

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



# A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...

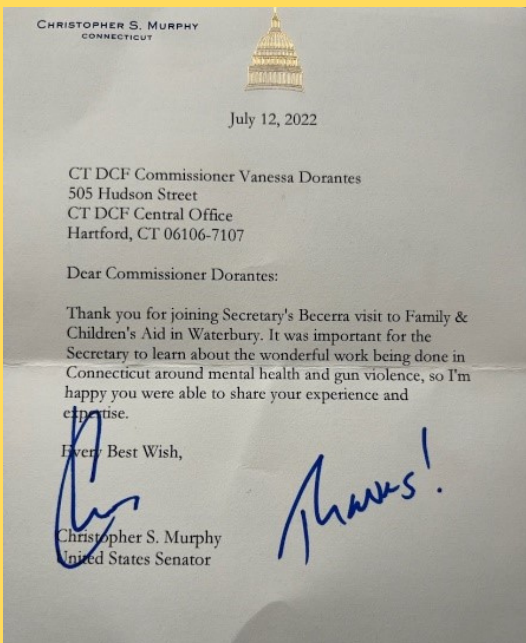


July tends to be full of hot summer days, time off for vacations and a slower pace in the work - not true here at DCF. Our month was filled with many events and success stories which demonstrate the successes of our system when families, the Department, and the community collaborate.

Earlier in July, Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra visited Connecticut. I participated in a roundtable discussion at Family and Children's Aid in Waterbury with Senator Chris Murphy, Representative Jahana Hayes, Representative Rosa DeLauro, and community providers to discuss HHS funding in the recently passed Gun Violence Prevention Bill.



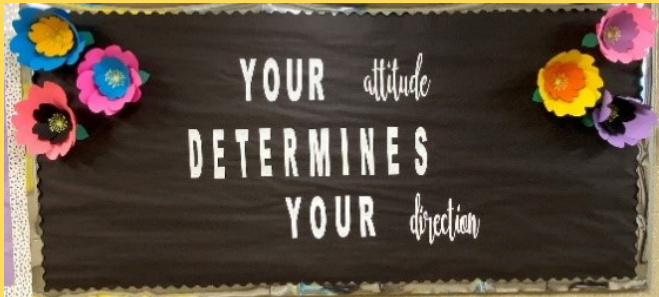
Sponsored and arranged by Casey Family Programs, Connecticut was honored to host a contingent of Congressional aides from around the country. First on the site visit agenda was a discussion of the Department's vision for transformation to a child wellbeing system.



Voices of individuals impacted by child welfare system involvement were prominent during a lunchtime panel. Senior Leaders discussed the process of developing a Plan of Safe Care for families with substance-exposed infants, and we also shared progress towards implementation of our Family First prevention plan. The visit culminated with trips to community provider agencies and included presentations of promising outcomes towards reunification, services to families and the resource center model.

We were so proud to show off Connecticut and to demonstrate efficacy of federal policies implemented here.

We also want to thank the staff at the Wilderness School for another fantastic graduation! One of the three groups of youth returning from expeditions participated in a unique collaboration between DCF and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) to incorporate summer youth employment and an environmental conservation corps, which introduced youth to environmental sciences.



In the midst of national workforce challenges, our employees at Solnit North and Solnit South provide continuous care to children and youth 24/7 365 days a year. My sincere gratitude for your tireless efforts to keep both campuses safe and functioning. We appreciated our candid discussion during the listening tour, and we will be back!

Our Spotlight this month highlights great outcomes for the children and families we serve. Read as two siblings are now placed with kin in Alaska! You will hear how "Team Waterbury" supported this family, resulting in these adolescents finding their permanent home.

For Joseph, DCF and community support came at the right time as he was experiencing "a very low time..." Today, he is sober, a proud father and one who credits the non-judgmental attitudes of two specific Social Workers for his successes.

Our foster parents are unique in their devotion to children. For one family, they became licensed specifically to support children in the district where one teaches! And...that foster parent became teacher of the year! Spend some time reading their inspirational story and how they partner with birth parents towards reunification - all the children placed into their home have returned to their families!

July was also a significant marker for statewide retirements. As we said "so long" to a host of colleagues who have become friends, we hope that their legacy will be the strength of an Agency left stronger because of their commitment to service. We'll miss them all and carry on great work in their honor!

I hope that all of you have been able to spend some rejuvenation time with your families this Summer.

Rest up, stay safe and know your efforts are truly appreciated.



