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**MARCH 2021**

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**Commissioner's Message**

**How do we punctuate Social Worker Appreciation and Women's History Month?**

Friday, I was honored to have a conversation with Vice President Kamala Harris during her visit to New Haven, CT… a pinnacle moment in my career as a lifelong social worker. The roundtable topic centered on one of the targets of the impact of *The American Rescue Plan*-- lifting ½ of the country's children out of poverty. This issue is inextricably linked to our work. We discussed system collaboration necessary to recover from the pandemic. To ***Build Back Better*** we must all do our part to support children and families across Connecticut!

As we sat in the room together, I thought about the "*firsts*" that she and I (to an obvious lesser status) represent. As the first female in this role, VPOTUS Harris is the first Black person, Asian American to be elected to that office and of myself, as the first African American Commissioner of the CT Department of Children and Families. We recognized we have made history yet remain focused on "*paving the way*" for the "***next ups***" and that "*our ceiling is the next generation's floor*." Seizing the momentum of this moment is not lost on either of us. She gets it.

You will hear more about the conversation in a separate publication.

This month's "***Spotlight on What's Right***" newsletter highlights two career social workers and their journey to and within the Department.

**Christopher Bidorini** is the recipient of this year's Janet Williams Humanitarian Award! As a social worker in our New Britain DCF office, Christopher vowed at a young age to live his life giving back to others….and boy has he done that! Read about his journey from across the world launched his commitment to serve those within and outside the Department. Such an incredible story.

You will also hear about **Siobhan Trotman** - the first DCF employee to test positive for COVID-19. She shares with us her experiences one year ago after contracting the virus and what her leadership as DCF Office Director in Torrington required throughout the pandemic. She too was "called" to do this work and has lived a life of **PURPOSE**. I am reminded every day by your actions as to how strong we are as a Department and the life impacting commitment you make to those you serve.

Thank you for making this the most memorable Social Worker Appreciation Month and Women's History Month… **Your success is mine and mine is yours**.

**"We are Called to this Work"**

In March 2020, Siobhan Trotman became the first employee at the Department of Children and Families to test positive for COVID-19. This began a period like no other she had experienced in her almost 29 years as a career social worker.

From where did she gain her strength? What was the experience like? How did she lead the Torrington Office during a global pandemic?

Siobhan's devotion to helping others actually started as a child.  Her parent's instilled in her the values of helping others and this was woven into her daily life and the culture in her community. Growing up in an African American Baptist church community, the church had a variety of ministries - all with the goal of demonstrating compassion while helping others.

"I have always seen my work at DCF - like the work in the church - as a ministry to serve the most vulnerable in our communities," Siobhan stated. "We are called to this work and I am honored to be called to serve through my work at DCF."

Since 1992, Siobhan has worked in a variety of capacities within DCF including as a caseload carrying social worker, supervisor, working on Consent Decree related Outcomes, the Adoption and Resource Exchange, Office of Foster and Adoption Services, Program Manager and currently as Office Director in Torrington.

"I am so humbled to work alongside such incredible people that work diligently day in and day out to meet the needs of children and families," she enthusiastically stated during an interview.

In early March, Siobhan found herself traveling to pay respects to a terminally ill friend out of state. On the return home, she immediately experienced some concerning symptoms and visited her doctor the following morning. Siobhan and her medical provider thought she had a simple virus and she was provided with medication for a sinus infection.

At the time, COVID-19 was just starting to aggressively make its way across the globe and our country. Minimal testing was available and much about the virus was unknown. "I actually heard the doctor ask another health provider that called over the phone, where he could get a COVID-19 test for another patient," Siobhan remembered.  Siobhan felt relieved that her symptoms seemed to be a simple and common infection.

A few days later and feeling better with over the counter and prescription medication, Siobhan went into the Torrington office building as one manager was out, and she wanted to help with the coverage of the office. The day was long, and she began feeling ill again that afternoon.  She worked a full day but left at the end of the day exhausted. She stated, "I took my laptop home with me that day, which was not my daily practice. How ironic that I would need that laptop to work from home once I had recovered because the entire state had shut down."

