

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



## A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...

Over the years, the summer used to signal a bit of a slow-down for our work. Not anymore. The Department has been quite busy, and June was no exception.

Team CT represented us wonderfully during the **New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors' Pathways to Partnership** regional convening. Representatives from all six New England states participated in two days of information sharing on better ways child welfare systems can engage families. By listening to persons with lived expertise, we become a more responsive system that can tailor our service delivery in ways that parents feel more included, heard, and respected during our interactions.



By mid-June, I was again speaking about our work during the **American Public Human Services Association's National Summit**.

Over the past 90 years, APHSA has brought together federal, state, and local leaders to "...influence modern policies and practices that support the health and well-being of all children and families and that lead to stronger communities."

Attendees at this convening participated in plenary sessions, design labs and breakout workshops all centered around charting our next course of service. Raising awareness of the tremendous work happening across CT DCF is vitally important as we continue to evolve.

Did you know that June is Reunification month? We are deliberately taking the opportunity to celebrate children safely

*New England Child Welfare Transformation - Pathways to Partnership*

**New England Child Welfare Transformation at the Front Door**  
Pathways to Partnership  
June 6-7, 2022

AAA Team CT: DCF DC Hill, Lily, Lina Esposito, Myke Halpin, CMSR Dorantes, AC Velez, Sana Cotten, Chris Scott, Corinna Martin, Melissa Kremmel & DC Williams

<< Nat'l Child Welfare Consultant, CT's own Dee Bonnick w/ Cmsr & DC



l-r Elaine Zimmerman  
Regional Administrator  
ACF Reg 1,  
CT DCF Cmsr Dorantes &  
Associate Cmsr  
Aysha Schomburg ACF



CT DCF Cmsr Dorantes &  
January Contreras

Assistant Secretary,  
Administration for Children  
and Families

returning home to parents strengthened by collaborative efforts across our system. Over the past 12 months, over **550** children have been reunified increasing the total during the pandemic to over **1,200** with a fresh start in the bonds of resilient families.

Successful outcomes are not achieved simply by our agency acting in isolation. In this month's *Spotlight on What's Right*, we hear from two fathers, **Tai Thergood** and **Olger Zuniga**, who have each been reunified with their children. Read about their journeys making Father's Day even more special this year.

Speaking of dads, two great events this month highlighted DCF's Fatherhood work. "Best Dad by Par" was a golf event hosted by the Department to underscore the importance of a father in the life of a child including the unique role of foster fathers. This awesome Fatherhood mural was unveiled on the side of the DCF Hartford Regional Office during a heavily covered press conference.



Speakers at that big reveal shared the collaborative efforts to empower and engage fathers between DCF, the state agencies represented in the **CT Fatherhood Initiative (CFI)** through the **Department of Social Services My People Clinical Services, The Village for Children and Families--Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES)** and **The Rise Up Group**.



"**You** are to be celebrated...for your uniqueness!" In this PRIDE month edition of our newsletter, **Kaelana Dauber**, a Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) receiving supports from the Department is highlighted. She teaches us through her courageous journey as member of the LGBTQIA+ community and the message she wishes to impart to other youth in care.





**Cultural humility** expects that we are open to continual learning and earnest understanding of the historically significant factors impacting members of a collective society. Read more about cultural humility in this article: [What is Cultural Humility? 3 Principles for Social Workers](#)  
**Governor Lamont** signed into law Public Act 22-128 recognizing June 19th as a CT state holiday. Beginning in 2023 **Juneteenth**, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. Watch the Juneteenth Bill Signing and this historic moment for Connecticut.

**TOGETHER we are "partnering with communities and empowering families to raise resilient children who thrive."** This is our mission. It has been embodied throughout this month with all our collective actions.

Thank You!

## "The third time's the charm."

Tai Thergood's children made him breakfast on Father's Day. Gone are the memories of being alone on this special occasion, wondering when and if his children would be returned to his care.

Later that week, he was the featured speaker during the Region 1 Fatherhood Engagement Training. Staff from the Department of Children and Families were his captive audience - adding another chapter to his intriguing life story and the lessons he can teach us.



Mr. Thergood's journey to arrive at this point in his life was painful. It also was reflective of the systems he encountered and implicit bias about not just fatherhood engagement, but also the potential role of fathers overall in the life of their children. Mr. Thergood does not hold onto the past. "In the end, it becomes a glory story," he stated when asked about what reunification felt like when he knew his children were coming home.