# Psychological Safety Found Across the Country



After sending 30-40 text messages a day, a goodbye party with their family at a local restaurant, an emotional airport sendoff, 9 hours of flight time and retrieving 13 bags of luggage, two siblings ran into the arms of kin and found permanency - in Alaska!

It was a journey to get here. A story at times almost not believable or practical. Despite the difficulties, "Team Waterbury" and the devoted efforts of Social Worker Brittney Kilfeather made it all happen.

"In theory, everything we do builds a foundation for our families," stated Brittney. These are not simply words. They exemplify the values and principles which have guided Brittney's work over the past six years.

Providing supports to adolescents in the care and custody of the Department can be a challenging task. It takes skill, patience, and an understanding of how the effects of childhood trauma manifest themselves in school truancy, risky behaviors, running away, disrupted placements, difficulty engaging with supports and lack of trust in adults. Yet, the Department has seen great success with our adolescent population thanks to the tremendous efforts of the staff who serve them as evidenced by this story.

For the two siblings Brittney supported, each day over the past 23 months brought with it a new twist and turn.

She never gave up.

"I will always tell you the truth," Brittney told them during their countless conversations about options for permanency. "I will not be here forever. My job is to provide them with the knowledge which will guide them in making healthy decisions," she stated.

These siblings, along with many others in the foster care system, have allegiances to their birth parents





"Our work is not about severing relationships. It's about building positive ones," Brittney stated. The birth family and extended family members were made part of the plans to support these youth and maintain those connections while they were in our care and custody.

The collaboration and engagement with the family proved beneficial as the children were placed in multiple kinship placement throughout their time in care. These particular placements were not in a position to achieve permanency with the children; however, they continue to maintain a strong, daily connection with them and serve as a part of the children's natural supports.

Recently, one family member contacted the Department and offered to be a kinship placement despite the knowledge of some pretty substantial barriers, namely, being a resident of Alaska and ineligible at that time for licensing.

They maintained contact with the two siblings, became a visiting resource, developed a relationship with the youths' foster mother and was given permission to sleep at the foster home during short stays when they were in town.

"I am a huge concurrent planner," Brittney stated. "We always kept this person in the back of our minds." They were not ruled out as a potential kinship provider.

Brittney realized the siblings needed more and were unable to fully embrace the supports offered. "You are never going to be able to do anything, therapy, etc. until you feel psychologically safe," Brittney stated. "Kids need a real connection to their birth family and their identity to have that psychological safety. You can't move out of your comfort zone if you don't have a comfort zone."

In her experience, Brittney has seen the positive effects of kinship placements. She believes that when children and youth are placed with kin, it takes the pressure off them needing to be perfect. "Kids know they have these traumatic experiences," Brittney stated. "They feel the responsibility to do better and behave well and make it easier on the parents." When



placed with kin, the youth may take comfort that their parents know where they are and that they are okay. "They don't have to worry about me, I am with family and now they can worry about themselves and their own goals," she articulated what the child may feel about their placement.

The family member began to pursue licensing in their home state and continued to express their desires to care for the siblings. An inquiry again was made as to what it would take to have the siblings placed.

This prompted Brittney to have another pointed permanency conversation to ensure that the resource had a good understanding of the children's short-term and long-term goals. The permanency options were explained one more time to the siblings as she also answered their questions. "Can you explain the differences again, and what they mean?" Brittney stated was a common response she received.

The family agreed - pursue placement!

From that point on, it took coordination from multiple people within DCF to put the plan into action. Brittney describes Amanda Nowak in the CT ICPC office as "phenomenal." Chris Donelan and Kim Watson in Fiscal were described as "wonderful."

The siblings were anxious. "One sibling texted all day every day," said Brittney. The texts just kept coming.

All approvals were granted and supports were arranged. Time to go!

Brittney had the car packed the night before, and along with Social Worker Julianne Chacho, brought the girls to say goodbye to their family who then followed them to the airport to hug them one more emotional time. The family was in support of the plan - allowing the siblings to feel even more positive about their future.

The flights were long and in typical sibling fashion, they needed to be separated to allow some "space." But overall, they were very excited about this new adventure.

Upon arrival, the siblings saw their family member, ran downstairs, and the three joined in a group hug. They had a quick tour of the house and found the bedrooms already set up as they played with the family dogs.



Brittney described feeling "an overwhelming sense of relief."

Over the next couple of days, the siblings texted Brittney first thing in the morning. They all went site seeing, ate dinner and went to watch the whales at sunset.