Her symptoms continued. Now with a fever, she called the doctor again. This time, he ordered a COVID-19 test. She went to a drive-thru testing site that was just established in her hometown and experienced no wait.  "I think they were actually glad to see someone," Siobhan stated. "There were no cars in line, and I drove up and got my test in minutes."

After 7 days, the results came in - she was positive. "I immediately lost It and started to cry," Siobhan stated. " I was actually physically feeling better and started to turn the curve when I received the news. But hearing those results jolted me and I worried for myself and my family. It was two weeks from the time of my initial symptoms to the positive test result."

The national news was now saturated with COVID-19 information. Siobhan worried about possible staff exposure on the one day she worked in the office. Precautions such as maintaining distance of at least 6 feet, wearing masks and hand washing were not common points of discussion or practiced at that time.

Siobhan healed and strengthened and eventually returned to work remotely at the end of March. Now it was time for her to lead her staff, some of whom have subsequently tested positive. "I would ask their supervisor how they were feeling and remind them to tell staff to take it slow, listen to their bodies and not try overexert themselves," Siobhan stated. She worried about them and could relate to many of the symptoms they may be experiencing.  Siobhan felt fortunate that she never had to be hospitalized for her symptoms but worried that others may not be as lucky.

Her experience as a leader during a global pandemic entailed balancing the mission critical work with the health and safety of both staff and the families. There was no training for what she would experience. No playbook or seasoned veterans to consult.

"Build as we go. Stay in the moment. Stay in the day," these were the mottos Siobhan articulated and modeled. "As leaders, we had to get it done,” she said. “We would put clear information out and pull in suggestions from staff. We remained focused on our mission of safety, permanency and well-being."

National Women's History Month is celebrated in March. Siobhan Trotman's experiences and leadership have made history. When she looks back, part of her legacy will be the manner in which she tried to lead her staff and the permanency outcomes achieved during this time.

Siobhan speaks with pride of the Torrington office's creative approaches to supporting and empowering families during the pandemic. She points to the number of children reunified, families where protective supervision was proactively ended, and the quality of relationships established with children and families as evidence of progress — data she proudly displayed during the virtual listening tour with Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes and her Executive Team.

Would Siobhan have ever thought after being with the Department for almost 3 decades she would experience teleworking, TEAMS calls and virtual visits?

 "We have all learned so much about our work,” she said. “This opportunity allowed us to think differently. I hope that we take the good lessons and cultivate them so that we can continue to develop and grow as an agency and create an environment that allows our staff to do what it is they came to do."

In March, we celebrate National Social Worker Month with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) designating this year's theme as "Social Workers are Essential."

The essential part of being a social worker for Siobhan Trotman is to ensure her values are embodied in each action she takes as a leader to support those most in need.

"We are called to this work and each and every day we must never forget that we have the lives of the children and families we serve are in our hands, we can never forget that."

**THE SOCIAL WORKER'S PROMISE**

At age 7, Chris Bidorini made a promise to his biological parents on the day he learned of their reported death.

"I made them a promise to help people and become a humanitarian," said Mr. Bidorini, who serves as a Department of Children and Families' (DCF) ongoing treatment social worker in the New Britain office.

Mr. Bidorini said his bio-parents brought him to an orphanage in Calcutta (Kolkata), India at one day old, which was their last contact. Born in 1987, Mr. Bidorini was adopted the following year by a couple from Burlington, CT -- Al Bidorini, who was a state employee, and Fran Baiamonte, who owned her own business as a human resources consultant.

Following the loss of his biological parents, he was struck with a sense of duty.

"Coming from such a poor city and living in the United States with so many opportunities, I felt like I owed it to them and myself and the world to live a life that was purposeful," Mr. Bidorini said in an interview. "I had been blessed, and I should live a life that's purposeful in blessing others. Those are the promises I made to them."

It is a promise he has kept and will continue to keep.

Mr. Bidorini also credited his adoptive parents for setting an example for him and his 26-year-old sister who was adopted from the same orphanage. "My parents modelled human compassion and taught me the importance of giving back," he said of his parents who still live in Connecticut. "They raised us to be very independent and also caring for others and that being reflective is very important. I credit much of who I am to them."