On three separate occasions, the Department of Children and Families became involved with Mr. Thergood and his family. The first time, a relative contacted the Department. He was working 80+ hours a week as a contracted security guard for movie sets and was not fully aware of all the conditions in his home when he was not present. A week after DCF's initial visit, he received a phone call to ask his opinion of the situation. "After DCF figured out my schedule, I was pushed aside," he stated. Circumstances in the home required his young child to be removed yet he scarcely met with Department staff and paternal supports were not explored. The child was eventually reunified.

**Fatherhood Engagement Training**

**Interview with**

**TAI THERGOOD**

June 21 2022 • 10 AM  
Norwalk

June 22 2022 • 10 AM  
Bridgeport

SCAN ME

PRESENTED BY **ABDUL-RAHMAAN I MUHAMMAD** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
MY PEOPLE CLINICAL SERVICES

For more information contact  
Marc Williams at [marc.williams@ct.gov](mailto:marc.williams@ct.gov)

Visit us at [mypeople-ct.com](http://mypeople-ct.com)

**MY PEOPLE**  
SUPPORT • EMPOWER • RESOLVE

Upon the second DCF involvement, Mr. Thergood admits he was upset based on his first experience. He was pointed in his statements to the Investigator and believes his actions were interpreted as "aggressive" instead of being understood in the context of genuine emotion being expressed by a frustrated and concerned parent. "I didn't know what to do but cry," he stated. "I talked to the worker in a very harsh way and took myself out of being considered." He apologized to the Social Worker, but "it was too late."

Removal again was necessary, and Mr. Thergood put a plan in place to reunify. "This is not me," he remembered saying to himself. He decided to move out of the house, secured his own 1-bedroom apartment and even brought pictures to court of his living conditions including the refrigerator. He was told his place was too small for an adult and two children and reunification would not occur.

Mr. Thergood began writing letters, sending e-mails, and advocating for himself, which included offering up a cousin who was already licensed as a foster parent to care for his children. After almost two years, his children were reunified to both parents. He questioned why it took this long and why his interests as a father appeared not to have been heard or acknowledged.

A period of time later, Mr. Thergood realized his children were not being cared for in a safe and nurturing environment. Proactively, he took them to live with a family member where he could only stay for a short time. The Department again was called to investigate resulting in the same outcome - the children were removed.

Mr. Thergood was not in a position to care for his children on his own, but he was committed to doing the work to make his life better and take care of his children. "Me being honest was the best thing possible," he stated. "I knew I would be that parent, not just the father, who was being truthful from the beginning."

This third time being involved with DCF was different. "I was given the opportunity to showcase myself," he stated. "The dad I was seen as inside my home was the dad that was seen by others on the outside. I never was horrible."

During this occasion, he also met Social Worker Mario Martins. "The worker had a willingness to work with me," stated Mr. Thergood.

"The third time's the charm."

"Mr. Thergood always kept a positive outlook despite what roadblocks and obstacles he was confronted with. He had a strong desire to persevere and stepped up to play a larger role in his children's lives. My experience with working with him seemed like an unspoken partnership we had towards bettering himself for his children. He was open to engage with what resources and services were available to him to get to where he is now," stated Mr. Martins.

A plan was put into place to support Mr. Thergood towards the goal of reunification. Key to his success was Mr. Sal Hanaif from the Family Re-Entry Fatherhood Program which includes Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES). DCF funds this community based in-home service that works directly with fathers to strengthen father-child bonds and enhance the level of involvement with fathers in their DCF case planning, provision of services and positive parenting.

"He had a lot on his shoulders," Mr. Hanaif remembers of his early work with Mr. Thergood. "Some days, he just came in and talked," he added. "He was a blessed guy who wanted to be there for his kids, he just didn't know how."

Their relationship continued to strengthen. Mr. Thergood stated Mr. Hanaif gave him the "tools of the trade," and taught him that "I had the right to speak up, advocate, switch attorneys and to express yourself." Mr. Thergood refers to Mr. Hanaif as playing the role of "Cus D'Amato to me," in reference to the famous boxing manager and trainer who turned a young and troubled Mike Tyson into the heavyweight champion of the world while serving as his father figure. "He saw me."

Mr. Thergood absorbed whatever information he could. "Human encyclopedia" is how is referred to himself with the way he gained knowledge from Mr. Hanaif.

Mr. Thergood "had affirmations" of the day his children would be reunified. After supervised and unsupervised visits, overnights and weekend sleep overs, the court ruled the children would be coming home! He cried tears of joy and happiness.

Mr. Thergood enthusiastically speaks of teaching others about his journey so the system can improve leading to more positive experiences for other fathers. The student has become the teacher.

