

FEBRUARY 2021

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



Black History Month



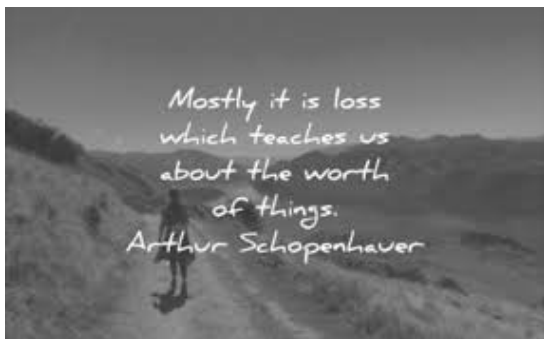
A Message from Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes

Grown out of historian Carter G Woodson's "Negro History Week," February has been designated as "Black History Month" since 1976. The identified theme for 2021 is "***The Black Family: Representation, Identity and Diversity.***"

DCF has a storied history in our evolution. I remain proud of the continued efforts to understand each other in the context of our work. At the same time, DCF has consciously committed to addressing disproportionate outcomes and eliminating disparity experienced by the children, families and communities we serve. By developing leadership strategies that hold us all accountable, we will become the racially just agency that matches our espoused values of equity. Stay tuned for the next legislative report required by **PA 18-111** which summarizes the Department's Racial Justice work.

For as much as we have celebrated our collective diversity, I am humbled as this week, our country has surpassed over 500,000 people who have died from COVID-19. This number hugely reflective of disparate impact of this deadly virus on communities of color. Our flags fly at half-staff in their honor.

It has been almost one year since the first individual in Connecticut tested positive for COVID-19. DCF has remained unwavering in providing services to our children and families. I remain in awe of the Department's entire workforce who have balanced the health and safety of their own families; some navigating distance learning with their children while others are caring differently for elderly relatives. This, all while conducting the many functions of our work. Tragedy has not escaped us. Many members of our workforce have lost family members and friends. Four of our foster parents have died from COVID-19.



This month's *Spotlight on What's Right* highlights three remarkable Department leaders and their efforts to keep us Safe & Sound. The work of Dr. Nicole Taylor, Attorney Erin Ryan and Program Director Yadira Ijeh has simply been nothing short of remarkable. From their contact tracing exercises to clarifying Centers for Disease Control's guidance to sharing public health metrics and sector rules, this trio has kept DCF informed. While working with other state agencies, developing messages, videos and supporting our staff-- we have been able to remain focused and strong.

Please join me in appreciation of this trio of amazing women leaders. DCF continues to conduct this mission critical work while maintaining the health and safety of our staff as well as the attention to the children and families we serve.

Read their stories and learn about their can-do attitudes that has held up the Department during this unprecedented time in our history. ***"For there is always LIGHT, If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we are brave enough to BE IT!" a gorman***



Dr. Taylor Leads Battle But Takes No Steps Alone

Nicole Taylor, M.D., arrived at the Department of Children and Families (DCF) as its new Director of Pediatrics in March 2019 welcomed by a Commissioner who had only been on the job a mere 3 months. Commissioner Dorantes committed to an open-door policy for whatever the new "top doc" needed to get acclimated to DCF. Little did the new Agency head know, she would need Dr. Taylor infinitely more in the year that followed.

In her first 10 months with the Department, confidence in Dr. Taylor's attention to detail, healthcare acumen and leadership abilities was solidified. While establishing that trust, Dr. Taylor had no way of knowing what would confront her and the Agency when COVID-19 hit the public consciousness in January 2020.



Dr. Taylor found herself leading the effort to keep children and families as safe as possible during a worldwide pandemic that as of this writing, has killed over a half a million Americans.....and counting.

But rather than feel overwhelmed, Dr. Taylor said she felt supported in a way that enabled her and the Department to respond to the crisis while doing the work of strengthening families in challenging circumstances.

"I started the first memo to staff about COVID in January 2020, and since that time it has felt like a race and also a rollercoaster," she said, referring to the quickly changing information about the disease and how to best contain it.

