

September 2021

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



## A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...



September brings us many important themes to celebrate starting with **National Kinship Care Month!**

Could a teacher you met in a high school Math lab become a permanent kinship placement? Yes, if your name is Lily. Read her story and how the right family created the foundation for her success.

In this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter, Bureau Chief Tina Jefferson and Foster Care Director Natalia Liriano discuss their vision to lead the Department towards achieving the aspirational target of 70% of children residing with kin. We also have a unique perspective on kinship care from Rodney Moore, Social Work Supervisor in New Haven.

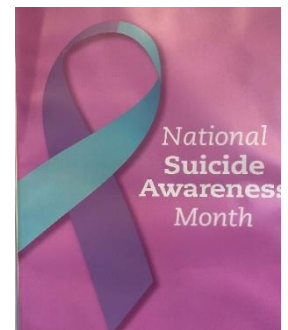


"Esperanza: Si Se Puede" or "Hope: Yes We Can!" is the theme of this year's Central Office Hispanic/Latin (O,A,X) Heritage Month celebration. Hispanic /Latin (O,A,X) Heritage Month is celebrated from 9/15/21 thru 10/15/21. The National theme - **Esperanza: A Celebration of Hispanic Heritage and Hope**, celebrates resilience and recognizes we are stronger together.

Connecticut is becoming more diverse! New U.S. Census data shows the number of Hispanic residents has grown by 30% over the past decade - an increase of 144,206 people!

September is also Suicide Awareness Month. Connecticut experiences 8 suicides annually of youth under the age of 18 years. For adolescents and young adults in Connecticut ages 15-34 years old, **suicide is the second leading cause of death. One death is too many.**

Please listen to my comments during a [Suicide Awareness Month Event](#) and the importance of de-stigmatizing asking for help. Here is a shareable link to resources provided by the Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board: [CT Suicide Advisory Board](#).



Lastly, I remind you of our responsibility as public servants in response the Gov's mandate for state employees regarding the COVID vaccine. The expectation is that you provide a vaccine card **or** negative weekly test results. Staff and contractors of our healthcare facility do not have the test-out option due to additional vulnerabilities of those served in those facilities. I remain so very proud of each and every one of you for the efforts you put forth daily! We are truly in this TOGETHER!

*Commissioner Dorantes*

# "Mary saw something in me that no one else was willing to see"

"Scared and confused, I waited in the orphanage for my father to come back for me, but he never came," explained Lily, a twenty-two-year-old youth who traveled from China to the US when she was twelve years old. "I can talk about it now with you, but it was a huge emotional deal, it took me years to feel wanted."



Lily was adopted through an international adoption arrangement, but unfortunately, her adoptive parents were not prepared to meet her individualized needs and she came into DCF care.

"I can look back on those times now and understand why they let me go," Lily explained. "They didn't have experience with kids my age and had no idea what pain I was carrying. Thankfully, Mary Urban, a middle school math teacher, saw something in me that no one else was willing to see."

Mary first met Lily in a Mathematics lab at the high school. She understood how delicate Lily's foster care placement had become so it was no surprise when she received an inter-office email through the board of education, asking all staff to consider being a permanent placement for this young adolescent. School administration understood the importance of Lily staying connected to the school and collaborated with the Department to assist in finding Lily a family to she could stay within her local community.

Later that evening, Mary spoke with her husband about Lily and felt called to learn more about the requirements needed to care for her. She remembers attending an open house session the next day and stayed long after the meeting to talk about becoming a kinship placement for Lily. "I knew what she needed was a permanent family, this wasn't a temporary place to stay," Mary explained. She was more than willing to meet Lily where she was at, and she took the steps to do so. Mary ran the idea about being a forever family for Lily by her adult children and had all hands on deck.



