

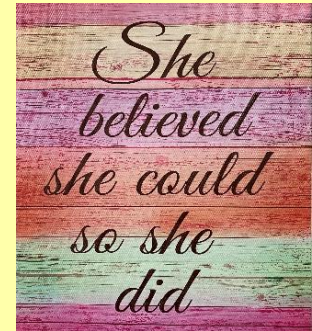
A Message from Commissioner Dorantes



Back to school and back to a better normal. As we prepare for another school year, we are reminded of the important relationships we have established with our educational partners as we collaboratively work to support children and families in our school communities.

In this month's, "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter, read about Dr. Glen Worthy, an educator in his 30th year, who is now serving as the Department's Educational Administrator for Juvenile Justice Services. A tough job? Is it any surprise the Department hired a former college linebacker for this role? He will lead a unit to oversee the education of youth in justice facilities, and who are incarcerated, to ensure their academic success. Linebackers fill the gaps - Dr. Worthy is a perfect fit!

The journey thought post-secondary education can be humbling. National statistics show that only 3-7% of youth in foster care will graduate college as compared to 30% of all Americans. With strong support from our Regional Office staff and Central Office Post-Secondary Educational Consultants, our youth will attend over 80 programs this Fall including as far away as Florida, Colorado, Utah and California!



Our youth are resilient and can teach us so many lessons to improve our child serving systems. For Stephanie Cooper, graduating from college at one point was a dream filled with twists and turns. Read how the dream all came true on a Saturday afternoon as she walked across the stage at Central Connecticut State University to receive her diploma. With one day in between, she began work on Monday - at Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford - side by side with youth involved with DCF.



We also highlight LPN Marcia Cherry who saved a life at Solnit South. Her personal story is one filled with giving back, compassion and serving others. Read as the "Mayor of Solnit" speaks about the children and youth she serves, her amazing intervention when she heard the words, "he's choking," and the request for a hug an hour later from the young man whose life has been forever changed.

Did you know August is also Dog Month? We were hosted by the Connecticut Human Society and reinforced our collaboration with the Department of Agriculture and the cross reporting of animal cruelty and child abuse. "Fernando" and his rescue pals are there awaiting safe and permanent homes..... Sound familiar?



August 31st is International Overdose Awareness Day. Let us pause in remembrance of all those lives lost due to substance misuse. The overdose deaths represent mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. Please continue to work together with our Agency Area Resource Group Clinicians to understand the impact of substances and the families we all serve.

Together we usher in a new school year.

Together we help each other.

Together we protect (human and furry) little ones.

Together we strengthen supports!

Thank you all!



"Can I please give you a hug because you saved my life?"



Marcia Cherry is referred to as the "Mayor of Solnit." It is easy to understand given her infectious energy and enthusiasm. "I know everyone," she stated. "Coming here is not work. I love what I do."

She is now known as a hero after saving the life of a choking youth.

This is not the first time she has played a critical role in someone's life - this is simply who she is.

While Marcia's career began at the Albert J. Solnit Center South Campus 16 years ago, her dedication to others and compassionate ways started upon high school graduation as her mother asked her to move in with her ailing grandparents.

Marcia's grandmother suffered a broken ankle. She was also unable to read which complicated the administration of pain medication. Marcia developed a system to place the pills inside manila envelopes and drew pictures on each indicating the time of day the dosage should be taken. The morning pills were placed in the "sunshine and coffee" envelope with lunch indicated by a "sandwich" picture and evening was marked with "moon and stars."

When Marcia's grandfather was suffering with terminal cancer, hospice staff taught her how to bring him comfort by giving him morphine. She was constantly by his side.

These experiences influenced Marcia's decision to become a Certified Nurse's Assistant (CNA) in 1997 and she later became a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) in 2004. After finishing nursing school, she worked in a hospital with Alzheimer's patients.

Marcia was encouraged to apply to Solnit South, formerly known as Riverview Hospital, by her sister-in-law who was a Department of Children and Families Social Worker at the time. She never looked back.