"Attitude makes the difference," he stated when speaking of relationships. "Equal partner," is a term he uses when thinking of how families should be viewed in the system.

Congratulations Tai Thergood for all your successes!



## "You are to be celebrated."



"Kaelana Dauber graciously told her life story while recovering from having her wisdom teeth removed. In one text message, she apologized for talking like a "goonies character" during the initial interview, which needed to be rescheduled due to her pain and discomfort.

Overcoming adversity is nothing new in her life. Neither is Kaelana's infectious positive attitude while encouraging others around her to be true to themselves. "Being your authentic self is the most important thing in your life," she stated. No more convincing words to live by.

Kaelana is now a graduate from Western Connecticut State University. She holds dual degrees in Justice and Law as well as Interdisciplinary Studies, with a focus on Social Work and Communication. Her diploma displays her full name - the end result of years of commitment and sacrifice.

Kaelana Dauber also deserves a diploma in courage and strength.

"It is a miracle I even graduated," Kaelana said. As a freshman, she was hit by a car going 60 mph in a school safety zone. While dragging herself from the middle of the road, she realized the force of the impact resulted in the car's license plate being embedded in her leg. Hospitalized for two weeks, Kaelana was initially told she may not walk again given significant nerve damage.

"When I was in the hospital, I was doing my homework," Kaelana shared. She still made the Dean's list, despite also suffering from a traumatic brain injury, the effects of which still impact her today.

During her last year at Western, Kaelana's gallbladder ruptured, requiring immediate surgery. She also needed two hernias repaired, which left her body scarred. "We have this idea of beauty and what we should look like," she mused. "Accept yourself."



Accepting yourself may have come easy for Kaelana Dauber, but expressing herself was not. While in the 5th grade, she came to the realization that she was a lesbian. She recalls that her sex education courses did not teach students how to identify themselves as a "queer youth" nor did they include discussions of LGBTQ issues. "I had to educate myself," she affirmed.

At one point, Kaelana took to Google and searched, "how to have safe sex as a lesbian." She told her very conservative family she was bisexual as a way to please them.

She explained, "It is hard to come out. You are going to be hated by a large percentage of the world because of your authentic self." This inner conflict led to Kaelana at one point contemplating taking her own life. Sexual identity is "not something I chose."

For over a decade, Kaelana kept this part of her identity to herself. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic, in November of 2020, that she decided to come out to her family. Kaelana explained that she identifies as queer. "Being queer is an identification." "Queer" is an encompassing term, referring to sexualities and gender identities "outstanding to regular societal norms" or "which challenge societal norms." Although the word "queer" has been used as a slur, many in the LGBTQIA+ community have reclaimed it and use it as an umbrella term for those who are not heterosexual and/or are not cisgender. She gives credit to a professor at Western Connecticut with assisting her in understanding the full breath of this word and its meaning.

While freely expressing yourself is more common for Kaelana's generation, she acknowledged it may come with a negative stigma from those closest to you.

The reaction from particular family members was harsh.

"Why can't you be normal?" her mother asked. Kaelana let it go for a couple of weeks and her mother eventually apologized. "My normal is not your normal. No one's normal is the same," she quickly pointed out. Another relative posted homophobic and transphobic slurs on social media.





Kaelana is the oldest of 11 siblings. "I have ten younger biological siblings who look up to me," she stated, with other half siblings on her father's side.

Kaelana found comfort in her siblings' reactions when she came out, as they were "100% supportive" and accepting. In fact, some expressed to her that they sensed she was a lesbian even before she spoke with them. "A lot of my personality comes from my siblings," she shared. "My siblings are my fiercest fighters. Everyone is completely different."

er best friend is her brother James. "I keep him calm," she said. James was the first person she came out to, and his accepting

and loving response allowed her to see hope and changed the narrative as she began telling her other siblings.

Kaelana also credits her brother Sean for always being there for her and filling in the place of her own father. "He is the best male role model in my life," she smiled.

After Kaelana came out, her "chosen family," which is her best friend's family, took her in and loved and accepted her for simply who she was and her genuine self. Having a chosen family to love is especially important for youth involved in the LGBTQIA+ community and foster care system. "There is never a shortage of love, and you can always make more when you need it," Kaelana pointed out.

Kaelana is now engaged and plans to marry her partner, Penny, in 2025 after they both finish graduate school. They started dating in March 2020 and Kaelana proposed while in Hawaii in 2021. Penny is a trans woman, with Kaelana being her biggest supporter.

