

JANUARY 2021

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



A message from Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes: **Embracing 2021**

In Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fierce or intelligent than the Masai. Perhaps it is surprising to know that they had a traditional greeting passed among their members: "Kasserian Ingera," one warrior would say to another. It means, "And how are the children?"

"All the children are well," was the traditional answer given. Interpreted to mean the priorities of protecting the young are in place and despite the struggles around them, the members ensured the well-being of the youngest and most vulnerable. Peace and safety prevail. (UUA,1996)

Communities experienced 2020 with great turmoil, loss, and uncertainty. **"And how are the children?"** If our recent past has taught us anything, it is that with relationships, collaboration and teamwork - children are best supported by families.

Families are best supported by communities.

None of us are in this alone.

Let us embrace 2021 with resiliency.

The evolution of our practice shifts will come into focus as we get stronger right along with our community partners.

Here is a glimpse into the year ahead...

Safe and Sound

We will continue to build a culture of safety in which our values, attitudes and behaviors support psychological and physical safety for staff. This extends how we treat the families and children we serve. Put into action, this culture allows us to be engaged, supportive, accountable and open to learning. It empowers us to competently provide services that help. Positive outcomes will be realized.

We will:

- *regulate* our emotions;
- *relate* to others authentically;
- *rise* to challenges in bold and brave ways;
- *reason* with sound decisions; and



KASSERIAN INGERA

OUR WORK AT DCF IS GROUNDED IN OUR SAFE AND SOUND CULTURE

- Regulate**
We are mindful of our physical and psychological well-being and the well-being of others as the foundation for our just and safe work environment.
- Relate**
We build and sustain relationships and cooperate with respect, trust, and caring.
- Rise**
We embrace and deal with our losses. We understand our passions and the above challenges and choose to rise to promote equity and bring our best to our work.
- Reason**
We make sound decisions based on consultation, research, and knowledge.
- Respond**
We plan forward and reflect back with compassion, confidence, and competence by utilizing a systems approach to problem solving.

- *respond* with intentional respect.



Racial Justice

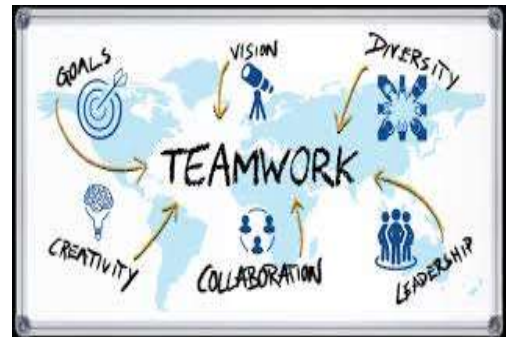
Pandemic recovery work is even more critical as we strive to become a racially just organization. Each and every action taken while performing our mission must be through a racially just lens. This is not new. It is imperative.

DCF's senior leaders have been working to refine over 25 different **change initiatives**. This focus is targeted to impact the disproportionate and disparate outcomes we currently see across many aspects of our work. We must push ourselves and remain committed to fairness for all.

Family First

Collaboration and teamwork to develop CT's **Family First Prevention Plan** has been outstanding. Families in need of support deserve a system designed with their best interests in mind, easily accessible and leading to a connection with services located in their communities. Quality Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) will focus on limiting the length of stay in residential settings, consistent with our sustained low percentage of children in congregate care.

With over 250+ community partners actively participating in workgroups, we are close to developing the framework for a comprehensive prevention plan which will impact all children the State of Connecticut for decades to come.



Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)



For children who cannot remain safely at home, we must ensure they reside in a family. **QPI** is an approach adopted Connecticut and launched on the belief that children are able to heal as they grow up to be adults, if they experience strong and positive relationships. Excellent parenting around children includes working relationships between birth parents, relative caregivers, foster families and others throughout a child's system. The QPI kick-off sessions introduced over 1,100 participants to the way we will do business going forward with children at the center of our intentions!