Mary and her family became licensed by a therapeutic foster care agency, Institute for Professional Practice (IPP). She explained that IPP and DCF provided "remarkable" support, adding that they were always readily available and responsive when she needed them. Michael AuYang who worked with Lily and the Urban's through IPP said, "I truly don't know a better definition of "family." Lily was naturally considered an 'Urban' the moment she was placed at the home and underneath all the fear, the mistrust, and the rebellion, Lily wanted and considered herself an 'Urban.' I think we often forget the importance of foster caretakers' resilience. Resilience is the capacity to recover from compressive stress, 'pull up the boot strap' and continue to do what needs to be done and the Urbans did just that."

This love and stability gave Lily room to begin healing.

The Urbans exemplify the true nature of kinship care by welcoming Lily into their home. Lily was able to soar because of the trust she had in Mary and her family and because of the feelings of identity and belonging she felt. "The Urbans' true commitment and attention was exactly what Lily needed in a family," explained Lily's Social Worker Adrian Perez.



Being placed and cared for by an adult who not only knew Lily's story but, who had come to know Lily personally, seemed like the most perfect plan for her. "My trust issues took a real long time. Things got better because of the Urbans and my commitment to therapy," explained Lily. With the Urbans, Lily said that she was able to express her feelings, share her fears. She felt safe and heard. "I consider the Urbans my family, my home," she added. It is because of the Urbans' commitment to Lily and their willingness to work through her challenges that Lily has been able to achieve success in so many ways.

"I have been honored to work with Lily and her foster parents and watch the many gains she has made. I am confident that she will continue to grow," explained Social Worker Perez.

What is the outcome?

Lily is a Bentley University graduate who received a \$160 thousand dollar 4-year academic scholarship and achieved a bachelor's degree this spring in Corporate Finance & Accounting. During her last semester, Lily transitioned into adulthood, gaining independence by living in her own apartment while working with the CHAP program and completing a virtual internship.



Lily recently moved to Boston this fall to begin her career at a well-known accounting firm in the Boston suburbs.

"If it wasn't for DCF, I really don't know where I would be. I definitely wouldn't be where I am today. DCF made my life better and now it's my turn to make my family proud of me," Lily stated.

## "We owe this baby the time for her mother to become healthy"



Social Work Supervisor Rodney Moore sings "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to his children each night. When the decision was made for his family to become kinship caregivers, that song and his voice welcomed "Ju Ju" into his family. He now sings to her - with the same emotion and love - just like he does with his own two children.

"I am humbled and honored to care for this baby," stated Rodney. The journey for Ju Ju to be placed into the Moore home is one full of life lessons.

Kinship care can be complicated and for Rodney, a 6-year veteran of the Department, the decision his family made to open up their home was not easy.

Extended family were aware of the birth mother's struggles and her pregnancy. It was apparent the family had to plan for this little baby. When the conversation shifted to Rodney's family being a placement option, the questions between he and his wife were many. "What if we get attached? How will we work with the birth mother? What will we say to the kids?" Rodney recalls.

"Yeah, let's do it," his wife said. The next day was the call to the Social Worker. Then came the home visit and...Ju Ju.

"Seeing her for the first time in the hospital solidified it for me," Rodney stated. "This is what we are supposed to be doing. We do not ever want her to feel less than the other children in our home."

Caring for others is a value in Rodney's extended family. Rodney's grandmother, whom he lived with the majority of his life, was a foster and adoptive parent. While Rodney lived with her as a child, she adopted four children, and she adopted two more approximately five years ago.



"I would not be the type of father I am today without what my mom and grandmother gave me," he stated. It was these experiences with his grandmother which influenced him to begin his career at DCF. She was also the first person Rodney called to tell that Ju Ju was coming. "That's amazing" was her response. "She said we would have nothing but a positive impact on this child's life," Rodney explained.

As a professional, Rodney knew the value of kinship care - keeping children within the family system - maintaining their culture and those close family bonds. As kin, the emotions were now on the surface and had to be balanced. "The bond, chemistry and emotions are all real," he stated.

Rodney Moore has many lessons he can teach all of us about kinship placements.

His first concern was that he did not want his children to feel they were receiving any less attention from him. Rodney knew from his grandmother that providing love to so many was possible. "It is not about dividing up love, it is about showing the same amount of love to each child," he stated.

