



April is Child Abuse Prevention Month!

Ensuring the safety of children who come to the Department's attention will always be our top priority.

As our work continues to evolve, we look to build upon our Prevention framework to reduce the number of families requiring DCF attention as we strengthen and empower communities to strengthen and empower families.

The 22nd anniversary of the Safe Havens Act for Newborns was celebrated this month. The law allows a parent - who does not believe they can care for their newborn - to voluntarily give up custody of an infant age 30 days or younger to the staff of an emergency room and remain anonymous. Read more here: [Safe Havens](#).



This month's *Spotlight on What's Right* draws attention to the joy brought to a family who adopted one of the 52 babies since 2001 who have been placed via this act into adoptive homes!



An urgent call for action occurred during a press conference at the State Capitol for Black Maternal Health Week. Did you know that Black women in America are three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women? More information can found by reading

this [Proclamation from President Biden](#).

"I like being busy," stated Christian Ripke. As a sophomore transitional aged youth attending Fordham University, he Co-Chairs the Region 2 Youth Advisory Board, recently played in a national tennis tournament, aspires to be a Public Defender, and was offered a job to work at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in New York when he graduates. Read about Christian's incredible story and why he encourages other youth to "Use your voice and advocate for yourself."



23rd National Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect

Doing Things Differently:
Moving from the Challenge
to the Change

Connecticut DCF's work was highlighted at the 23rd Annual National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect with the 2023 theme - *Doing Things Differently: Moving from the Challenge to the Change*.

Along with colleagues from Minnesota and Illinois, I presented on the topic of Moving Toward Race Equity in Child Welfare: Changing Realities, Evolving Strategies.

At the conference, Jackie Ford Community Outreach Coordinator for DCF, received the 2023 Children's Bureau Champion Award for building Community Capacity! Read in the *Spotlight* about the innovative programs she has led which are now embedded in our communities and her vision for the future. "There is a rewarding aspect in everything we do," Jackie stated.

Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly, Legal Director Zoe Stout and I presented at a Tri-Bar forum for the Minnesota Bar Association on the evolution of Connecticut's Child Welfare System. With great pride, we discussed our practice changes which have gained national recognition.



April is also Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Month. Professionals use the term "[the link](#)" to describe the correlation between animal maltreatment and child abuse and neglect. DCF and the Department of Agriculture have established cross-reporting protocols which result in the protection of both children and animals within our communities.

April also saw significant legislative activity. Many thanks to Chief Administrator of Government Relations and Policy Vin Russo for leading the DCF team along with Assistant Legal Director Kate Dwyer - who completed the Boston Marathon last week - to ensure our interests are supported in recommended statute changes.

Enjoy the Spring weather everyone!

Adopting a Safe Haven Baby

"His smile in the morning when he first sees us is everything."



For Cara Clark, the dream of adopting a child was something that she had envisioned since she was a young child, and when she met her husband, Mike, her vision became their shared aspiration.

While engaged and planning their wedding, the Clarks attended a DCF Open House to learn about fostering and adopting in Connecticut. Soon after, they began the required training and became a licensed home right before their wedding day. Their support social worker, Robyn Wood, suggested that they place their home on hold until after they returned from their honeymoon.

Once settled, the Clark's home study was made available to Permanency Planning Teams held throughout the state, but their wait to adopt continued. In January 2019, the Clarks selflessly put their adoption journey aside to care for a family friend's nephew for thirteen months and helped with the reunification process.

The Clarks, whose intention was to adopt, became increasingly disappointed each time they were notified that they had not been selected for a child - that is until they received a call that an infant was born at a local hospital. "We all cried tears of joy when they were selected as the pre-adoptive family," explained Robyn.



A Safe Haven baby, a term that the Clarks had become familiar with through their training, needed a family.

Connecticut's Safe Havens Act for Newborns was passed in 2000. The law allows a parent, who does not believe they can care for their newborn, to voluntarily give up custody of an infant age 30 days or younger to the staff of an emergency room and remain anonymous. DCF will then place the baby in a pre-approved adoptive home.

"It was a rollercoaster of emotions," Mike explained, adding, "We were both happy and scared, terrified, and thrilled. We had gone through a few letdowns (not being picked in teamings), and to finally get that call that we were selected was amazing."



The Clarks immediately went to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and felt privileged to be able to name their baby boy, Kevin.

According to Robyn, the difficult decisions of the birth family are not lost on Cara and Mike and the story of the parents who recognized what they needed to do to keep their child safe will always be part of the story that they share with their son.

"I felt like we won the lottery! It was surreal. We felt an overwhelming amount of gratitude to have been chosen to be parents and so excited to meet him and bring Kevin home." Cara said.