Watch also for the development of our **Kinship Practice Model** to sustain our preference for children growing up in families with someone they know.

Safety Practice Model

Safety of children remains our #1 priority.

How is "**safety**" defined, components of safety assessments and tools used by all child serving systems must be in concert with each other. The Department is engaged in the development of a comprehensive **Safety Practice Model** which will serve to create a through-line of consistency between DCF and external stakeholders. As we jointly protect children, we will serve families in a manner understood more clearly by all in the continuum.



You will hear more about CT being one of 22 jurisdictions across the country participating in The **National Partnership for Child Safety**. Our very own DC Jodi Hill-Lilly is a co-leader of this innovative project!

ChildStat



ChildStat is a real-time management accountability and quality improvement process using a combination of data analysis and case discussions to improve practice. During **ChildStat** reviews attended by agency leaders, data is shared, performance is measured, and practice is compared across geographic areas. Actual case themes will also be reviewed. These discussions are intended to effectuate both a shared sense of accountability and lead to problem solving the most important issues affecting child and family outcomes.

Adolescent Practice Model

Did you know that CT has just been selected to participate in a **BreakThru Series** to modernize our Adolescent services??? It is **V.I.T.A.L.** that we evolve to meet the changing needs for today's, older youth in care. Lifeskills that prepare for success, securing positive adult connections and enhancing relationships with adult-serving systems through seamless transitions are just a few components you will see attention to. Financial literacy, elevating the youth voice in policy development and creating more opportunities for alumni in foster care to support the next generation of young people to thrive will also take our work with adolescents to new heights!



This time next year ... when **the question** is asked,
... the only acceptable answer will be "**All the children are well**"



Introducing the Best of 2020.....

We are proud of our accomplishments during 2020 across Divisions of our Department. What are our successes? How did we manage the daily operations? What did we do to ensure clear communication across the system as key components of our work were completed? With whom did we consult and interact?

Please read here for some of our highlights....

- Consulted with the Governor's Office, other state agencies, child welfare jurisdictions across the country and community partners to share and collaborate on best practices in our work.
- Provided written guidance and video recorded messages weekly to all staff, including community partners, clarifying new pandemic procedures.
- Deployed over 2,600 Tablets, including approximately 600 in one week alone, leading to over 75% of staff teleworking.
- Engaged with children and families using innovative and creative methods via remote technology such as Face Time and Microsoft Teams.
- Established triage procedures, including proper PPE use, when in-person response was required due to a circumstance that could not be resolved remotely.
- Continued to monitor services to vulnerable populations such as children with specialized needs and children and families in disproportionately impacted communities.
- Issued a moratorium on older youth being discharged from care during the pandemic.



- Established the "When it Builds Up, Talk it Out" campaign which included a phone line staffed by community providers that parents could call when in need of support.
- Conducted continuous contact tracing processes guided by DCF Medical Director of all COVID-19 positive diagnosis for caregivers, youth and DCF staff.



- Presented twice at the Governor's Council on Women and Girls Health and Safety Subcommittee, co-chaired by Commissioner Dorantes, regarding resources available to support Connecticut children and families including access during the pandemic.
- Discussed during the Alcohol and Drug Policy Council (ADPC), co-chaired by Commissioner Dorantes, services and supports available across Connecticut during the pandemic.
- Developed and regularly updated a [COVID-19 website](#) at which has resulted in over 24,000 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.
- Produced a daily DCF NEWS with information regarding supports available for children, families and staff as well as highlighting positive efforts of the workforce.
- Published a "Spotlight on What's Right" monthly newsletter highlighting the collaborative work of the Department and community partners leading to successful outcomes for families.
- Encouraged staff to utilize internal supports, including the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), ensuring a healthy work/life balance.
- Established a foster parent contact database so communications could be quickly and consistently delivered and confirmed backup childcare plans with each caregiver during the pandemic.
- Engaged in regular pandemic conference calls with key legislators, Juvenile Court Administration, Attorney General's Office, Public Defenders Office and Office of the Child Advocate to provide Department updates and resolve issues brought to their attention.
- Consistently met with leadership from 8 different state employee labor unions to answer questions and clarify operational procedures for staff throughout the department.