Marcia's work started on a unit as a floor nurse. She believes you need to be a "special person" to work at the facility. "This is not for everyone. You must have compassion and be patient," she often tells others.



"I am a mother first," Marcia stated when asked about her approach to the children and youth she serves. Marcia describes "pouring love" she has for her own children into those at Solnit. After all, Marcia started at the facility while her first child was four years old and gave birth to her second child early in her tenure - after a concerning episode. While four months pregnant, she was kicked in the abdomen by a youth during a restraint. Thankfully everyone was alright - there is more to this story.

In testament to her character, Marcia looked beyond this incident and saw a young girl in need and without family support. She later gained permission to mentor this youth upon her discharge. She visited her, took her shopping, bowling and became an active support to this adolescent female. "I was glad I was part of her journey," Marcia stated when speaking proudly of knowing this former resident is now functioning well as a young adult and completed community college.



This "joy" she feels when reaching a child starts with her hands-on approach. "I'm going to get on the floor and talk to them," she stated when she sees a child in need. For one particular young girl who experienced difficulty trusting and talking to others, she sat next to her and they read a poetry book together. "Look beyond their behaviors," is one of her core beliefs.

"Don't quit. Don't give up on our kids," she emphatically stated.

A combination of motherly instincts and training put Marcia in a critical situation one day while giving new employees a tour of the facility. "He's choking," Marcia heard when entering the cafeteria. She quickly asked the other youth sitting at the table to move aside and performed the Heimlich maneuver on an adolescent male while a roomful of youth and staff watched.



Marcia was trained in this technique yet never performed it on a live person. "I didn't even think about it. I just acted," Marcia stated. The technique was successful, and the youth began unobstructed breathing.

The entire cafeteria of youth and staff applauded her efforts. "You saved him from choking," one resident yelled.

"You're my hero and you don't even wear a cape," another told her.

An hour later, the young man saw Marcia in the hallway. "Can I please give you a hug, because you saved my life," he asked her. We all know what happened next.

Since 2019, Marcia has been the Staff Development Coordinator at the facility. She is the first face new employees see upon hire. Diligently, she works to retain new hires, knowing the demands of the job amidst a national nursing shortage.

Marcia speaks highly of the dedication of those who work at Solnit South. "We all stuck together a team," when describing the efforts at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. At one point, she was working from 6:30 a.m. until 10:30 p.m. to take temperatures of staff entering the building.

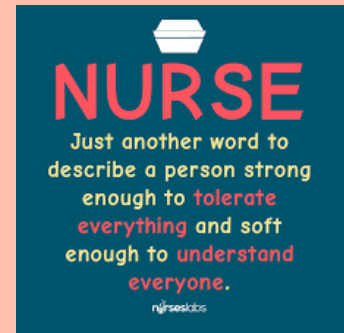
Marcia is continuing her education, parenting two children, managing a family and yes, making sure "King" her pit bull has all his needs met.

What does Marcia say to others when describing the youth at the facility? "You have to get to know them for yourself. They can be so terrible on paper," she stated. "We are here for the kids. Look beyond the behavior."

"The kids come first."

"God put me here for a reason," she speaks of her journey to Solnit South and her experiences.

Thank you, Marcia Cherry, for all you give to each and every one of us!



Dr. Glen Worthy - "How do I support you?"



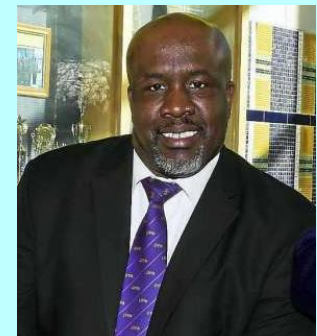
As Dr. Glen Worthy was being introduced to Senior Leadership at the Department of Children and Families, the fire alarm went off in the hallway and interrupted the meeting. A coincidence or a sign of things to come?

He is now the Department's Educational Administrator for Juvenile Justice Services. Created pursuant to Public Act 21-174, this new position will direct a unit that provides educational oversight for students on a high school diploma (non-GED) track in all justice facilities or who are incarcerated. The goal is to create standardization, reentry processes and quality assurance across the system while continuing to assess for needed resources to meet the needs of this unique population.

