

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...



April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

Spring has arrived and April is Child Abuse Prevention Month! This is a time to reflect on the collective roles we play to assess the safety of children while linking their parents to supports. We know that strengthening the child wellbeing system empowers families and reduces the likelihood of child maltreatment.

From April 27-29th, members of CT DCF Sr Leadership attended the Child Welfare League of America's National Conference in Washington DC. The CWLA's conference theme: ***The Fierce Urgency***

of Now-Collective Action to Ensure Children and Families Flourish. Along with CT DCF, Margaret Doherty, the President and CEO of CT Association of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF) and CAFAF staff members Jennifer Bellamy and Raymond Ortiz attended conference plenary sessions, workshops, and forums to learn more about what is happening in child welfare around the country. Our very own Senior Administrator JoShonda Guerrier presented on a (Spotlight Track) panel called *Operationalizing a Community Pathway to Prevention: Partnering with Families to Strengthen Communities*. I was a panelist for *How Leaders and the Media Can Transform the Narrative About Child Welfare*.

It is always with tremendous pride that we get to lift up the efforts of the CT DCF workforce. In this edition of the Spotlight on What's Right newsletter we highlight our collective actions across the many aspects of our work. In this month's newsletter, read about Social Work Supervisor Angel Robles as he describes his journey while serving others during careers in law enforcement and social work. What does engagement mean to him? What has he learned while working with diverse groups of individuals and families?

CT DCF Leaders attend CWLA National Conf. Treena Mazzotta, Tina Jefferson, Commissioner Dorantes, CWLA CEO Christine James Brown, Monica Montalvo Rams, JoShonda Guerrier and Yadira Ijeh.



"We all have a lot of similarities"



Angel Robles will walk out of a DCF Office for the final time next month. "A little nervous," is how he described his feelings while reflecting on 17 years with the Department. "I have been privileged."

Retirement will signal the end of a career, starting with Law Enforcement and ending with Social Work, where for over three decades Angel engaged with the most vulnerable and oppressed in our society. "I have been blessed to serve the public," Angel was quick to state in his typical upbeat demeanor.

He will leave quite a legacy, but his work is not done. "We have to be the voice for children," he remarked - no matter what you do in life.

Angel's voice was given to him by his family. The youngest of nine children, he experienced firsthand the impact of being cared for and surrounded by support. "My brothers and sisters took good care of me," he affirmed. They taught him right from wrong, guided and encouraged him. "We understood the struggles," he stated while describing the periods of time when his family relied on public assistance as his mother tirelessly worked to support her family.

Angel describes his mother, Maria Robles, as a "good mom" and phenomenal with people. He vividly remembers her feeding two or three children in the neighborhood on a consistent basis, despite the family's limited resources. "She took care of them," Angel recalls. Maria could develop a relationship with all types of individuals while accepting each one for simply who they were and their unique ways. Maria was Angel's teacher, and he eventually would become ours.

Engagement and resiliency are consistent themes throughout his life's journey - both personal and professional.

Angel feels a special connection to the Department's Mission statement - Partnering with communities and empowering families to raise resilient children who thrive - given how Maria raised her children. "She taught us to be resilient. She said if we were resilient, we would do well."



Angel was the first in his family to achieve a college degree and upon graduation, entered the military, following the path of his brothers all of whom were in the Air Force. He then became a Marshal at Superior Court and was approached by a Waterbury Police Officer who encouraged him to join the force, even bringing him the job application. "He liked my engagement and how I handled myself with people," Angel stated.

The next 17 years saw Angel patrolling the streets of Waterbury, eventually being promoted to the Detective Bureau given his unique abilities to work with others. He investigated homicides, was a member of the hostage negotiation team, and one occasion, an individual in crisis actually requested Angel to respond to the scene. His superiors frequently consulted with him on how to intervene in neighborhoods experiencing an uptick in violence.

Angel learned the core components of engagement which he imparts to others. "Do not be afraid. Be yourself. Do not let other people bait you in," he advised.

Angel described a time when he and a rookie police officer were patrolling a neighborhood. He stopped the car, walked into a family's yard, and played dominos with them. He recognized the position he held afforded him immense power. "I have always treated people from the poorest to the richest the same. Always be willing to learn."

What was his message that day to his fellow officer? "Respect their opinions."

"Simply engaging with people is listening and talking with them, laughing with them, crying with them," he stated. Angel recounts his experiences with a young woman seriously impacted by substance abuse and the encouragement he offered her to seek help. A period of time later he received a letter of thanks from her as she went to a rehabilitation facility, re-connected with her family and was doing well. Angel recalls an individual he arrested shaking his hand and commenting on the professional manner Angel engaged with him. One person in particular thanked him for "straightening" out his life.

Upon early retirement, Angel was encouraged by current DCF Program Supervisor Glaister Gopie to join the Department of Children and Families. He started as a Social Worker and now is a Social Work Supervisor.

He brought his engagement techniques with him. "This is a very tough job but rewarding," is how he describes protective services.