She said the early information from the federal government underplayed the deadly nature of the pandemic. "We quickly learned how impactful it would be," she said.



Oddly enough, COVID-19 thrust Dr. Taylor into the realm of public health that motivated her to join the Department after serving individual patients during most of her career.

Most of her experience prior to 2019 was as a primary care physician specializing in pediatrics serving one patient at a time.

"I've always wanted to get into public health," said Dr. Taylor who graduated from UCONN medical school. She defined public health as "an approach to influence the population instead of one person."

"You get so busy as a primary care physician focusing on the individual, but you need them both - individual and public health - because what happens to the overall population can have dramatic effects on individual patients," she said. "It's hard to be innovative and come up with policies that will affect the broader population when you're seeing 20 patients a day."

Indeed, when Dr. Taylor came to the Department motivated in large measure to conduct macro or population-level public health, she got a crash course in it.

In order to limit the virus' spread, health officials made contact tracing - the process of identifying who might be exposed to someone else with the virus - a key strategy.

"Quickly it became obvious that to mitigate the exposure, we had to be very systematic," said Dr. Taylor. "A lot of my energy went toward learning about contact tracing and applying those principles when a staff person tests positive. Every touchpoint that one person has who is (COVID) positive can affect multiple other individuals."



There were several "touchpoints" of risk that became her focus:

- the risk to client families and children and to social work staff from in-person contact in the families' homes;
- the risks for children in foster care and for the families that cared for them;
- the risks to court and private agency personnel; and
- the potential to transmit the disease between DCF staff themselves who share offices, workspace and vehicles.

Dr. Taylor was instrumental in helping to:

- inventory and determine PPE stockpile needs of the entire agency including burn rate projections;
- coordinate initial point prevalence testing with the secured vendor;
- offer additional support to DCF facilities and medical teams on their very successful infection control protocol adherence; and
- assist the DCF Executive Team in answering questions for contracted providers who secure placements for children in their custody

By mid-February 2021, more than 800 people: staff, children in care, and their caretakers - would test positive. Tragically, four of the caretakers have died from the disease.



Dr. Taylor also developed surveillance protocol to ensure children in the Department's care were followed closely following a COVID-19 positive diagnosis-watching for any indication of the Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C) as well as instructions to foster parents to detect and report potential symptoms.

Dr. Taylor said that over time the Department has improved how it conducts the contact tracing. "We're getting significantly better at it," she said, adding that it used to take her hours to conduct the contact tracing herself. "We are quicker in our response, as well as more consistent and systematic. After doing this the 100th time, you get a great rhythm."

DCF Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes said, "Dr. Taylor is our resident subject matter expert - She has helped us make some of the most critical decisions in my career. The steady confidence she has instilled has allowed the Department to weather this tumultuous (IM)perfect storm. I cannot imagine enduring this without her."

"Dr. Taylor has been a huge factor in enabling the Department to conduct our core function of safely keeping families intact and strengthening their capacity to care for their children. Going through a pandemic, I can't think of a better person to do it with than Dr. Taylor," stated Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams.

Dr. Taylor isn't the least fazed by the challenge. "Honestly, I never felt like I had time to panic," she said, referring to the 24 hour, seven-days a week demands placed on her, Commissioner Dorantes and her executive team. "I wasn't going to allow myself or the Department to be even one step behind the changing information. There was so much to do, there wasn't time to worry about it."



Dr. Taylor cited the culture of support at the Department for enabling her to do the job as well as possible. "I don't feel like it is a burden," she said. "I never felt like I was carrying the burden. Within the agency, there was true partnership and consistency at all levels."

Dr. Taylor has also co-chaired one of the DCF COVID recovery subcommittees which were stood up to advise the Executive Team on specific considerations and workplace implications.

In addition to crediting Commissioner Dorantes and her Executive Team with creating a team environment, Dr. Taylor also highlighted the work of the Department's Human Resources and Engineering Divisions with collaboration that made the effort possible. "If there was any burden, it didn't feel like I had to carry I alone," she said of the partnerships within the Department.