As a Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) Kaelana continues to receive supports from the Department. "Ryan Shove is a great DCF worker," she stated. Kaelana was quick to point out the complexities of working for DCF. "He really does try," she stated as she expressed gratitude for Ryan's ongoing efforts to support her.



Kaelana has a message for other youth involved with the Department. "Be yourself, your most authentic self, only if it is safe," she advised. "It is okay to come out, it is okay to be happy, it is okay to let yourself be happy." She does feel current state law makes Connecticut a state where those in the LGBTQIA+ community can feel safe with their rights being protected.

"You are to be celebrated."

This fall, Kaelana will speak with other LGBTQIA+ youth as part of a program put on by the SUN Scholars - a support she used during college. Kaelana pointed out that staff member Yamia Gibson was particularly helpful

to her as she partnered with Kaelana to find behavioral health supports and other services in the community while navigating college life.

Kaelana aspires to be a Guardian Ad Litem, with a clear understanding of which types of individuals she desires to support. She will advocate for those most in need "with passion and whole heart, and she has already received acceptance letters from the law schools at Cornell University, the University of New Haven, as well as the Criminal Justice program at Georgia State University.

Kaelana wishes to express her gratitude to the Department of Children and Families and Olivia Dudley from Waterbury Youth Services, who assisted her with obtaining school materials. She also thanks Dora Poma from the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAP), as she has been a huge support during her college years. Kaelana's graduation photo was taken by Justin Sprague Photography. Justin is also a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and one of many allies to Kaelana. Lastly, she wishes to thank her foster parents, Doc and Marcia, for the years of care they provided to her.

Whatever Kaelana Dauber decides to do with her life, she will conduct herself in the most genuine manner, true to herself. This is simply who she is, and she will never change.

"We as people are made to be celebrated," affirmed Kaelana Dauber.

We celebrate you, Kaelana Dauber, and all your accomplishments. Most of all, we celebrate you for being your authentic self.



# "I am complete. My happiness finally arrived on my doorstep."

During the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic, what felt like a system stacked against him with countless barriers, waiting lists, court delays, cast judgment, and misconceptions became a motivating force for one father on a mission to get his daughter back home.



From the moment that Olger Zuniga's daughter Aynara was placed in foster care, he worked tirelessly to prove to the Department that she belonged at home with her father. He ensured that he maintained a stable job, had no criminal involvement, a safe place to live, extended family to help him care for Aynara, and a true desire to do whatever it took to reunify with his little girl.

Separated from their child's mother, Mr. Zuniga focused on himself and Aynara, complying with all the Department's expectations and accepted services that were offered to him. They were comprehensive and included Child first, Circle of Security, Fatherhood Support, individual therapy, parenting classes, and Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time (RTFT), a program created to determine a family's readiness for reunification that works with the child, birth family and foster family to support a healthy and successful transition back home.

Hearing from professionals that the child welfare system is set up to favor a mother's efforts, Mr. Zuniga felt that he had to work harder and beg to be seen. "A piece of me was missing, it was a very, very sad time," he said.

Mr. Zuniga grew from never being a primary caretaker, to cooking healthy meals, setting up Aynara's bedroom, learning positive parenting skills, and participating in shared parenting with his daughter's foster parents. Since reunification occurred, he has set scheduled weekend visits for Aynara to continue having regular contact with her siblings.

It was a beautiful experience to witness the whole village support this father's role and ultimately ended with this child achieving permanency," stated Brittany Sanchez, Director of Child Welfare Services from Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut.



Sol Vega, Mr. Zuniga's DCF Social Worker, shared that she had never before worked with a father so dedicated and determined to be reunified with his daughter. She expressed pride in Mr. Zuniga for his commitment to Aynara and his progress with the department. "After he was reunified with his daughter his face completely changed, he seemed alive,

so different, smiling all the time and excited. He thanked me for giving him his life back, but it was because of his openness, patience, and grace that his daughter was able to come home to him."

Mr. Zuniga expressed deep gratitude for Ms. Vega. He believes it was because of her honesty and unconditional support that the two developed a trusting relationship. "She kept her word," Mr. Zuniga explained. "She believed in me at a time when a child's mother seemed more valued than a child's father," he added.

"Mr. Zuniga graciously navigated extensive court delays due to the pandemic and legal maneuvering. He chose to look at the situation from a positive point of view, rather than giving in to frustration and assigning blame. His perseverance paid off, and after many delays, he was successfully reunified with his daughter," stated Social Work Supervisor Erika Striebel.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel," explained Mr. Zuniga. "You might not see the light at the moment, or it might not be that bright, but the light is there, and you have to move towards it."

Reunification with Aynara was that light, and he never gave up.

