

July 2021

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



## A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...



One thing I know for sure about our work is that we never do anything alone. This team approach is highlighted in this month's "**Spotlight on What's Right**" newsletter. When we partner with families, children can thrive. When we partner with providers, legislators, sister state agencies and other stake holders, *the system* becomes stronger to respond to the needs of Connecticut's children and families.

In two "*Spotlight*" articles, we bring into focus a little boy named **Jayden**. Jayden's mom Destiny benefitted from the care he was provided in the foster home of Becca and Bill Allen - leading to reunification. Children are less anxious when the adults around them work together, keeping the child's wellbeing in the center of this effort.

Read as Destiny refers to the Allens as her "family" and expresses the gratitude she has for the way she was embraced during one of the most difficult time periods in her life. Destiny's words speak volumes.... "*Becca and Bill fostered my little guy and they fostered me.*"



Read further about the foster family's perspective from the moment they accepted the awesome responsibility to care for someone else's child. The profound impact our foster parents make when they connect with the child's birth family cannot be overstated.



Thank you to our partners from the **CT Association of Foster and Adoptive Families Home - CAFAF** ([cafafct.org](http://cafafct.org)) for their unwavering support and commitment to joining DCF in championing the values of the Quality Parenting Initiative **Home - Quality Parenting Initiative** ([qpi4kids.org](http://qpi4kids.org))



Our collaboration with members of the Connecticut General Assembly is valued and paramount to the success of public policy that benefit CT's kids!

July ushers in the effective date of many new legislation. Read what our Legislative Liaison Vinny Russo has to say about the significant work accomplished this past legislative session. Vinny highlights key legislation impacting the Department and the constituents we serve. Click here to read the full [2021 DCF Legislative Summary](#). Reflecting the teamwork theme, we would be remiss if we didn't give a special shout out to Assistant Legal Manager Attorney **Katherine Dwyer** and Executive Secretary **Johanna Schmidt**, who we were so fortunate to have assigned to us through the **Govern for America (GFA)** Fellowship. Many, many thanks to the team of Vin, Kate and Johanna who all worked tirelessly through this unique session on behalf of DCF.

One of the new CT laws that became effective July 1<sup>st</sup> was the adult use of Cannabis. The decriminalization of this substance in Connecticut came with much preparation and solid planning. Here is the link to the Governor's website for more information: [Adult Use Cannabis in CT](#)

We partnered with **five** different state agencies, including the **Office of the Child Advocate**, to message the importance of safely storing adult substances - legal or illegal. I recently appeared in this [newly released public service announcement](#) to reinforce this message.

And finally, we appreciate our partners at **OPM** and **DAS** along with our Human Resource Business Partners & Labor Team as we supported staff upon their return to our office spaces. This past week, we published [Re-Entry Frequently Asked Questions](#) to assist in clarify any outstanding issues.



Once again, Welcome Back Team!

We hope you are taking some well-deserved vacation time this Summer!!!!

We are getting through this TOGETHER.

*Commissioner Dorantes*



## "We Were a Team"

Destiny, who is now 19 years old, has reunified with her son, Jayden. She graduated from High School and is co-parenting with the help and support of her mom. Destiny is preparing to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), learning of the love and support of her family while staying in touch with the Allens - her second family.

"Becca and Bill fostered my little guy and they fostered me," stated Destiny, referencing Becca and Bill Allen. But they played an even greater role in Destiny's life. "They are my family," she said.

Destiny expresses a depth of gratitude for Becca and Bill. She said that Becca was an advocate for her at ACR meetings, helping her to articulate her thoughts and worries, and advocated for her to get the services and supports she needed. Destiny explained that Becca also aligned with her mom, Jayden's grandmother.

"We were a team," Destiny said.

The team approach started in a hospital waiting area.

