

Commissioner's Message



Fall is upon us, and October brings with it two very important themes with Breast Cancer Awareness Month being one of them.

I bring this message to you today as a living testament that early detection saves lives. It was only a few months after Governor Lamont appointed me as Commissioner, that I found out my fight against cancer had begun. Listen to more of my journey [here](#).



Consider this a reminder to yourselves, family members, friends and colleagues to engage in regular screenings - before it's too late.

October is also Intimate Partner Violence Awareness month. In our small state alone, Connecticut has had an average of 14 IPV-related deaths every year since 2000. If you need help or just someone to talk to, please visit [CTSAFEConnect.org](https://www.ctsafeconnect.org) or call or text (888) 774-2900. Advocates are available 24/7. Consider the children exposed, in anyway, and please act.



In this month's, "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter, Jenna Corson tells us how trauma and coercive relationships led to her fentanyl addiction. She is now raising her daughter and living a life she had little hope at one point, could be achieved.

Lenisa Mathew, Director of Organizational Development, supports the DCF workforce during the most difficult circumstances while building "sustained systems" to keep the work moving forward. She provides insights on the strengths of our staff and her unique perspectives on our work.

"Definitely different," is how one mother describes the care her daughter is receiving at Albert J. Solnit Children's Center South Campus. Read about her experiences and the "empathy and skill" demonstrated by the staff towards not just her adolescent - but the entire family.

Unidos - "*Diverse Voices for Stronger Families*" was the theme of the Central Office Diversity Action Team celebration during Hispanic and Latino a/x Heritage Month 2022! A great event! The diversity of our staff reflects the mosaic of ethnicities, cultures, languages, and customs.

We were inspired and uplifted by the Unidos program! We presented the first Dr. William Rivera Humanitarian Award to Bill himself. He was humbled in his appreciation to advancing our immigration, racial justice, and multicultural affairs within DCF.



With great pride, I watched CT DCF be highlighted on the NBC News TODAY show! We are considered a leader nationally for having children remaining safely at home, reunification, our racial justice work, kinship care and family engagement. Watch the full story here: [Today Show](#)

"This is life or death."



Baby Lydia may someday read this story. The words describing the courage of her mother, Jenna Corson, who completely changed her life - after she began loving herself.

"I don't ever want to use again," Jenna stated. "Lydia is the one who got me sober. Today, I am the one keeping me sober."

Jenna's life journey is not easy to hear. To fully appreciate her strength, each detail, failure, insight, and triumph must be understood.

At 14 years of age, Jenna began living on the streets, self-medicating with alcohol and marijuana to numb the pain of early childhood trauma.

While in this vulnerable state, she was preyed upon by a man over a decade older than her. "He wanted to control me," Jenna stated. This coercive relationship included Jenna being held down as he injected a needle full of drugs into her system. He introduced her to crack cocaine.

The relationship ended and Jenna again was homeless - each day simply trying to survive. Recognizing her addiction, she was in and out of multiple rehabilitation programs only to relapse upon discharge.



Jenna's experiences with abusive partners continued. Again, she engaged in a relationship with another individual who "was an addict" and was so demeaning in his verbal abuse, Jenna "cannot repeat" his words because they were so harsh and painful.

The couple fought each day. "That's what I thought love was," Jenna stated. "Being so hateful to one another. I thought this is what I am worth. A good five minutes of a relationship they gave me."

The couple was kicked out of home after home. At one point, they lived in an apartment with no heat, hot water, or electricity. With each failure, Jenna fell deeper into her substance use. "More shame caused me to use more," she stated.

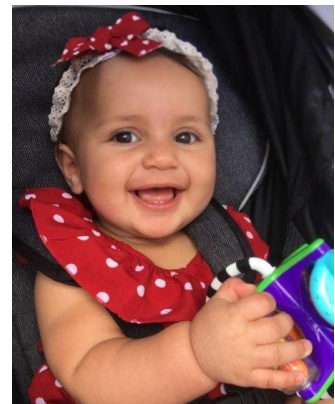
"I was in misery."

