

August 2021

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...



After 2020, this year "*Back to School*" takes on a whole new meaning.

We are also approaching the end of a moratorium in effect that kept young people from **aging out** of DCF care during the pandemic. We are working very hard to adjust our language and actions that help Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) successfully **age INTO** young adulthood.

In this edition of the *Spotlight on What's Right*, read about the specific work of the **DCF Transitioning Youth for Success Division** under the leadership of Dr Linda Dixon.

Celebrating those in care who are continuing academic work through higher education or solidifying vocational training interest, it's our responsibility to make sure they are learning the basics of *adulting* as they are finding their way.

That brings us to a *Spotlight* story about Betty, who came to the United States at age fifteen with only a 3rd grade education. Firmly planted with kinship foster parents, Betty just graduated from high school and her goal is to become a nurse. The anchor of unconditional love, support and guidance is illustrated beautifully in this relationship.

Join my '*proud-parent*' excitement in reading the list of schools our kids are set to make their mark in all across the country!

We all know, the journey through post-secondary education can also be very humbling. Only **3-7%** of youth in foster care will graduate college compared to **30%** of all Americans.



One of the '*safety nets*' of security is offered by the **Sun Scholars**. The excellent work of Sun's Executive Director, Chris Scott, to support youth who are in, or who have been in foster care, while they are attending college is highlighted in this edition. During last year's program, the 26 students achieved a 3.03 grade point average and all advanced toward graduation! What's unique about the staff of Sun Scholars? You'll have to read to find out!

Young people have so many strengths. V.I.T.A.L. to their success is a newly designed practice model specific to TAY. The approach is abbreviated V.I.T.A.L. to focus our attention on:

- ✚ Voice and Choice,
- ✚ Innovation,
- ✚ Thorough and Accountable actions,
- ✚ Authentic Youth Engagement, and
- ✚ Life Launch



Read the VITAL summary and the critical work underway to ensure that all youth have relationships, supports, and opportunities to thrive as they launch into adulthood.



Speaking of the **Transitional Youth for Success**, pictured here completing the 85-mile *RiMaConn* relay is one of the division's Program Directors Latosha Johnson who, with DCF colleagues Tomas Villanueva (Middletown), Tracey Johnson (New Britain), and Janet Feliciano (Hartford) are ready to lace up for their next race along with their supporters, Aurora Contrino and Felix Fernandez (New Britain).

Let us know what you are doing to stay active during these trying times...you never know who you'll see cheering you on at the finish line!

Best of luck to all of you and your families starting all levels of this new school year!

Commissioner Dorantes

"They saw me as someone who could achieve the highest goal"



In 2015, a soon to be fifteen-year-old adolescent found herself moving from her home in Liberia, Africa to the United States of America. "My mom had four other children; she was struggling. When my dad passed away, my mom gave me to a neighbor who brought me to this country for a better way of life," explained Betty.

She arrived in Connecticut as a teenager with a 3rd-grade level of education and could not speak English.

Unfortunately, Betty felt unsafe with this family friend and disclosed her concerns to her cooking mentor, Maggie, who notified DCF. Maggie and her husband, Frank, recognized the supports

Betty needed and agreed to become a licensed kinship resource for her—and a permanent part of her life. "Maggie and Frank will always be my family," Betty explained. "I am so happy they are in my life."

Betty shared that it was because of their unconditional love and guidance that she was able to find her way. "They saw me as someone who could achieve the highest goal."

"Her spirit is unbroken," shared her foster father, Frank. "Despite the hardships she has encountered, Betty is the one that saved herself. Maggie and I were just there to help her to do so. She's strong and smart, and I know that where she is now is just a step to something far greater."

Betty's internal strength was evident even as a young child. While in Liberia, Betty spent her time taking care of other people's children so that she could make money to pay for school fees, uniforms and school supplies. "Learning was so important to me," explained Betty. Caring for other people's children and the added expense of school created many barriers for her. She stopped attending school as a young child.

Betty flourished with the support of her newly formed family and embraced the opportunities provided to her.