Bill Allen, a foster parent from New Haven, remembers sitting in the pediatric hospital waiting room, holding his wife Becca's hand, patiently waiting to meet the hospital staff and the DCF worker. "Did you ever think we would be here at our age, in a hospital, waiting for a baby," Becca asked Bill. They were waiting for Jayden to be discharged.



Shortly after, Becca noticed a youth backpack on the floor that the birth mom had left behind, learning in that moment that the mother of this baby was young herself. When the Allens returned home with their foster child, they told their daughter, Maddy, that the baby's mom was her age. Maddy's compassionate heart spoke volumes of wise maturity. "Mom, this baby's mother needs a mother too, she needs you," she stated, and so the story began.



Becca and Bill fostered Jayden, an infant, and they also began fostering Jayden's family, too. "As soon as I met Jayden's Mom, Destiny, I just loved her. I asked if I could have her cell number. We began texting, Facetiming and sharing photographs. I didn't want her to miss a second of Jayden."

Within a short time, Becca learned that Destiny was taking the bus home from visits, so she provided her rides. "It was a chance for me to get to know her better too," Becca said. Destiny expressed her admiration for her supportive new family. "Becca's vibe from that first time we met made me feel like everything was going to be OK. I never felt angry or bitter, I just knew she was there to help me."

Asked to envision herself speaking to a group of birth moms who are on a similar journey, Destiny emphatically stated clear advice. "Don't you ever give up. Set a goal for yourself and stay focused. Welcome partnering from the foster family and accept all the support that is given to you. Think of yourself as a bodyguard for that baby of yours. You have work to do."

Destiny, Jayden and Becca recently spent time together at a beach. Through tears, looking towards the ocean line where Becca was playing in the sand with Jayden, Destiny shared, "I have a bond with Becca that will never be broken. She took care of my son for me when I couldn't, and she loved him like her very own. She was my voice when I didn't have a voice. Becca and Bill fostered my little guy and they fostered me. They are my family."



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## "On the Beach...Surrounded by the Most Important Adults in His Life"



Sharing a profound commitment to fostering in partnership, Becca and Bill Allen from New Haven, Connecticut, became licensed foster parents in 2016. The Allens are a textbook example of the positive effect co-parenting has on a foster child, the importance of fatherhood engagement, and the critical role biological children play in a foster care placement.

The Allens' devout commitment to working with a birth family is natural and effortless - with the result being all the children placed into the Allens' home have been reunified with the exception of one child.

The Allens have a true understanding of the mission and the core values of our department. Considered a role model and advocate, Becca is now a **Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)** Champion. Invited to have a seat at this table, **Program Supervisor** Toni Ligon described the Allens in the highest regard. "Becca is an experienced and seasoned caregiver. An overall great partner. She and her husband are a great team."



Becca explained that she first learned about the need for more foster parents through Jennifer Hartley, a liaison from the **Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF)**. Ms. Hartley came to a community neighborhood forum to talk about the department's needs. Becca said she knew after listening to Ms. Hartley that she wanted to be a foster parent. "I went home expecting Bill to be a little hesitant with the idea, but he said 'yes' right away," Becca stated.

Ms. Hartley reflected upon the first time she met Becca at that neighborhood forum to recruit foster families and her continued work with them. "Wow, wow, wow! Becca and Bill and their bio kids are amazing! I am beyond humbled at how our lives intertwined," she later added.



The Allens, who have two biological children, Maddy and Owen, shared the idea with both of them during a family road trip. "We wanted to be in tune to how they felt," Bill added. Both were enthusiastic. "Even though they didn't quite understand the gravity of abuse and neglect the children would have faced, they knew our family could help," explained Becca.

Maddy, who is now 20 years old, has a deeper understanding. "Before we started fostering children, there were some people saying that lots of my parents' affection and attention would be elsewhere. This did not hold true. As every child entered and exited our house, we grew closer and closer as a family. The love was amplified and there was more than enough to go around," she stated.

Owen, who is now 19 years old, explained his feelings towards caring for another child. "It changed my life for the better. It made me more independent because we had another child to look after. I was not the youngest person in the house anymore," he stated.

