ms. Rebecca Vocatura, a Social Worker from the Norwich office, was also able to explain a positive experience with ACO reporting. "The ACO's concern about a dog bite gave me an opportunity to further assess and educate the family about how to care for a puppy and remind them of the importance of teaching the children how to properly care for of an animal," Ms. Vocatura stated. She was able to help the Mom understand that the puppy was an added stressor given the family's economic situation and over-crowded living environment. and persuaded her to rehome the puppy.

A partnership between the ACO and the DCF Social Worker, working towards a common purpose, can not only improve the understanding of the link between animal cruelty and child abuse and neglect but can positively impact a family in need more effectively because of the collaboration. For example, earlier this year the Department received a report of neglect on a family who owned a farm with over 200 animals. The ACO was concerned about a hoarding issue inside the home which he believed was creating an unsafe living environment for the children. The home was cluttered with various items. DCF opened a case and was able to keep the family together by guiding the family on ways to improve the numerous safety conditions. "The family was very cooperative", explained assigned Social Worker, Kristy Borders from the Willimantic Office. "Plans were made to clear the home of the debris by renting a dumpster and clearing paths to ensure two areas of egress in the children's bedrooms. The Department also provided the family with gift cards to purchase beds frames because the children were sleeping on mattresses on the floor of the home," she added. The ACO's report to the Department made a difference in the quality of life for the family.



"We are still early in our work on Cross Reporting but as evidenced with the increase in reports to DCF in 2020, the commitment of collaboration with DOAG, and knowledge and interest by DCF staff in this work, I think we are making some progress" said Rosell.

DCF Highlighted in "Families over Facilities" Report



Connecticut is viewed as a national champion for the manner in which children reside in a family setting. Currently, over 94% of children in out of home placement live with a family - a stark contrast to the position the Agency was in 10 years ago.

In January of 2011, Connecticut had 4,900 youth in care of which 30% were in congregate care. Our system also showed 200 youth in in congregate care were less than 12 years of age. This prompted system transformation across Connecticut between the Department of Children and families and our community partners over the past decade.

With intentional emphasis on reducing the number of children overall entering care, increasing kinship care and providing in-home supports to foster parents and kin providers, the numbers markedly dropped. Embedded in the efforts were targeted recruitment strategies and child and family team meetings to ensure a holistic approach to what a child and family may need to be successful.

These efforts reflect the core values that children are best served in families and congregate care should be utilized only for those circumstances where a youth is best served in a short-term treatment facility with the goal of returning to a family setting.

In April 2021, statistics showed 3,480 youth in care with less than 6% of children in congregate care and only 14 youth who were less than 12 years of age placed into a non-family setting.

This transformation has led to our work being highlighted in a report entitled, "Families over Facilities" written by Children's Rights.

Please see the full report here: <https://www.childrensrights.org/familiesoverfacilitiesreport/>

"This position piece is consistent with the value CT DCF has held over the last decade. We are delighted to continue to join these thought-partners in elevating this important message. In Connecticut, stakeholders across the state, recognize congregate settings are temporary, treatment focused entities with the goal of strengthening families," stated Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.

"The ToolKit developed by Children's Rights and other subject matter experts, lifts up an infrastructure to reinforce the full-service array continuum that supports keeping children safe in the context of families with an emphasis on equity," she further added.

"We are honored to continue keeping the needs of children in families in the context of communities at the center of our work."

We proud of our work and for the public/private partnerships developed over the years to improve the lives of Connecticut's children.

Thank you, Children's Rights, for highlighting not just the Department of Children and Families but the efforts of our community partner networks who have collaborated with us on this journey.!