Preparation was key and it was Rodney, pulling from his personal and professional experiences, who prepped his own children.



Rodney put Ju Ju's need for a family into the context of his job while explaining the placement to his 10-year-old son. This little boy knew Ju Ju's mother and his response was "cool" when told a baby was coming.

For his 5-year-old daughter, the framing was a little different. "We are going to have a baby come and live with us for a little while," Rodney explained to her. "She was excited and always wanted to be a big sister."

Rodney guarded against how much of a change this would present for his children and developed a schedule to spend intentional 1:1 time with both of them. "We made sure it was not all about the baby," he stated. "The family is opening up our home to someone who needs love and care," was the constant theme he reinforced.

Both children welcomed Ju Ju with "open arms" and play with her, sing to her and she is treated just like a regular member of the family. "It's going to be okay, Ju Ju" his daughter says soothingly when the baby cries.

Patience with family members is also a point Rodney makes. "Explain the process and what to expect," Rodney advised. Rodney and his family are maternal relatives to Ju Ju. His wife experienced more emotions while considering the placement. This was all very natural.



With a history of tense family relationships, questions were raised about how the birth mother would feel about where the baby was placed. Contact does occur with the birth mother and she is aware of the placement. "Her mother knows she is in good hands," Rodney affirmed. These relationships will still take time.

The role of extended kin and their ability to be a resource is one we should all keep in mind. When kin are supported, the entire experience becomes easier and ultimately, the child benefits. "Realize it may not be right for you to be a caregiver, but you can be a support in other ways," he pointed out. "Offer up what you can." Upon placement, the extended family stepped up to help. "They provided us clothes, formula and raised money," Rodney stated. They wanted the placement to be successful. They also wanted something much more.

"They want to see mom healthy."

The ease at which Rodney describes changing diapers, the feedings and establishing a new routine may overshadow the attachment his family immediately made with Ju Ju. Rodney describes the talks of permanency, would this placement lead to adoption, or what if Ju Ju was reunified.

Rodney was also clear on the message he would like to impart to his DCF colleagues in regard to permanency and the timeframes expected within the Department. "Be mindful of timeframes and why they are in place," he recommended.

Providing kinship care can be a journey - focus always must remain on the child.

"Be okay with an alternative outcome. Know you can advocate, know the role you can play," is Rodney's advice. There may be times when permanency is not in alignment with your own beliefs. "Understand what you want may be different than what others want. What will happen will happen," he added.

"What is most important is this child's understanding of how we attempted to help her mother get as healthy as she possibly can. If she believes we tried to help her mother in a time of need, she will know we will always try to help her in a time of need," he stated.

"We owe this baby the time for her mother to become healthy."

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## Leading Kinship Care and a Vision for the Future



The Department of Children and Families' improvements to kinship care - when a child in care is placed with a relative or someone else the child knows -- flowed from larger changes to the overall foster care system, said Tina Jefferson, the Bureau Chief of Child Welfare, and Natalia Liriano, the Statewide Director of Foster Care.

First and foremost, the pair said, bringing foster care staff under the management of the Child Welfare Bureau created a more uniform culture and practice of support for kinship care among the Department's six regions.

Ms. Liriano said this centralization creates greater consistency in approach and a more integrated effort overall. "With foster care no longer separated from child welfare, the conversations about kinship care are no longer siloed," she said. "We have a stronger sense of team and bringing all the regions and central office under [the Child Welfare Bureau] creates greater consistency and helps us look at all the systems issues and have better work all around."

Ms. Jefferson credited Ms. Liriano's leadership for many improvements to kinship care statewide. "Natalia's leadership as Statewide Director of Foster Care has helped us create a stronger culture," said Ms. Jefferson. "That in turn creates greater consistency of practice across the six regions. It's no longer six different ways of doing things."



One example of an improved process resulting from centralization is how the Department handles waivers for licensing prospective caregivers who have a previous substantiation. The decision about whether the substantiation can be waived to allow licensure now rests with the Department's legal division - thereby providing greater consistency in handling the waiver requests.