While in Stonington Institute detoxification program, Jenna found out she was pregnant. With another unsuccessful attempt to complete treatment, Jenna began using again, eventually gave birth to Lydia.

Lydia was born with fentanyl in her system - a deadly drug responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths across the country.

"I felt like a bad mother," Jenna stated when she learned of the condition of her little girl. "Ashamed and embarrassed" is how she described her feelings knowing that the Department of Children and Families became involved. "Removal was inevitable," she thought.

"My world was crashing down."



Upon DCF involvement, it was assessed that Jenna was not able to keep Lydia safe and the decision was made to place Lydia with kin while Jenna yet again started efforts to rehabilitate. She was told the goal was to have Lydia safely returned to her care - once progress was demonstrated.

"I was terrified I was not going to have the strength to get better," she stated.

Jenna entered The Connection - Hallie House for Women and Children in Middletown, a substance use rehabilitation facility for pregnant and parenting women. Jenna was informed that she had three months to remain sober and have Lydia placed with her or she would need to be discharged.

"This was life or death," she remembers thinking.

"I started kicking butt," is how Jenna described the work she put into reclaiming her life. Hours of trauma focused work, self-reflection, visits with her daughter, structured living and reconnecting with family all aided her recovery.

During this time, she was working closely with DCF Social Worker Niki Mikolinski from the Torrington Office. "She was always up front with me," is how Jenna described her. "She is very good at her job."



"Using drugs is not who I am as a person," Jenna stated. "I needed to love myself."

Lydia was reunified with Jenna and the family continues to reside at Hallie House. They will move into their own apartment in November under the Supportive Housing Program.

Her work is not done.

Jenna recognizes the impact trauma has played in not only her life but in the lives of other women she encountered in her journey. Within each rehabilitation placement, women disclosed domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of adverse experiences which led to their substance dependency.

Different women. Same stories.

Jenna's life goal is now to become a recovery coach. "I will work my butt off to get to that goal," she stated. She wants to help other women with similar experiences who are too afraid to open up about their own hurt just like she was years ago. "So many have experienced when you open up about your pain, you will only get hurt again."

Every week, Jenna works on one thing about herself which she wants to improve. She has six notebooks filled with personal inventory statements of her thoughts and actions during her recovery.

Jenna admits she was initially terrified to work with DCF. What would she say now about our involvement?

"It doesn't hurt to have DCF in your life. DCF is not the problem, it is you," she answered. "Take responsibility as this not about your DCF worker or DCF, it is about you. It matters how hard you are going to fight for your children."



Jenna realized DCF had Lydia's best interests at heart - and hers.

"In a way, you saved my life."



Jenna has reestablished the relationship with her parents after not speaking with them for approximately five years. During the initial stage of the investigation, the Agency pursued her family not just for placement of Lydia, but also to form a network of support around Jenna.

Not a day goes by when Jenna does not speak to her family members.

As far as her relationship with Nikki? "During each phone call and visit, she tells me she is proud of me."

Lydia's smile and personality light up a room. She is loved by a mother who fought so hard for her and most of all fought so hard for herself.

"It is beautiful to see. DCF staff are incredible."



Back home in Texas, Lenisa Mathew was given the nickname "Leni Brown Sunshine." This is not surprising given her engaging personality and the enthusiasm she brings each day to those around her.

Within the Department of Children and Families, Lenisa is known as the Director of Organizational Development. She is called upon to lead the Safe & Sound culture and assist in the standardization of grants. She is also the lead to coordinate workforce supports after a critical incident with a child, an employee experiencing a traumatic event, or to speak with a staff member who is seeking guidance to address personal or work-related

issues.

"Active listening is key for me," Lenisa stated.

Work in Child Welfare can be intense and emotional - believed to be one of the toughest jobs in state government and around the country amongst all professions.