Although Kevin was born healthy, there were some tests that were pending results that extended his stay in the hospital. Mike, who just happened to work at the hospital, was able to spend a lot of time holding and bonding with their son. "I never understood what parents meant when they said their child means everything to them, but now I understand. Having Kevin makes me want to be a better man, husband, and father," he stated.

Kevin was born outside of the hospital, and because of the mother's fear of being identified, a friend brought him into the hospital with a note from his mom. The note explained that she did not name her son and that she wanted the hospital staff to know that she took prenatal vitamins throughout the pregnancy.



State law allows parents to bring their baby to a hospital without facing charges of abandonment, although the parents can still be held accountable if abuse or neglect occurred. The birth parents did not come forward within the 30-day appeal period and never shared their identities.



Cara explained that everything moved quickly, and the Clarks legally became a family six months after Kevin was placed in their home.

"We are so grateful for Robyn Woods, our social worker," explained Cara. "There were many people involved in making us parents that we will never forget, but Robyn has been our rock on our parenting journey, our trust in her, there are just no words."

When asked what life is like with Kevin, who is now two years old, Cara explained, "Our days are filled with so many moments of gratitude. Kevin's happy personality since he was born has made the biggest and best positive impact on me mentally and emotionally."

"His smile in the morning when he first sees us is everything."

**The names in this story have been changed to protect the family's privacy and the pictures are not specific to the individuals.*



period of time with the New York Police Department. He has visions to work with the "disadvantaged community" and devoting his life to public service.

"That is where I can be most impactful," Christian stated.

"Sometimes, that person is the only person in your corner," Christian explained as he described the role an Attorney may play and the critical relationship they establish as they "connect" to a client.



On a part-time basis, Christian works as an advocate for youth involved in the Planning and Placement Team (PPT) process at Long Island City High School in New York. He assists in a variety of ways which includes imparting his insights on appeals to receive additional financial aid.

He gained this knowledge as a senior in high school when his Guidance Counselor assisted him in appealing for the financial aid package he was awarded at Fordham. The appeal was successful, and he now attends the University tuition free.

Christian is of the firm belief that youth need more resources to attend post-secondary programs. "They need to enter the field of education on a level playing field," he stated.

On weekends, he devotes his time outreaching to the homeless population spread across the Manhattan borough under the direction of a private agency.

"I like to be busy," he stated.

In October, Christian applied for a position as a youth counselor at a juvenile justice facility. "It was the worst interview of my life," he recalls. However, after an hour interview he was given the business card of a child welfare staff member who offered him a job upon graduation with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in New York City!

Christian Co-Chairs the Region 2 Youth Advisory Board (YAB) and co-facilitated the Commissioner's Quarterly Statewide YAB when Region 2 hosted the meeting in February 2023. The YAB is a statewide group of youth supported by the Department who meet and advocate to the Commissioner about changes in statute or policy which they believe will enhance the experiences of youth in care.

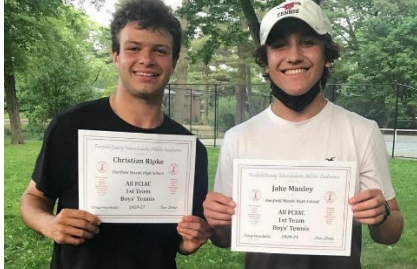
He is leading his peers to push forward a bill which would extend tuition assistance for youth in care up to the age of 26 years. "Sometimes you need more time," Christian explained to finish your education especially if early life experiences presented challenges.

Ensuring that youth have a voice where visitation occurs with family members is another piece of their work as is setting standards for how youth transition from one placement to the next.



Why is he so successful?

Christian attributes much of his strength and resilience to what he learned during therapy beginning at eight years of age. "I was able to develop a tool set to help me navigate challenges," he explained. He also learned how to be persistent. "If one key does not work, there are nine other ones on the chain."



This tenacity and drive carry over to his love of tennis. Christian began playing at a young age with the Department even paying for lessons. As a senior in high school, he received all-state honors in doubles.

"I am very competitive," he explained after he came back from a trip to Arizona with the Fordham club tennis team. In singles matches, he beat a player from Oregon State and played one of the "best matches of my career" while losing to a much higher seeded player from the University of California.

What is his message for youth currently involved with DCF? What does he see in his peers?

"It is intimidating to work with a bureaucracy," Christian stated. "Use your voice and advocate for yourself."

"Their voice is power. They don't need to roll with the punches."

Christian is also clear that given their early childhood experiences, youth may resist interventions by the Department. It can be difficult for youth in care to be successful and many have developed unique coping mechanisms. "The survival skills we develop in the system, help us outside of the system," Christian explained.