"It was heartwarming to see these two wonderful young people embrace this new life for themselves. A life which they helped choose," Brittney affirmed. The siblings had a voice when it came to these decisions. Their decisions were not made for them but in partnership with the siblings and family.

It was time to leave and let the family settle into being a family - for that psychological safety to begin to develop.

Brittney had one additional thought- she had to write the narrative for the trip to document each and every of this multi-day problem.

"I just finished the narrative," she remembers Julie saying as they walked out of the family's home.

"Julie had already been documenting the details since the adventure started the day prior, ensuring that she captured every aspect of the trip in real time," Brittney stated.

Since placement, Brittney has maintained consistent contact with the family. The siblings are described as "doing phenomenally" and adjusting well.

Plans are underway to transfer guardianship.

"Brittney is a fantastic social worker who puts 100% effort in every family that comes across her desk. I am always amazed by her level of professionalism, her ability to pull people together, and her ability to connect to her families. As exemplified in this story, she is the consummate advocate for all the children on her caseload," stated Social Work Supervisor Mark Williams.

This was a long journey. For the rest of their lives, this family will forever feel the diligent and determined efforts of someone who never gave up on them.

Congratulations to Brittney and Team Waterbury for this tremendous success!

*Identifying information in this story has been slightly altered in order to protect the confidentiality of the family.*



# "I Love Knowing They Feel Safe With Me."



"Go get your daughter." For Joseph, those words will forever be etched in his memory. The day he received a call that his young child was living in an unsafe environment, Joseph knew he had to act quickly. For seven months, the children's mother prevented him from seeing them, only allowing a handful of phone calls with his daughter and minimal contact with his son facilitated by a relative.

"I was hearing bad things," he shared. During this time, he also admits he was struggling with substance use issues and other stressors, including housing instability. "That was a very low time in my life."

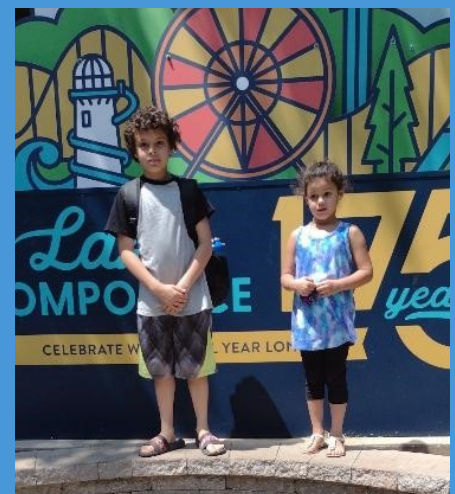
Joseph was finally able to gain an address for his daughter by speaking to the mother's partner. As he turned down the street, there was his little girl, with her belongings, standing on the side of the road with an unrelated male. Joseph picked her up and brought both his children to live with him in the home of a relative, Ken Szniavel, who graciously opened his home to the family and who has been a constant support.

"It was time for me to step up more for them," said Joseph. He felt good about himself.

he following day Joseph received a call from the Department as allegations of child maltreatment had been made. "I started crying," Joseph stated. "I always heard bad stories about DCF," he shared, including children being removed from their parents, conflicts with Social Workers and an unwavering bureaucratic state agency.

He found the opposite.

Joseph initially worked with Investigator Theresa Fitol from the Milford Office. His opinion of the Agency immediately started to change. "She was understanding and listened. Heard my story," Joseph affirmed. "She did not judge me."





He realized that in order to be the best father he could be, he needed to accept the supports offered. Shortly after DCF knocked on the door, Joseph embraced help and is now proud to say he is 18 months sober. "It all happened right at the right time," Joseph stated. "The children needed me."

Joseph was honest with the Agency and felt a camaraderie with Theresa. "Being 100% truthful to her meant a lot," he explained. The decision was made to keep the case open and continuing supporting Joseph and his children.

Social Work Supervisory Jennifer Carey-Walker agrees with Joseph's assessment of Theresa, stating, "Theresa is an extremely passionate social worker. She approaches each case with a new lens without judgement. She recognizes that every person has strengths and weaknesses and builds upon their strengths. Theresa ensures that everyone has a voice and deserves to be respected no matter what the situation. As a result of all of this, Theresa has been able to make a profound impact on the families that she serves."

Jillian Robichaud of the Bridgeport Office then began supporting the family. Joseph describes her as "awesome" and a "real nice lady." He felt she took his lead on the supports that he wanted, without judgment. If Joseph would call or text, Jillian would quickly get back to him.