"Now you have one way of interpreting when a family should get a waiver," Ms. Jefferson said. "We now have greater consistency for families and staff regarding what qualifies as suitability to be licensed. This will help us increase kinship placements," Ms. Jefferson added. Ms. Liriano said the new structure also empowered staff to talk with regions that had lower levels of placement with kin compared to the statewide average - which stood at 42.8% in July 2021.

The Department has added to these gains the last two years - specifically by increasing by 10% the children who enter care the first time and live with kin. Of those who enter care the first time, 51.9% lived with kin in State Fiscal Year 2021 compared to 41.6% in 2019. In addition, the number of children achieving permanency through guardianship is on pace this year to exceed the 2019 number.

The Department's Quality Parenting Initiative - an approach to caregivers and biological parents grounded in strong relationships and valuing the partnership of caregivers in working with the Department to help biological families reunify with their children -- enables the agency to build better relations with kinship providers, they said. Kinship care is stronger as a result of this improved relationship.

"It's a family-centered approach that's about relationships," said Ms. Liriano. "This helped us change the dynamic from 'do what I say' to a dynamic of cooperation and partnership."



Or as Ms. Jefferson said, "The caregiver is a full partner in every decision."

Ms. Liriano said that while important improvements have been established, the Department wants to make further progress.



The term "kin" includes those individuals who share a blood relationship to a child or have a supportive relationship with them. Kin form the "village" a child needs in order to be successful.

The Department of Children and Families has embraced kinship care, with the percentage of children in Connecticut placed with kin at approximately 43% while the national average remains around 33%.

During one of the most trying times in the life of a child, kinship care affords children the opportunity to experience a familiar face, hug and voice as they are on their path towards healing and the goal of reunification with their parents.

When science and data confirm common sense, we know we are on the right track in finding solutions for children in foster care. Through research, we confirm that what makes sense for children - placing them with kin - is also validated with cold, hard science. Read on...

A study published by Casey Family Programs entitled "[The Impact of Placement with Family on Safety, Permanency and Well-Being](#)" reports that the benefits of kinship care are widespread and substantial. The report found that youth who spent more than half of their time in care with family had "fewer documented recent well-being challenges" such as those related to school, social functioning, adjustment to trauma and social development.



The study also found improved permanency. It reports that 87% of children living with family benefitted from relational permanency compared to just 57% of children with no time living with family. An impressive 83% of children in kinship care achieved legal permanency compared to 38% of children with no time living with family.

Research across multiple disciplines is clear that children involved with the child welfare system have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), leaving them more likely to have negative health outcomes as compared to children in the general population. Research shows that a series of protective factors can mitigate the impact of ACEs and promote resiliency. These factors include positive child-caregiver relationships, stable living environments, and relationships with extended family members.

**Perhaps the most important protective factor for a child is a supportive relationship with a loving adult. Grandparents and other kinship providers are often uniquely suited to be the supportive adult a child needs to help mitigate the impact of trauma.**

A report by the [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#) documents that children removed from their homes have fewer behavioral problems three years after placement with relatives as compared to being placed into traditional foster care.

[National research](#) and a paper by the [American Bar Association](#) reports that compared to children in non-relative care, children in the care of relatives and kin experience:

- Increased stability and fewer placement changes
- A greater likelihood they will remain in their school of origin
- Lower re-entry rates into foster care after reunification
- Enhanced support as they transition into young adulthood
- Greater safety within kinship homes and a lower maltreatment rate
- A greater likelihood of children living with or staying connected to siblings



What do the children say about kinship care?

The children's voice also speaks through the research. Children report they have more positive feelings about their placement if it is with kin and want their current kinship placement to be their permanent home. They more often like with whom they reside and are less likely to run away.

And, how does one measure the impact of preserving your cultural identity and community connections that kinship care affords?

Connecticut aspires to have 70% of our children in care placed with kin. It takes everyone who plays a role in the life of a child to make this happen.

Keep this in mind when considering your efforts to find a kinship home for a child. One research study found that children in kinship care overwhelmingly state, "***I always feel loved.***"