She also praised the Department of Public Health, the Center for Disease Control, the court system, and private service providers for offering the expertise and collaboration necessary for staff and clients to mitigate risks.

Dr. Taylor has been the DCF GPS - Our Coronavirus Navigation System!

"I don't feel overwhelmed, I feel very supported," she said. "I don't feel like I take any steps alone at DCF."

Erin Ryan - Difference People and Different Experiences Lead to Cohesion

Human Resources (HR) - employee issues, consulting with managers about interpreting union contract language, arbitration and labor negotiations - this is work that an HR manager expects to focus on.

Contact tracing in a world-wide pandemic? Not so much.

But Erin Ryan, the Department of Children and Families' assistant Human Resources Director, is now firmly entrenched in that work due to the COVID-19 crisis.

"All that regular HR work took a back seat" when the Department had its first positive COVID test of a staff member in March," said Ms. Ryan, who also is a licensed attorney.



Attorney Erin Ryan, Dr. Nicole Taylor, the Department's Director of Pediatrics, and Yari Ijeh, a Program Director, form the Department's contact tracing team. (See separate articles about Dr. Taylor and Ms. Ijeh in this Spotlight edition.) When the pandemic first hit the state and the Department, Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and her Executive Team would meet each time a staff person, youth in DCF custody and or foster parent tested positive to discuss next steps related to protecting other staff who may have been exposed, including both person-to-person exposure and the potential for exposure from shared use of office space, equipment and state cars.

But as the number of positive staff members mounted, it became apparent that an alternative approach was needed, and the task was given to the 3-person team of Dr. Taylor, Attorney Ryan and Director Ijeh. Ms. Ryan and Ms. Ijeh report to Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly, who said that Ms. Ryan has made a vitally important contribution to the effort.

"Erin's deep knowledge of the intricacies of labor relations and strong relationships with union leadership is so valuable because it helps to guide the decision-making process in a way that respects and supports all staff," said Deputy Commissioner Hill-Lilly.

"In the midst of a state agency centralization of HR functions, a pandemic hit! From Day 1, Erin answered questions, created consistency and was a solid bridge of information to and from DCF's leadership team. She and her team have become expert contact tracers. Moreover, this has guided successful notifications and transmission mitigation strategies. Erin shepherds a firm framework of Department accountability of public service. We are fortunate to have her committed leadership," stated Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.



Ms. Ryan said the experience of working with Dr. Taylor and Ms. Ijeh on the pandemic has been as rewarding as it has been unexpected. "It's been great," she said. "We are very different people with different experiences, yet it is a cohesive team and we all have a great deal of respect for each other."



to guide our path.

She said the team is always available for each other. "I can always pick up the phone and know they will answer," she said of Ms. Ijeh and Dr. Taylor. The burden of long hours and working weekends is not quite as difficult due to the team culture. "Being part of a team really helps to get you through," Ms. Ryan said.

Frank Gregory, Superintendent of the DCF Solnit South nicknamed this fantastic triad a lighthouse in this fog --- They have provided the direction the Department needed

Ms. Ryan's new immersion into public health has piqued her interest. "I have no background in public health, so I've been learning on the job," said Ms. Ryan, who worked for a utility in Human Resources and labor relations for 10 years before coming to DCF three years ago. "It's been very interesting. I'm finding it fascinating, although I would rather be doing it in circumstances other than a pandemic."

Yari Ijeh And The Team Approach to Success

Yadira Ijeh is a Program Director with the Department of Children and Families reporting to Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly, who is responsible for administration of this large social service agency employing about 3,200 staff.

So, when the Department got thrust into the COVID-19 pandemic along with everything else in our state, country and world, it was necessary that Commissioner Dorantes would need to quickly identify Department leaders who were organized, quick learners and work with proficient accuracy. One such leader would be tapped to play a critical role in pulling all the Department's COVID response together.