They made a great team as referrals for parenting classes, medical appointments, therapists for his daughter and enrollment in schools were made. During the holidays, Jillian delivered Christmas presents.

Again, Joseph experienced Agency Social Workers who listened to his story, were judgement free and simply wanted to help.

"Joseph had not always lived with his children but stepped up immediately to care for them when we became involved. He was always honest about the challenges he was facing and willing to accept help, and this helped so much in our work together to provide him the right supports and services. It was very rewarding to work with a father that had such a strong commitment to his children and willingness to better himself for them," stated Social Worker Jillian Robichaud.





Given Joseph's past struggles, he is acutely aware of how others perceive him. "People judge me without knowing me." That was not the experience he had with DCF.

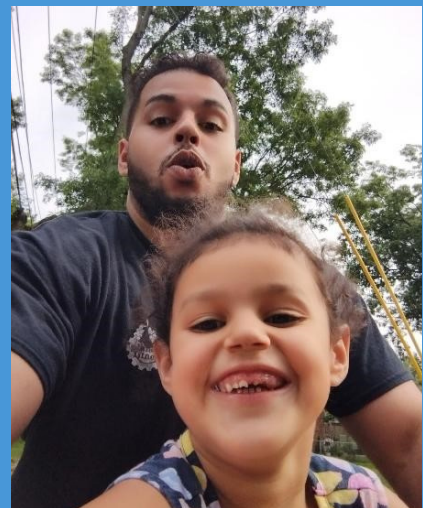
Joseph describes benefitting greatly from community-based services. Three days a week he attended parenting classes and enhanced his knowledge of childhood development, grief and how each child needs individualized attention. Joseph admits that initially he was scared to parent his children alone. Now, he is more confident. "I love being there for them," he stated.

"I've stepped up a lot," Joseph affirmed. He is now putting in 100% of his effort into his children. "You can't just be the fun guy." Parenting is hard work. In fact, he actually gave up a job he loved at UPS, as it took too much time away from his parenting, and the job responsibilities conflicted with childcare.

What would Joseph tell other parents who are involved with DCF? "Be honest. Don't be scared. Don't think that DCF is only in this to take the children."

In speaking of his children, Joseph is clear what he wants for their future. "I want my son and daughter to live a happy and comfortable life."

**"I love knowing they feel safe with me."**



**"No one can ever have too many people that love them."**

For Rebecca Atkins and Andrew Lee, fostering a child was something that they aspired to do once they were married and settled. The couple, who has no children of their own, was first asked to be a resource for a student before they were married. Although it was something that they strongly considered, it was not a good time at that point in their lives, but it began the conversation about caring for children.

As educators in the public school system, Rebecca and Andrew saw the need for foster care resources in their community. Once they were settled, the couple began fostering in 2018, with reunification being of utmost importance. They decided to become foster parents for any student who needed them.

Rebecca and Andrew have fostered six children over the past four years, all of whom were either students or

connected to students that they taught in the school system. Rebecca explained that if a child can stay in a familiar setting while their family works on becoming healthy, the child will thrive.

All of the children who were placed with the family eventually reunified.



One teenage boy they fostered was the top wrestler in high school. Now 19 years old, the young man reached out via text to share exciting news about his job, his new apartment, and his volunteer work with the high school wrestling team. He is now competing at an adult level, working towards the professional MMA. "I appreciated you taking me in for that period of time and teaching me and supporting me. You and Andrew are great people," he texted.

Rebecca explained how proud she is and how important it is to her and Andrew to stay connected to the children they fostered and their birth families. "These are the outcomes that need to be shared with others," she added.

As a new foster parent, Rebecca did a lot of reading and tried to find her own support system. When others would learn that she and Andrew were foster parents, there was always a familiar statement of, "it's so great you do that, but..." Rebecca feels strongly that if more people would take that "but" out of the equation, so much more love, connection, perspective, and support could occur.

Rebecca left the field of education and is now a consultant, with her focus remaining on child wellbeing. Andrew, who was named "2022 Teacher of the Year" for the Norwich Public School system, recently left daily classroom teaching to join the district's focus on students' behavioral issues. Andrew has gone above and beyond the regular duties of a school teacher, making a profound impact on the school, the district, and his community. His holistic approach as an educator has improved the quality of life for many children in foster care.

"We can't let the fear of risk deter us from fostering. Loving a child and having them leave sounds scary, and the unknown about the entire experience can be scary as well," Rebecca explained.

"We need to consider for a moment how it must feel for that child or teen that has to walk through your door to stay a while. What must drive us is that no one can ever have too many people that love them."