Challenges are nothing new to this career educator in his 30th year. After all, he was a former Honorable Mention All-American linebacker at Western Connecticut State University. Before attending Western Connecticut, he attended Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven and after he graduated from Western with a degree in Health Education, he returned to Wilbur Cross as a Head Football coach.

He is the first child in his family to graduate from college.

Dr. Worthy has been given some of the toughest assignments in New Haven. As a principal at Hill Central, a K-8 school, he launched a "turnaround" effort to overhaul this low-performing school. Using a "distributive leadership" model, along with natural staff attrition, he rebuilt the school which led to a dramatic increase in reading proficiency scores among other improvements.



He later was named principal of James Hillhouse High School. Here, he walked into a school without equity across classes especially in advanced placement with little structure to prepare students for college.

Staff did not feel a connection to administration. The culture was not conducive to learning.

Dr. Worthy was intent on developing a family atmosphere at the school. He walked the halls, and "spent time with kids in the hallway" to understand their needs. "Buy in from staff on the first day," is how he articulated his approach. He developed a leadership team which included the youth voice.

"Always approachable," is how he describes his style with the students and their families.

"Be ready for college atmosphere," is what Dr. Worthy sought to establish. He implemented more resources for college courses and re-instated the construction and automotive programs for youth who were not college bound in order to learn a trade. In partnership with Gateway

Community College, he developed a program for students to earn an associate degree as an x-ray or surgical technician.

"Education is the key for our kids to be successful," he stated. It is also the key to "break that cycle of poverty."



As principal, Dr. Worthy was also aware that some of his students were placed into justice facilities. "They did not have a good support system," he stated. The majority of these youth had gaps in their education, and they felt they were "not going to be successful in school." What Dr. Worthy believed these youth needed was actually more contact with adults in a smaller setting.

One particular youth made a lasting impression on him. A Freshman at Hillhouse had a reputation for fighting in the community and people were actually afraid of him. "He was one of the toughest kids I ever met," is how Dr. Worthy described him.

This youth eventually was incarcerated at Manson Youth Institution only to return to Hillhouse over a year later. At 16 years old, he had only achieved 3 credits when the 16 would have been the age-appropriate number. He was the typical "over age and under accredited" youth.

"I was invested in him and others like him," Dr. Worthy recalls.

With intensive support, but most importantly, a belief in what he was capable of, this youth graduated to community college.

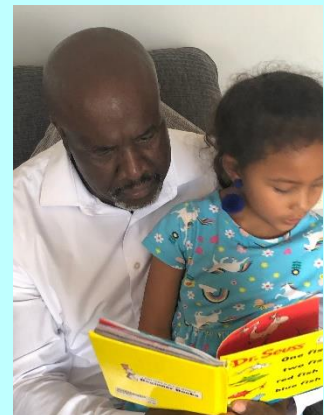
"Mr. Worthy, you are okay," the youth stated in a quiet moment with Dr. Worthy.

"The biggest achievement I have felt," is how Dr. Worthy reflects back his work as principal at Hillhouse.

When asked why he would accept a position DCF at this point in his career his response was clear. "It intrigued me," he stated. "I have a plan. We need to change the system for these kids to be successful."

Dr. Worthy has a vision for his new role - to ensure a quality education for each student in a justice facility.

One strategy is to implement universal screenings in math and reading and monitor progress of all students at the beginning, middle and end of placement in a facility. The results of the screening will then follow the youth to their next educational setting, but most importantly, will give us direction on how to support our students in their learning.



Professional development of staff is another important element as is data to document the successes of the programs as well as sharing best practices across the system.

"They are here. It is not a regular school," he indicated yet this should not allow anyone to have low expectations of what the youth are capable of achieving.

"The question is, how do I hold everyone accountable including myself," he stated.

Success is everyone's responsibility.

"How do I support you," he will constantly ask the students and staff.

Welcome Dr. Glen Worthy and best of luck!