- Conducted weekly videoconferencing with the Children's League of Connecticut (CLOC)
- Met monthly on a virtual basis with the Non-Profit Alliance to ensure consistency of information and problem solving.
- Established the Educational Professionals Investigation Unit (EPIU) leading to consistency and standardization in our investigations practice.
- Outreached occurred daily from our Licensing Division to private providers caring for our children in congregate care facilities and program leading to trouble-shooting concerns with maintaining virtual connections to the families they serve.



- Conducted two virtual town halls for contracted and credentialed providers. Followed 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 and supplemented their stockpile when necessary.
- Commenced the Voluntary Care Management Program.
- Intensive Family Care and Support (IFCS) began accepting referrals.
- Conducted two webinars with the State Department of Education (SDE) and established guidelines for assessing families remotely and criteria for educational neglect in a remote environment.





- Collaborated with the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to establish an escalation protocol leading to stronger working relationships.
- Conducted virtual listening tours with the DCF Area Offices and Facilities.
- Presented the Department's COVID-19 planning on a Casey Peer to Peer national call with over 200 representatives from jurisdictions across the country.
- Actively participated in the National Governor's Association (NGA) Children and Family Learning Cohort leading to sharing our best-case practices with other states across the country including a joint presentation by the Commissioners of the Department of Children and Families and State Department of Education.
- Established an anti-racist framework for the Department leading to the Department becoming a racially just organization.
- Presented our racial justice strategies at the national Child Welfare League of America's 100th Anniversary conference.
- Held a "Virtual Adoption Day" where over 25 children achieved formal permanency.
- Implemented the five9 Careline phone system which allows greater responsiveness to the public and quality assurance.
- Continued work towards the development of a Family First Prevention Services Plan (FFPSA) with the input of over 250 community partners.
- Launched the implementation of the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) for foster care collaboration.
- Began Rapid Permanency Reviews hosted by Casey Family Programs.
- Achieve pre-certification of Juan F. Consent Decree outcomes measures pertaining to caseload sizes and quality of investigations.
- Received approval of the Department's Affirmative Action Plan.
- The Academy for Workforce Development delivered a catalog of virtual curricula including a Leadership Academy for Middle Managers and Mentoring program.



"She Breathed Life Back Into Our Family"



"My kids love her, and we were really sad when she had to close the case. We formed a bond with her, and she became a part of our family. She saved our family."

These powerful words were spoken by a mother who was supported by the Department of Children and Families after suffering years of domestic violence inflicted upon her and witnessed by her children. She is speaking about social worker Melissa Hofmann with whom she shared a special relationship.

Strengthening families by helping parents to help themselves is the best way to serve families. That's the guiding philosophy of Ms. Hofmann who has been with the Norwich Office for a little over a year. Community services are available, and families will need to know how to access them on their own once the Department closes a case, she said.

While Ms. Hofmann arrived at DCF with 20 years of experience working for private non-profit service agencies, including Community Health Resources and Community Solutions Inc. With that background, she knows from real life that connecting families to community providers holds the key to long-term success.

"Once we close the case, it's crucial they can do this on their own," said Ms. Hofmann. "With direction and guidance, families can learn how to get support from the community. That's going to make them more capable and stronger after we are no longer involved."



She said parents truly appreciate the approach because it gives them connections to resources that make a real difference in their day-to-day lives by enhancing their ability to care for their children.

One such mother quoted above, said Ms. Hofmann helped her and her children find a new home and helped the entire family get the therapy to recover from the trauma of the violence in the home.



The family's old home was dilapidated and contained "a lot of bad memories" stemming from the violence, the mother said. Two private service providers -- Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Ct and United Community and Family Services -- delivered counseling for the mother and children.