Recently, the Department recognized Mr. Bidorini as its 2021 recipient of the Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award, named in honor of the beloved clinician who worked for the agency a number of years ago. Mr. Bidorini received the honor for his social work -- but also for his work promoting racial justice, raising money to fight HIV/AIDS, and combatting human trafficking.

"Christopher Bidorini is a passionate advocate who has made a measurable impact not only on his community, but also the children and families we serve," wrote the staff in the DCF New Britain office in their nomination of Mr. Bidorini. "He encourages and exemplifies the virtue of an individual who has shown unwavering compassion for his love of humanity."

Indeed, Mr. Bidorini's humanitarianism gives meaning to his life and focuses his activities. He estimates that he has raised/donated more than $50,000 for charities for causes including combatting HIV/AIDS and human trafficking. He has testified before the General Assembly and conducted community organizing to promote civic engagement, including voter registration and participation.

In addition to his committed efforts outside work, Mr. Bidorini has served as a lead trainer on human trafficking for the Department's Academy for Workforce Development and has presented on the topic at a number of conferences. In 2018, he received an award from the Human Anti-Trafficking Response Team (HART) for all his efforts in this area.

While obtaining his master's degree in social work at UCONN, Mr. Bidorini interned with DCF's Tammy Sneed, the long-standing administrator who leads the agency's efforts to combat child sex trafficking. Mr. Bidorini says he plans to pursue a doctorate to conduct research on how to most effectively respond to this awful form of child exploitation.

Eventually, Mr. Bidorini says, "I want to have Tammy's job."

As an intern to Ms. Sneed, he had already earned her confidence.

"Chris went above and beyond any school or work requirements supporting Connecticut's efforts to end child trafficking," said Ms. Sneed. "Chris is a dynamic presenter, engages audiences, and provides difficult information in a way that is well received and life changing for participants. Chris is an advocate, a leader, and an everlasting voice in the movement to end this horrendous crime against Connecticut's children."

Indeed, service as a social worker flows naturally for Mr. Bidorini.

"It's a difficult job and everyone comes to the job with a certain passion," he said. "I'm like every other worker, and that passion is the underlying reason I wanted to do child protection.

"Once I started, I fell in love with the work," Mr. Bidorini added. "Coming from an adoptive home and having a great outcome, I wanted to make sure other children had a good outcome too - good outcomes regardless of what they are." He made a point of saying that adoption is only one good outcome of many possible, including keeping families intact, reunification and kinship care.

As robust as Mr. Bidorini's experiences and work has been, the Janet E. Williams Award stands out as a highlight, he said.

"Getting an award that recognizes me as a humanitarian is validation that I'm on the right path," he said. "It was a special moment for me, but I'm far from done."

**Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award 2021 Nominees**

Dr. Janet E. Williams served as the agency's Medical Director for several years prior to her passing.

She left a legacy of devoted and compassionate service to Connecticut's children and families.

Dr. Williams was also an active presence in her local community - utilizing her knowledge and skills to give back in unique ways.

In her honor, the Department has developed the Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award.

Annually, the award is given to a DCF staff person who has demonstrated a strong passion for children and families, has shown an unyielding concern and has taken action towards the advancement and betterment of those on his or her caseload, or within the Black community.

The following is the list of nominees and a link to their individual write-up provided by their colleagues:

Christopher Bidorini - Social Worker New Britain Office and 2021 Janet E. Williams Award Recipient: [Mr. Bidorini](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/CBidorini2021.pdf)

Ann Adams - Director of the Office of Community Relations: [Ms. Adams](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/AAdams2021---Dr-Janet-Williams.pdf)

Elsie Aponte- Social Work Case Aide Bridgeport Office: [Ms. Aponte](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/EAponte2021.pdf)

Tawanda Ebron - Program Supervisor Norwalk Office: [Ms. Ebron](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/TEbron2021.pdf)

Anthony Gay - Social Work Supervisor Torrington Office: [Mr. Gay](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/AGay2021.pdf)

Lorraine Thomas - Social Work Supervisor Norwich Office: [Ms. Thomas](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/LThomas2021.pdf)

Shante Powers-Gaskins - Clinical Social Work Associate Willimantic Office: [Ms. Powers-Gaskin](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/SPOTLIGHT/2021/March/SPowersGaskins2021.pdf)