At DCF, Angel realized right away the power he wielded and the importance of engagement. "We all want the same thing for children to be safe, to be stable and to have permanency in their life," he commented. The question becomes how to develop trust with the family to build upon their strengths.

DCF staff encounter a diverse array of families, with family dynamics becoming more complex over time. He views others not as how they are different but what they have in common. "We all have a lot of similarities."

When delivering the message about the Department's involvement with families, he encourages others to do it with dignity and respect. "Imagine if you were going through the same thing," he stated. Don't be afraid to ask questions and use humility. "When you learn, you grow."

Transparency is also key as Angel prides himself on being upfront with those he meets. Developing a positive reputation within the community is also paramount to success, as each interaction you have will leave an impression. "Your reputation follows you," he stated. Angel recalls meeting families as a DCF worker that he encountered as a police officer. They remembered him for the positive way he helped.

Angel has one overarching message to newer staff. "Don't ever feel you are alone." From case consultations, learning the policies and procedures of the Agency, to receiving assistance on a difficult case, DCF is a family, and we all strive to support one another. That also includes on personal matters. Perhaps no greater example of that statement was when Angel advised his Supervisor, Marta Guzman, that Maria was very ill, and she drove him to the hospital so he could be with her. Marta attended Maria's wake and funeral after her passing.

A quote by Anne Frank: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment to improve the world. -Anne Frank". The text is displayed in a typewriter-style font on a light blue background with a soft gradient.

Maria Robles would be proud of her youngest child - a husband, father, relative, friend, colleague, mentor, and a true example of a public servant.

Angel is our teacher on being your authentic self, engagement and respecting those we serve.

Congratulations to Angel Robles on your retirement and thank you for the legacy you have left to all of us!

"You came"

The 10-year-old little boy sitting with Investigator Erika McCormack had a story to tell. It began with allegations of being beaten with a belt, sleeping on a mattress on the floor and expressing fear of his caregivers. The ending included tears on a front porch, an engaged family, a basketball game, and a big smile.



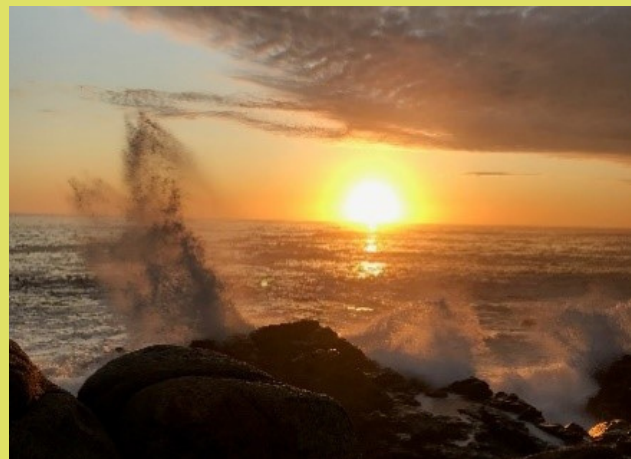
The theme throughout this story - engagement.

"I really love the job," stated Erika as she conducted this interview while juggling her schedule around entering case narratives, answering phone calls, and preparing for a Considered Removal Meeting. "This is what I do."

Erika is used to multitasking. While working in sales, she decided to go back to school, with two children aged 3 and 5 years, and enrolled in Central Connecticut State University to obtain a Bachelor's in Social Work Degree. She was eager to learn and sought classes taught by one Professor who was "instrumental" in her development and inspired her the most - Professor Vanessa Dorantes, now Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.

After earning her degree, Erika began working at the former Mount Saint John's residential facility. She obtained a Master's in Social Work Degree from the University of Connecticut, became licensed, and continued conducting clinical work.

Erika eventually joined the Department of Children and Families and after 10 months as an Ongoing Worker, she was "voluntold" to transfer to Intake given staff shortages. It took her six to eight months to feel comfortable in this role, as she was accustomed to having more time to engage and build relationships with families. "Be kind and understanding with the family," she quickly learned and recognized that her role in Intake was a "steppingstone to the relationship with the Ongoing worker."



There was no better question to keep in mind when it came to the case of a young boy named Markel* and the unique approaches she took to engage his family.

Markel disclosed to school personnel that he suffered injuries on his back after being beaten by his caregiver. He expressed fear of returning home and spoke of sleeping in undesirable conditions. Erika was assigned the case and quickly collaborated with the local Police Department to conduct a joint investigation.

She engaged with Markel at his school and developed a rapport. He told her he was living with his relatives for a "better life" in the United States while his parents remained in another country.

Markel was spoken to 1:1 and was examined for injuries - none were found. When questioned about sleeping on the floor on a mattress, Markel admitted he did not want to sleep alone in his room and wanted to be close to his relatives, so he brought the mattress into their room each night.

"Put the pieces together," is one way Erika describes her work and engagement with families. It was clear more was happening with this young boy.

It was then time to speak with Markel's caregivers.

Erika visited the family's home and given their culture, recognized they may fear they are in "trouble," as they were being visited by a government agency. She drew on her



previous experiences with a family of similar background and recalled spending two to three hours with the father in that home as she allowed him to educate her on his beliefs, parenting style and priorities for his family. Practicing cultural humility, she remembered asking questions and seeking knowledge. "How would I feel?" she asked herself while

imagining what the experiences of being investigated by the Department would be like.