"When I arrived in the US, I had no time for fun. I had a lot of schooling to catch up on. There is something new to learn every day and I wanted to learn as much as I could." Betty said. "How can I explain this? Everyone in my school here in the US had so much experience. I didn't know all that they knew, and I wanted to know more."



"Betty politely reprimanded her peers for not taking school seriously. She was seen by her teachers as a polite and enthusiastic young lady who viewed education opportunities as a privilege," her DCF Social Worker, Adrian Perez explained. "Gaps in education created challenges for Betty; however, what stuck out to all of her school support team was her hard work, diligence, and perseverance. She maintains a consistent eagerness to learn and wholeheartedly appreciates the education that has been available and provided to her."

Betty values SW Perez's guidance. "I am very close with her, she comes to visit me, she helps me with my problems and makes sure that I feel comfortable," she said.

Betty graduated this spring from Shepaug Valley High School and will achieve a certificate for a Certified Nurse's Assistant (CNA). While in high school, Betty played soccer, ran track and was a cheerleader. She plans to pursue a degree in nursing in the fall.



Betty is now a transitional aged youth (TAY) and recently moved into her own apartment, receiving additional supports from a community provider. "She has been working with a great case manager who is helping with the transition from her foster home to living as a young adult," Ms. Perez explained.

Betty, when asked about her experience with the Department, paused for a moment. "Ah, DCF, what more can I say. I have no blood family here but DCF is my family. It was such a good experience. I have learned so much and they have helped me in many ways. I will never be able to repay them for my gratitude," she stated.

"I am human just like everyone else. I am relieved to know that now. I will keep talking to myself, being positive, and let the people who care about me help me get to where I need to be."

V.I.T.A.L. Highlights: Activating Potential in Young Adults to Build Success, Justice, and Lead Change

By Linda Dixon



"Can You Hear Me Now???" A 30-year-old woman presented this as a tag line that described her experience as someone who transitioned from a child welfare system at age 18. Her delivery was loud and abrupt. No explanation. The mic immediately turned off. The woman has been silent in every session of a year-long breakthrough series on serving transitional age youth. We were separated across thousands of miles and different life experiences. I'm not quite sure, but I believe we happened to make eye contact at that moment. I was stilled and fortunately, I was with a very strong and dedicated team of colleagues. I admit I didn't expect

anything to happen in that session and I was prepared to multi-task throughout the hour. These are the exchanges that keep the momentum in adolescent work.

Since the overview of V.I.T.A.L adolescent practice approach in May, policy regarding [Adolescent and Transitional Age Supports](#) and [Practice Guide](#) materials have been disseminated and the work moved into implementation mode. The hope is to give transitional age youth (TAY) progressively more control over their planning and to make system adjustments based on feedback from those with lived experiences. The Transitional Supports and Success team has leveraged several partnerships across the agency to move the work. The aim is to capitalize on rigorous engagement vs. an emphasis on compliance. In the past few months we have assigned tasks to team members and partners based on strengths and we divide the work into three broad buckets: "paper and research," "people," and "numbers." Everything has been inspired by authentic youth engagement.

Traction has started in the following ways:

- Launched the partnership with the Academy to revamp the adolescent certification process.
- Activated a team to develop the Health and Wellness Curriculum for adolescents.
- Began compiling a civic engagement workshop for TAY.
- Piloting the Omega functional assessment process with the ACR team with Orlando Cuadrado's leadership and expertise.
- Pulling data for a second deep dive on outcomes of TAY.
- Multidisciplinary team members have sketched out a framework of deliverables to ensure all LGBTQIA+ youth and families involved with DCF are provided a safe, inclusive, affirming, and discrimination-free environment. This group will create a 'toolkit' to support practice work with chapters for child welfare (e.g., intake, investigations, etc.), family support, housing, education, engagement, legal rights/resources, launch to adulthood, race, ethnicity and LGBTQIA+ intersectionality, and health and well-being.
- Wrote and posted a new RFP for an enhanced mentoring service for LGBTQIA+ youth. This will triple the budget, increase the catchment area to cover the entire state, and structure mentoring.
- Started a consortium of paid young adults to work in tandem with providers serving TAY to develop a manual that embeds V.I.T.A.L values and principles into the work.
- Developed a partnership with D.E.E.P. to pay young adults in environmental conservation service at the Wilderness School this summer.
- Gathered philanthropic donations for TAY. For example, Jordan's Furniture donated 5 \$1,000 vouchers for furniture for TAY. They hope to expand this donation in the future.
- Writing an MOU with DMV that streamlines the process for youth to obtain non-driver's identification and driver's licenses. This will include adding a mobile serve that visits area offices, adding a pre-check of documents, creating a designated day for youth in DCF care to obtain a license, and streamlining an interagency exchange of funds, etc.)
- Met with the Banking Commission and compiled a list of banks that offer financial literacy programs through schools.
- Recruited private providers to offer life skill courses at DOC facilities serving young adults.