"Find the good in everything."



"Awesome and a little crazy," are the words used by Stephanie Cooper to describe graduation day at Central Connecticut State University. That smile while walking across the stage. The cap and gown. Family in attendance.

A college graduate!

The day was not yet over. After the ceremony, Stephanie visited her mother's gravesite and with diploma in hand, took a picture.

Mom would be so proud.

We all have a personal story. Stephanie Cooper is our teacher of resilience, determination, advocacy and giving back while we are the students - learning from her to assist the next child or youth in our path.

Stephanie spent a brief period of time in foster care as a young child before being reunified with her family. At 10 years of age, Stephanie's mother died of cancer and her aunt became her legal guardian via Probate Court hearings.

It is these early childhood experiences which Stephanie believes formed the foundation for her empathetic and compassionate ways. "I was the mom of the group," she stated when describing relationships with peers and friends. "Super caring" is another term she used when referring to the concern she has for others.

Stephanie aspires to be a human rights lawyer and a commitment to college was the first step towards achieving that goal. "I love learning," Stephanie stated. She has a particular interest in African American history and can "talk about history all day long."

National statistics show that only 3-7% of youth in foster care will graduate college as compared to 30% of all Americans. Stephanie was up for the challenge.

"It was a long run," Stephanie stated as she recalled her college years.

Yet, due to finances, this opportunity was almost not possible.

Given Stephanie's guardianship was transferred via Probate, she was not eligible for a college subsidy through the Department of Children and Families.

Finances were extremely difficult to piece together. Significant loans were taken out to pay for classes, room, and board.



In contrast, a couple of Stephanie's siblings were adopted after their mother passed away, making them eligible for the DCF college subsidy and receiving annual stipends to offset tuition.

Stephanie's desires to pursue a degree were balanced with the college debt she continued to incur. She continued to move forward and commenced efforts to change the system.

Stephanie, while still attending the University, began advocating to impact Connecticut Statutes regarding financial subsidies for youth who experienced a transfer of guardianship. Her goal is to draw attention to the vast differences in financial support between these youth and those adopted.

She has now spoken multiple times with Legislators, in front of committees examining subsidy determinations broadcast on Connecticut Television Network (CT-N) and may pursue further advocacy efforts in the upcoming legislative session.

Stephanie is the voice of thousands of youth across Connecticut who seek a more equitable system.



"I want to be in a history book," Stephanie explained. "I want to be at a podium one day in front of a large crowd talking about how things are going to change." The dream may also take her to Washington D.C. where she has visited on a number of occasions as she is fond of the culture.

Stephanie was recently accepted into Howard University to pursue a Master of Social Work degree and has committed to begin their on-line program despite the high loans again she must incur to pay for her education.

Stephanie will also be working full-time as less than 48 hours after graduation, and hours after her party ended, Stephanie began her career as a Youth Development Specialist (YDS) at Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford. Her role is to work with over 50 youth to assist them in developing goals and an individualized success plan. "I was going to go into something I knew I enjoyed," she stated.

She is now a role model for youth in the care and custody of DCF. Many of whom do not like the Department's place in their lives.

What is her message to the youth she now serves?

"Being involved with DCF has nothing to do with them. They did not cause the involvement," she advises these young adults. "Take advantage of supports DCF has to offer."

"Do not ever give up," she emphatically answered when asked about the messages she delivers to those who are in a similar situation she experienced years ago. "You have to ask for help. You have to advocate and cannot do everything for yourself."

Stephanie sees firsthand the challenges of today's young people. They may feel disempowered, without a voice or uncertain about their future. "Youth are afraid to ask for help," she stated.

In regard to advocating for yourself, she is equally clear in her message. "Putting your feelings first does not make you selfish," she tells those on her caseload. "Be interdependent and not independent," are more words of her wisdom.

"Advocate."

Stephanie should be commended on her strength and perseverance. She is strong. Insightful and has already impacted so many.

While early life experiences posed challenges, she rose to the occasion time and time again.

"Find the good in everything," she stated.

Beautiful words to live by.