"I was a kid who did not want to come into the system. DCF is giving me a billion times more of an opportunity than my family could," he clearly articulated.

Congratulations Christian for all you have accomplished in such a short time!

"I am an empath in every aspect of my life."



As a young girl growing up, Jackie Ford's grandmother donated to the Covenant House non-profit organization in New York City. The program's brochure rested on a table in her home with a picture of a young brown eyed girl with tears in her eye on the cover.

That picture changed Jackie's life.

"I knew since seventh grade that I wanted to work with abused and neglected children," Jackie stated. In that school year, she wrote a research paper on child abuse and experienced a neighborhood child being raised by parents struggling with an alcohol addiction.

"I am an empath in every aspect of my life."

For almost two years, Jackie applied to work in the Department of Children and Families. She still remembers preparing for the job interview. "I did a trial run and drove to the office the day before I was going to be interviewed," she stated. The interview was cancelled but after a year of waiting, her journey with the Agency began.



Over 30 years later, Jackie still brings with her that same energy, determination, and creativity to support those she serves as she did over three decades earlier. "The work is so rewarding. You have the ability to impact a family's life," she stated.

Jackie is the Community Outreach Coordinator in the Bureau of External Affairs. "I am charged with helping to change the narrative, helping to change the perception of how our community sees our department and how the community sees our families. I am humbled by the opportunity to highlight the army of dedicated staff who work tirelessly to strengthen our families, keep them together, and find ways to support them and celebrate their successes."



She has been at the forefront of innovative programs which are now embedded in communities, and which have gained national attention.

The first was in 2012, when she had the idea to rent a room at a house in North Haven to establish a setting where the foster care division could hold open houses for potential foster parents and where 1:1 interviews could take place.

In 2016, she established the first DCF community center in the Connecticut Post Mall in Milford. Her vision was now to use a donated commercial space to recruit foster and adoptive families. It received national attention with each television channel in Connecticut attending the kickoff event.

Using her well established relationships in the community, Jackie established the *Doors to Hope and Healing* TV show in 2018. Over 75 episodes have been aired which include interviews with a diverse group of individuals each month. The show reaches over 60,000 homes via the cable network. "We have changed the narrative and misconceptions by educating our viewers about the many facets of child welfare work. We have given our families, children, and community providers a platform to tell their stories, celebrate their accomplishments, and support other families," Jackie explained.

Two months before the COVID-19 pandemic, another community center was established in the Buckland Hills Mall in Manchester. "We created this location with prevention in mind. To dispel the myths of the agency and have a space where families can simply come and receive information at any time of the day," she explained.

She was not done.

Jackie envisioned creating a central space to collect toys, gifts, and bike donations, where families receiving DCF services could come together and "shop." Thoughts of families stopping by, taking their sweet time choosing gifts that they knew their children would love, and personalizing that experience for each family became a reality.



In 2021, the Olive Branch Toy and Gift Shop was established - in 9 days - just in time for the holidays. "Knowing that the holidays can be stressful, we hoped to alleviate stress by inviting families to shop for free, wrap their gifts and leave the store with dignity, knowing they had a hand in creating joy for their children," Jackie explained.

"The Olive Branch became a place where community members provided emotional support and healing for our families, offering resources that reached far beyond the walls of the shop, such as pro bono legal representation, employment, and friendship."



Jackie's focus on preventing child abuse and neglect has also led her to collaborating with the Waterbury Police Department to send local families to camp for a weekend - not just the children - but the whole family.

Jackie's contacts across Connecticut have resulted in donations of gifts, clothing and other items for years. When asked to collect stuffed teddy bears for children who have been adopted, within weeks she had 1,000 donated which even saw her coming home to packages left at her doorstep from people she never met.

She is a fierce advocate to protect animals and has been on the forefront of the Department's collaboration with the Department of Agriculture to establish cross-reporting requirements for child abuse and animal abuse.

"I know the tireless work our staff does. I want people to see our Agency and our work the way I do," she emphatically states.

This month, she received the 2023 Children's Bureau Champion Award for Building Community Capacity. "When I originally saw the e-mail, I thought it was spam," she stated. It was the letter received from Aysha E. Schomburg, J.D., the associate commissioner in the Children's Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, which made it a reality.



"I am humbled and honored to receive this award," she stated. "This is a great opportunity to talk about what our agency does each and every day."

"We are often perceived as powerful and authoritative, and our work in the child welfare system can be frightening for families. This opportunity to extend homage to our families is a true privilege."

Thank you to Jackie Ford for your tireless efforts to continue to promote the great work of our department by enriching the lives of countless children and families.