One challenge has been finding young adults to commit as paid role models and ambassadors. We hope to build on that in the future as this is critically important.

There is no shortage of staff ready to support TAY. Our work pivots based on feedback and creative ideas from regional partners including Lisa Mas and Christine Stebbins, our teammates in a national Breakthrough Series Collaborative on TAY.

Even though we have accomplished quite a bit in just a few months, some of the impact hasn't happened quickly enough for our taste. Outcomes for TAY in child welfare are stubborn. Recently, I've found

comfort in a phrase I heard a lot growing up: "Proceed as the way opens." I ignored this years ago, but I now understand the value in waiting for guidance to come and avoiding hasty action. Using patient discernment requires a demanding level of discipline. Guidance can come in a time of seeking or entirely unexpectedly. The way eventually will open. It always does.

Please feel free to contact myself or Latosha Johnson, Program Director if you would like to help lift and sustain the V.I.T.A.L. culture.

Sun Scholars: "It's a family with shared experiences"



Sometimes who provides a service is just as important as the service itself.

Chris Scott, the founder and executive director of Sun Scholars, a nonprofit agency located in West Hartford, knows how challenging navigating higher education can be for young people who were in or are in foster care.

Chris, a 25-year-old who was in foster care as a boy and was adopted at age 14, said the trauma from being removed from home makes college much more complicated for these youth.

"We know that only three to seven percent of foster youth will graduate college compared to 30 percent of all Americans," he said.

So, it is encouraging—and impressive—that the 26 students in the Sun Scholars program during the Spring 2021 semester averaged a 3.03 GPA and all advanced toward graduation. Remarkably, no one dropped out. "That's exceeding expectations," he said.

He said the non-profit is a "relationship-building agency" whose foundation is the lived experience of its staff.

"Our biggest selling point is that all our staff grew up in the system," Chris said. "The students know we understand what they are going through. They know they can trust us."

Sun Scholars has five staff, including Chris, all of whom were in foster care and all of whom attended college with financial assistance from the Department of Children and Families' post-secondary program. Each year, hundreds of youth in foster care and youth who were adopted attend post-secondary education through this program, which funds all college expenses that are not covered by grants or scholarships up to the cost of attending the Connecticut state college system.



Sun Scholars provides academic tutoring and coaching, career coaching, advocacy and life skills. The program helps students find internships and other professional development opportunities.

Upon graduation, Sun Scholars helps students find a job. "We have an anything it takes approach," he said. "Do they have a job? Do they have a driver's license? Do they have stable housing and access to food? Can they manage their money, and are they in healthy relationships?"

**Your path is your
character defining itself
more and more every
day, like a photograph
coming into focus.**

Jodie Foster

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Those kinds of real-life, practical issues have a great impact on whether a student can succeed in college, he said. "As we build an authentic relationship with them, we look at these things, and we'll get you the help you need," he added. "We go beyond just sitting down with them to study. It's making sure the barriers to education are removed."

Students in the program have gone on to law school, careers in information technology and the criminal justice system, and serve in AmeriCorps, he said. Some have gone on to graduate school, and one is interning at the Department and hopes to be hired as an employee later this summer, Chris said.

There are currently 40 students in the program now after additional students joined in late June. Students in the program are attending Central Connecticut State University (where Chris graduated), University of New Haven, UCONN, Mercy College in Massachusetts, and several Connecticut community colleges. Chris said other students not formally in the program are helped when they reach out. "We have an open-door policy to work with students outside the cohort," he said.