"Opportunities," is how Lenisa describes her actions to assess the health and well-being of those who work for the Agency. "Connect the dots to keep the work moving forward," is one aspect of her efforts.



DEER OAKS
THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SOLUTION

She is also the lead in making the connection between staff at all levels of the Department to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Lenisa recognizes that she is working against past perceptions about the EAP program. She wants to help educate our staff that EAP is multi-faceted and so much more than just counseling. EAP has a wide variety of resources that are available for our DCF staff and their families. She hopes that we continue to lift the negative stigma of asking for help.

Her overall vision is to build "sustained systems of support" resulting in staff receiving predictable and structured assistance even without asking.

"Early on in this Administration, we were crystal clear that the support and development of our workforce would be critical to our work as evidenced in our strategic goals. To that end, we sought to pay particular attention to ensuring that an organizational infrastructure was in place to ensure sustainability of that support," stated Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly.



"I am fortunate to be in this role," Lenisa stated.

Hired during the COVID-19 pandemic, forming relationships was difficult for Lenisa given the virtual environment. She made it work. "Respect is earned," Lenisa stated. "I love getting to know people and the holistic approach."

Lenisa has an interesting work/life balance. "Beautiful chaos" is how she describes her own family which consists of her husband and two children with the youngest being four years old. Long days at work and long days at home.

Serving others is at the core of Lenisa Mathew. "I believe in God's work," she stated.

Lenisa came to DCF with a master's degree in Organizational Leadership and background in the non-profit sector including providing resources to schools to connect families to early intervention services. Her efforts also found her working with incarcerated students to achieve higher education credits. "Your past does not define who you are," she stated.

Lenisa believes in the "greater good" and how "collectively" it is all our responsibility to lift each other which aligns with the foundations of the safe & sound culture rooted in respect, trust, candor, equity & racial justice.

These values started within her own family upbringing.

"I am where I am because of the sacrifices of my family," Lenisa stated. Her family is from South India, and she speaks an Indian dialect. Lenisa is first generation born in the United States. She saw her family work through poverty and receive supports from the community to meet their daily needs.



She has taken these values and imparted them to others throughout her personal and career journey.

What has Lenisa seen as strengths in our employees?

She describes the DCF staff and leaders as going "above and beyond." Despite their ever-increasing demands, they do not stop "being there for each other." While each office may do things a little differently, they are all working towards the common goal.

"Communication is key to our success and with each intervention and sign of support, leaders build trust with those around them. This is evident in the work we already do with our safe & sound culture, but also an opportunity to deepen our work in safety culture and as a learning organization," Lenisa stated.

"Hungry to change the world," is how Lenisa refers to the new staff she encounters.

"I have never grown so much in one year in my life," Lenisa stated as she reflected on her time with the Department.

"It is beautiful to see. DCF staff are incredible."

Deputy Commissioner Hill-Lilly further commented. "Lenisa joined our team during a global pandemic, a staffing crisis, economic uncertainty and racial unrest. Her compassion and even keeled demeanor coupled with her incredible acumen for organizational development was exactly what our Department needed. She is a trustworthy and dependable leader who has already left an indelible impact on our workforce. We are beyond grateful to have her."

We are fortunate to have Lenisa and her personable ways to support us!

"The cycle needed to change"



"Definitely different" is how Marlana, a parent of a child with complex needs, describes the treatment her 14-year-old daughter is receiving while placed at the Albert J. Solnit Center - South Campus.

These compliments should not be taken lightly, as they come from a parent who has extensive experience with the children's behavioral health continuum.

Since 2012, Marlana and Jennifer have interacted with the child welfare, mental health, and criminal justice systems throughout Connecticut. A decade later, Jennifer was still in desperate need of the right type of interventions administered by professionals with the utmost of expertise.