"She breathed life back into our family," said the mother, who requested anonymity to protect her family. "She saved us."

Ms. Hofmann said that the mother showed she could head the family by taking responsibility for re-establishing the family's functioning. "She was a go-getter," Ms. Hofmann said. "She would make the phone calls to the service providers and did a great job advocating for herself and her needs and those of her children."

Thea Korytkowski, who is Ms. Hofmann's supervisor, said the social worker is particularly skilled at connecting families to the right community services. "She has a way of connecting the dots and getting the services families need," said Ms. Korytkowski, who has worked for the Department for more than 11 years. "Her strength is case management - to really know what services will work for which families and which won't."



Reflecting the approach of supporting families in navigating community supports themselves, mother secured the new housing through a local public housing authority with Ms. Hofmann "guiding mom and being a support to mom," said Ms. Korytkowski. "This is hard work and Melissa is making a difference. Melissa is awesome, and I am very lucky to have her."

Ms. Hofmann said she uses a light touch with families. "I gave mom the direction, and if families hit a barrier I will help," said Ms. Hofmann. "But the key is that the family be able to function on their own, and that means knowing where and how to access services in the community when we close the case."

In addition to strengthening mother's ability to support the family on her own, Ms. Hofmann also built a special bond with the family, said the mother. Even after closing the case in November, Ms. Hofmann brought Christmas gifts to the family's home that mother would give to her children.

National Human Trafficking Awareness Month

By Tammy Sneed

As many know, January is National Human Trafficking Awareness Month. A time to increase awareness across the globe that modern day slavery exists worldwide, in the United States, and right here in our beautiful but small state.

In Connecticut, we are seeing children targeted right in their own homes. Children who never had access to the internet, technology, social media, APPS, and online platforms have these exciting tools to assist in learning during the pandemic, maintaining social connection and child entertainment.

At the same time, children are now accessible to people wanting to do them harm. These exploiters, extortionists, traffickers are right in our own homes, in the homes



of the families we work so hard to support every day, and right in the classrooms of our children.

We have seen many such examples over the last several months of Connecticut's children targeted in spaces that should be safe, their homes and schools. Children are being groomed, threatened, manipulated into sharing their personal information, exploited images, and even meeting in-person outside of their homes.



The vulnerabilities of the COVID-19 pandemic make families targets for labor traffickers. These vulnerabilities include unemployment, financial instability, homelessness, food insecurity, social isolation, and lack of childcare.

The National Human Trafficking Awareness Month comes at the most critical time to educate, learn, and partner to protect Connecticut's children and families. Let's share our knowledge with our co-workers, families, parents/ guardians, children, and neighbors to give them the information to stay safe during these most challenging times.

There are resources for parents on internet safety and educational opportunities to learn how to identify and protect children; these resources are also great for educators and are being implemented in some of our schools. There are opportunities to educate youth ages 12 and up on internet safety and child trafficking; children had told us they wished they learned about trafficking before they were victims. There is a new training on labor trafficking that has already resulted in identifying labor trafficking in Connecticut; education is vital to increasing the identification of victims that have gone unnoticed.



National Human Trafficking
Hotline
1-888-373-7888

If you or someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, **call now.**

Si usted o alguien que conoce es víctima del tráfico de humanos, **llame ahora.**

Attached and below are several resources. Events, training, educational opportunities continue to be added; if you would like to be added to the HART distribution list, please email DCFHART@ct.gov. The department has knowledgeable and passionate HART Leads and Liaisons in every region and office to support possible cases of child trafficking (list attached). Please also feel free to contact me at any time for assistance, tammy.sneed@ct.gov.

- [App Guide for Parents](#) (English)
- [App Guide for Parents](#) (Español)
- Internet Safety Materials for Families: [Internet Safety Concepts](#)
- Available Training: HT Training Descriptions, email DCFHART@ct.gov to request a training
- [DCF Human Anti-trafficking Response Team \(HART\) Page](#)
- [HART Lead and Liaison List](#)