Sun Scholars is funded through the Department and has an annual budget of \$250,000.

One of the Sun Scholars is Alan Abutin, who expects to graduate after the Fall 2021 semester. The 22-year-old entered foster care at age three and was adopted at age five. The parents who adopted him "are amazing people" and he remains very close with them, he said. But that good turn of events did not mean college wasn't a struggle for Alan.

"My first semester, I got very distracted, and a lot of the distractions are due to the trauma I experienced from being placed into foster care," he said, adding that he had trouble with his emotions and relationships. "I was figuring out who I am."

He said the distractions led to doubts about his ability to stay in college. Then as a sophomore, he connected with Sun Scholars, and Chris personally worked with Alan on time management, studying, and other academic skills.



But it was the mentorship that really stood out for Alan. "It was different to see someone who had been in foster care as successful as Chris," Alan said. "It's more than a school group. It's a family with shared experiences. We can guide each other."

Providing the encouragement and modeling success was essential for Alan.

"Chris helped me overcome obstacles, insecurities and stress," Alan said. "Having people to encourage you and be there for you made a tremendous difference."

Alan has achieved a great deal as a result. He earned a 3.0 GPA in the Spring and expects to graduate with a cumulative GPA over that in the Fall semester. He is currently serving as an intern in the office of United States Senator Richard Blumenthal and will serve as an intern for Sun Scholars this Fall.

"I'll do for the students what Sun Scholars did for me," he said. "I'll have their back the way Sun did for me."

DCF Youth Attending Colleges and Programs Across the Country!



Wendy Jackson, Maria Pastorelli and Lisa Driscoll are "proud parents" again this Fall. Why? As Post-Secondary Educational Consultants, they have supported countless youth in DCF care as they enroll in continuing education.

The pursuit of an education can be enriching, and "world expanding." An education program that is "the right fit" can lead to a lifetime of rewarding and fulfilling work that allows you to be the best version of yourself.

For the academic year 2021-2022, transitional aged youth (TAY) will be attending 4-year colleges and universities across the country - as far away as Utah and Florida! Some are staying local and are enrolled in one of 14 community colleges. Our youth will also take part in vocational, technical and job training programs leading to careers as electricians, cosmetologists, phlebotomists, welders and many other trades.

Congratulations to the Regional Office staff who have supported their older youth to reach this point in their lives!

Read on for the specific programs where youth will be attending.

4 Year Colleges and Universities

UCONN - all campuses	Goodwin University
CCSU	Paier College
WSCU	SCADD Atlanta
CCSU	Bridgewater State University
SCSU	New England Institute of Technology
ECSU	AMDA College and Conservatory of Performing Arts
Colorado State University	Fisher College
Temple University	Oakwood University
Curry College	Bennett College
Valencia College	Mitchell College
California State University	Albertus Magnus College
Purchase College - NY	Elizabeth Park College
Kekeua College - NY	Mercy College
Simmons University	Grand Canyon University
Johnson C Smith University	SUNY Broome
Norfolk State University	Florida Institute of Technology
UMASS- Amherst, Boston	Howard University
Elizabeth City State University	Brigham Young University
Florida Atlantic University	Nova Southeastern University
University of Hartford	IONA College
St. John's University	Stony Brook University
New Hampshire College MA	Becker College
Virginia Tech	Yale University
University of New Haven	Fordham University

2 Year and Community Colleges

Manchester Community College	Capitol Community College
Naugatuck Valley Community College	Three Rivers Community College
Middlesex Community College	Housatonic Community College
Asnuntuck Community College	Norwalk Community College
Gateway Community College	Tunxis Community College
Northwestern Community College	Quinebaug Valley Community College
Herkimer County Community College	American Institute

Vocational Technical and Job Training Programs

Training Direct	Triangle Tech Welding Academy, PA
Porter and Chester	Job Corps
Lincoln Technical Institute	Academy for Medical Training, Inc.
CTECS	International Institute of Cosmetology
Paul Mitchell Cosmetology School	Harborview School of Phlebotomy
Bravado Academy of Barbering	Northeast Medical Institute