Each week, Becca and Bill looked forward to the training sessions, dubbing that night of the week as "Date Night." They adored the trainer and became connected to other families in the training class. "We were all in," Becca said.



The Allens decided to foster children birth to five years old, determined to focus their time and efforts to help the family heal and reunify. Once licensed, their intentions became empathetic - action. "Working with Becca and Bill was like a breath of fresh air! They were eager to know more about how DCF and the juvenile court worked, but most importantly, they wanted to engage with the biological family," explained New Haven **Regional Office Social Worker** Samanta Posila. Becca and Bill committed to their new role as foster parents, working together and leaning on one another for support. "Bill would have coffee with prospective Dads, trying to get other men to foster. Positive father figures are so important," Becca added about her husband, sharing, "Bill also gave me my time to grieve when letting go was hard."

Over the course of the past several years, the Allens have fostered and provided respite care to seven children. With the exception of one little boy, who was adopted by a relative of the Allens in Vermont, all of the children that they have cared for were reunified to their biological families. The mother of the little boy who was adopted voluntarily terminated her rights after meeting with the pre-adoptive parent. "We met on the beach with the birth mom. It was a sad day but a beautiful moment of relief for a mom who knew she couldn't keep her little boy", she explained. That time on the beach allowed a little boy to be surrounded by the most important adults in his life - birth mother, foster mother and adoptive mother.

The Allens worked tirelessly to engage the birth families. "We foster the family. I reach out to the moms with calls and pictures, and I offer to transport the child to visits. Bill tries to engage with the dad. We want them to know that we are on their side," Becca shared. "Their patience, kindness and flexibility were phenomenal!" explained Milford Office **Social Worker** Candra Bacote, adding, "Balancing virtual visits, in-person visits, DCF meetings along with their personal lives, jobs and family demonstrated the love they had for people and the dedication they had for the work. I believe that Mrs. Allen's partnership with a biological mother aided in her transformation as a parent."

While sitting comfortably in the Allen's living room, they shared countless stories about each and every foster child as they reminisced through each page of the **memory books** they created. Pointing to pictures and commenting on those special moments, recalling with fondness each and every placement that they had. The chemistry, the respect, the love and humor that Becca and Bill shared was delightful to witness.

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*DCF Legislative Program  
Director Vincent Russo*



## Legislative Update

With the 2020 legislative session being cancelled due to COVID-19, the 2021 session certainly felt like two sessions crammed into one. Despite the Capitol and LOB being closed to the public, the General Assembly passed several significant bills this year, including ours.

When reviewing the [Legislative Summary](#), you will notice certain overarching themes in the acts that were passed: Racial justice, criminal and juvenile justice reform, the physical and mental health of children and prevention services for youth. These are areas that DCF specializes in and the Department was extremely influential in crafting the policies that were passed. In fact, we were often sought out to offer our expertise and provide suggestions by the Governor's Office and legislative leaders. I would like to thank of all you whom I called upon to answer questions or attend meetings on a variety of legislative initiatives. Your time and wealth of knowledge was greatly appreciated by the legislators and highlighted the incredible talent in our Department and the commitment you all have to our children and families.

Along with the acts, the two-year state budget was passed this year. I'm happy to report that the Department was funded more than adequately for our goals over the next biennium. In fact, the General Assembly gave us additional funding for several initiatives as well as fully adopting our recommendations for the American Rescue Plan Act (**ARPA**) funding. More information to come as we work with OPM and our partners to develop a distribution plan.

Many of the policies embodied the acts will be effective in the coming months. When reading the summary, please pay attention to the effective dates of the sections described. Additional information detailing how the Department will be implementing the new laws will be forthcoming. However, please call me with any questions.

Please pass along any legislative ideas you may have for next session. The deadline for submission to the Governor's office for next session is **October 1<sup>st</sup>**.

I hope you all enjoy your summer.