Marlana was clear that she recognizes the impact of family discord on her daughter. For a three-year period, she herself was incarcerated and Jennifer was placed with family members for approximately five years. Jennifer's father also spent long periods away from the family while he was serving time in jail.

At a young age, Jennifer began demonstrating behaviors consistent with early childhood trauma. Difficulties in school and peer relationships were seen with bouts of depression and anxiety following. Outpatient, extended day treatment and in-home services were implemented.

Short term gains did not sustain into the long term.

Jennifer required placement into several private psychiatric units across the state. Upon discharge, it was only a matter of time before the unsafe behaviors again began to manifest themselves.



Group home placement and other congregate care settings were the next steps for her. While progress was made, Marlana remained cautious.

When Jennifer returned home, she again became aggressive towards those around her, damaged property and threw objects including scissors, prompting visits by law enforcement "You need to learn how to be a parent," is what Marlana remembers Officers telling her.

At this point is when Marlana began to fear a negative stigma was attached to her daughter due to her behavioral health conditions. She was concerned the police had labeled Jennifer as a "problem child" which then would follow her into adulthood where the consequences of her actions would be more severe.

Would professionals from other disciplines also view her in this manner?

"Parents fear they will be blamed for something going on at home," Marlana stated. "Parents get tired of asking for support within a system so overbearing and confusing. "You are already overloaded and now are asked to figure out more stuff."

"It's challenging."

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an emerging behavioral health crisis in children including Jennifer. Again, she was in and out of hospitals with no real long-term improvement in her behaviors.

"I realized the level of care she needed was something I could not give her," Marlana stated. "The cycle needed to change."

Solnit South was authorized as her placement.

Marlana immediately recognized the difference in the care her daughter began receiving.

"They deal with her behaviors. They deal with them with her," she stated. Marlana speaks of the unique approach of Solnit's culture starting during the admissions process, when staff sat with her, she met everyone in the room and when she advocates - staff listen.



Marlana especially wanted to point out that Jennifer's therapist "meets me where I am at." Communication is "streamlined" amongst clinical staff making it is much easier to receive and provide facts about Jennifer's progress.

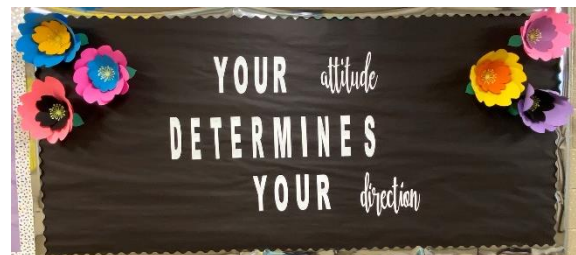
In previous placements, Marlana felt providers looked at her as "just the mom." At Solnit, Marlana's voice is well-received. She was even able to talk out a disagreement with a Nurse. "She listened," Marlana stated.

Marlana participates in therapy once a week with Jennifer. "How you will behave here is how you will behave at home," is the message her daughter receives. They openly discuss rules, consequences and truly what it will take to have Jennifer discharged back home.

Marlana was quick to point out a recent intervention by staff as Jennifer was preparing to visit with her. Jennifer was having a difficult day.

"Empathy and skill" are how Marlana describes the staff intervening with Jennifer to calm her down, give her space and work to move her from this "aggressive state."

When Jennifer was able to regain her composure, a successful visit occurred.



In Marlana's experiences, Jennifer would have been sedated or restrained for demonstrating the same behaviors in another facility. At Solnit South, "they teach the child how to calm themselves down," Marlana advised.

"They waited," Marlana stated. "In other places, they would have called off the session."

At Solnit, Marlana believes Jennifer is "still in reality" and "not in a bubble" with her behaviors and the expectations put upon her.

"Jennifer is given the opportunity to make the right choices versus the right choices being given to her," Marlana described her experiences.

What would she tell another parent about Solnit South?

"This is a good place," Marlena stated.

"I feel it would have made a difference if she went there first."

(The names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the family)