"We see the impact of Yari's work each day with her organizational skills, assessment of data and focus during our meetings. She has been an integral part in mitigating virus transmission. She has become an arm-chair detective, piecing together clues that unlock the Department's coronavirus narrative. Director Ijeh has worked around the clock to ensure Department leaders have the information necessary to respond to themes and trends as a result of the contact tracing protocol established. Yari also has worked with our facility teams to coordinate testing and vaccination vendors. DCF would not have been able to have such a relatively light transmission footprint without Yari's leadership," stated Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.

"Yari has been involved with so many important special projects at the Department over the years," Deputy Commissioner Hill-Lilly said. "She has proven over and over again that everything she does is done competently, efficiently and with the ultimate goal of serving our families better and achieving better outcomes for children."

Yari is part of a three-member contact tracing team at the Department along with Director of Pediatrics Nicole Taylor, M.D., and Human Resources Assistant Director Attorney Erin Ryan. (See separate profiles in this **Spotlight**.) Each member of the team brings their own expertise to the process. Dr. Taylor brings the medical expertise necessary to determine who has been exposed to a staff person who tested positive for COVID-19. According to the Center for Disease Control, a close contact is anyone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a total of 15 minutes or more. An infected person can spread COVID-19 starting from 48 hours (or 2 days) before the person has any symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19. The use of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is also used to determine whether an individual is identified as a close contact. Ms. Ryan brings her expertise and experience in labor relations and her oversight of the labor specialists who obtain the information from staff used in the contact tracing process.

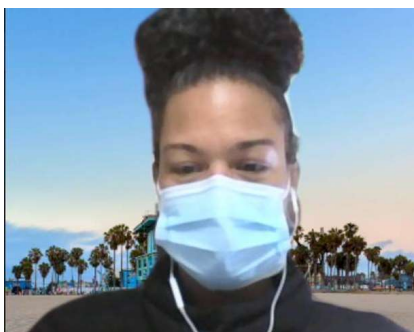


Yari said the team approach is vital to the success of the contact tracing operation. "This is not work I could have done alone," she said. "Each of us brings a different type of expertise."

Yari facilitates the meetings in which the information about who was potentially exposed to the positive staff member is gathered, assessed, and then summarized for Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and her executive team. It is at that meeting when the team determines who had "close contacts" with the positive staff person. Then the managers and administrators overseeing those potentially exposed staff are notified and the tracing commences from there by the labor specialists supervised by Ms. Ryan.

Yari was thrust into the role in October after just coming back from a maternity leave.

"I came home from the hospital on Tuesday and on Thursday the state shut down," said Yari who took the leave beginning in March. "When I came back from maternity leave in October, I've been doing COVID work ever since." The Department is grateful for her capacity and willingness to take on this tremendous endeavor.



Like everyone else, Yari did not anticipate this kind of work consuming her days. "It's unfortunate, but I have learned so much," she said. "When I look back on my career, I'll say 'I can't believe I could do that.'"

In addition to the contact tracing, Yari is also overseeing the process for determining which staff would be prioritized for the vaccine and then facilitating the actual administration of the vaccine. She worked closely with the Comptroller's Office and Griffin Hospital to set up mobile vaccine clinics at the Department's two Albert J.

Solnit Children Centers located in Middletown and East Windsor. She said over 200 staff at the facilities have been vaccinated since January.

Yari said the experience has been humbling due to how important it is for the Department to keep staff safe so that they can in turn do their jobs of strengthening families and keeping children safe.

"No one has done this before," she said of responding to a global pandemic. "No one really has experience with it, and that the agency leadership gave this role to me is humbling."

She said the experience has also been empowering. "This has taught me a lot about myself. Oh, yea, I can do that," she remembers thinking. "I organized this process in a way that allows us to move more quickly. As a result, we can effectively and efficiently conduct these meetings so we can move forward."

"It is a well-oiled machine with the right people at the table," she said.

Yari said the team works without boundaries - working nights and weekends as needed."

"We are connected in a way that I've not seen before," she said. "It's time sensitive, important work, and we don't take a rest because COVID doesn't take a rest."