Her interviews continued with the caregivers and again with Markel. Erika and Markel sat on his front porch, they continued to talk, and then came the tears - Markel started crying

"I lied," he said. None of the allegations were true.

Markel was in pain and his allegations were in response to the trauma of being separated from his parents. Neither his mother nor his sister could enter the United States as originally planned. Although he could FaceTime with his mother daily, he was desperate to be with her. Markel also feared for his father's safety given the prominent position he held in the community back home where heightened unrest was present.

In the helping profession, it is important to ask not "What's wrong with you?" but "What's happened to you?"

Markel was grieving and his allegations were viewed as a response to childhood trauma.

Erika continued to engage with the family and was able to move past their understandable caution to her initial questions and interventions. She used an interpreter to ensure the family was able to communicate fully in their primary language. The family disclosed they began caring for Markel with the understanding his parents could soon come for him. Those plans were on hold. Erika helped the family understand the reasons underneath Markel's statements, the losses he was experiencing and the supports he so desperately needed.

Erika wondered if Markel found a connection to her given she was a female.

After full investigation, it was determined no need for child protection existed. However, Erika's assessment and compassion brought her to want more for this little boy and his family. She recognized his need to become involved in activities which would increase his self-esteem and allow him to work through his emotions. Erika asked Markel about his interests and engaged with him well beyond the allegations.

"I really wanted to do basketball," Markel said.

"Yeah, that would great," was Markel's response when the idea was presented to him about joining a team. The family agreed and Erika facilitated the sign up

The first game came, and Erika attended. When Markel saw her, he ran over to her with a big smile on his face. "You came," he said.

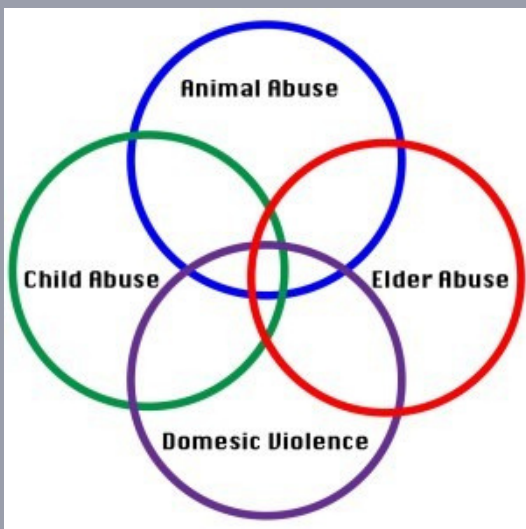
Markel was not the only one who noticed her. The school Principal wrote a kind note to the Department on behalf of Erika's thoughtful work.

The case is now closed, and the family is receiving proper supports within the community.

When Erika's work brings her back to Markel's school to speak with other children, she will look for him and that smile.

It is also most likely true that Markel looks for her.

**The name of the individual in this story was changed to ensure confidentiality*



The Link between Animal Cruelty, Child Abuse and Neglect and Interpersonal Violence

April is Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Month.

Studies have shown a correlation between animal abuse, child maltreatment, and other forms of interpersonal violence, including domestic violence and elder abuse. Professionals refer to this correlation as the Link.

A review of research shows:

- Animals were harmed in 88% of homes where a child was physically abused.
- 75% of female survivors of domestic violence in one study reported their pets were threatened or intentionally harmed by their partner.
- Children exposed to domestic violence are three times more likely to be cruel to animals
- 45% of caseworkers working with the elderly encountered animal abuse or neglect co-occurring with elder abuse.

Connecticut has taken proactive steps to address these issues, including enacting legislation pertaining to cross-reporting.

State statute requires both DCF and Animal Control Officers to report suspected animal cruelty to the Department of Agriculture. The legislation includes training requirements as well. Here is the cross-reporting guide for DCF staff: [Cross Reporting Guide for DCF Staff](#)



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

State law further mandates the Commissioner of Agriculture to send a monthly report to the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families containing all reports of animal cruelty received.

Between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021, the Department of Children and Families received a total of 134 written reports from the Department of Agriculture. Of the total reports received, 36 families had histories with the Department, 20 reports were made on open DCF cases, and eight reports met the standard for an abuse/neglect investigation based on the initial information provided in the written report. More information is available on our [webpage about the Link and cross-reporting](#).

Paws for Kids is a partnership between DCF and the animal advocacy community to promote child and animal well-being through education, cross-reporting efforts, and other activities. Their website can be accessed here: [Paws for Kids](#)

Members of the public can make a reports of animal cruelty directly to the local Animal Control Department in the town where the concerns have been noted or by calling (860) 713-2506 as well as via e-mail at AGR.AnimalControl@ct.gov. Those wishing to make a report can remain anonymous.

A reasonable suspicion of child maltreatment can be made to the Child Abuse and Neglect Careline by dialing 1-800-842-2288. The Careline is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Callers to the Careline can remain anonymous.

