

A Message from Commissioner Dorantes

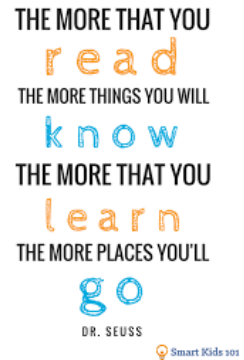


The month of August means the end of summer vacations and back to school!

Children and families are better served when we all work together. We are grateful for our relationships with CT State Department of Education Commissioner Charlene M. Russell -Tucker, our own USD II leadership & staff, the DCF JJ Education Oversight Division and educational professionals across the state as they prepare for the year ahead.

Whether it's handing off a timid kindergartener to their first all-day teacher or packing up a T.A.Y. as they nervously venture onto college (...and all our students in between) we appreciate the support our DCF foster parents and guardians give to all children in care as they start a new school year.

The journey through post-secondary education for youth in care can be tough. National statistics show that only **3-7%** of youth in foster care across the country will graduate from college as compared to 30% of all Americans. Read this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter for the list of over **50 programs** - as far away as Virginia and California - where our transitional aged youth will be attending this Fall!



"I was sick and tired of being sick and tired."

This is how Tyler DiChichio describes the point in his life when he realized his decades long addiction to drugs needed to end. His motivation? His son, Tyler Jr. Read Tyler's story as he openly discusses his years of substance abuse, the extensive efforts he put forth to reunify with his little boy and the life he is currently living.

Click here for more information sponsored by our partners at the State of CT Dept of Mental Health and Addiction Services: [DMHAS Programs and Services.](#)



The opening of Hartford's first Urgent Crisis Center --Pictured with DCF Cmsr Dorantes are Gov Ned Lamont , Htfd Mayor Luke Bronin, Representing CGA Children's Cmte Sen Ceci Maher & Rep Tammy Exum & cutting the UCC ribbon is CEO Galo Rodriguez of the Village for Families and Children

From Vision to Fruition

The pandemic exposed gaps in an otherwise strong children's behavioral health continuum in our state. DCF Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams challenged the brain trust of stakeholders gathered in a *2021 Children's Behavioral Health Summit* to envision something different that gives the same depth of attention as given to physical health care. Read more about that prompting and subsequent planning that birthed **The Urgent Crisis Centers (UCCs)**. The UCCs are licensed and funded by DCF. They are aimed at diverting parents of children in behavioral health crisis from making visits to hospital emergency rooms. This *Spotlight* highlights some early feedback from the short time they have been open!



WATERBURY, CT 082223JS05 Dignitaries officially cut the ribbon during a ceremony for the opening of the state first Urgent Crisis Center for Youth Tuesday at Wellmore Behavioral Health in Waterbury. Jim Shannon Republican-American

"I couldn't be happier to work myself out of a job." This is what I said standing alongside



Governor Lamont, CT State Treasurer Erick Russell, BPRC Chair Senator Pat Billie Miller, local Stamford leaders, and families to highlight [CT Baby Bonds](#). I shared that poverty is often conflated with neglect giving rise to over representation of people with low income more often surveilled and reported to the child welfare system. Economic and concrete supports are proving to be a catalyst to lift families out of poverty. Beginning July of 2023, this program set aside \$3,200 for each baby born

in Connecticut whose birth was covered by HUSKY. There is a financial literacy component built in to increase parental capacity in that area. When the child reaches adulthood, the bond can produce between \$11,000 - \$30,000 dollars for that child. Read more about this **first in the nation** innovation and how the funds can be used in the embedded hyperlink above.



Sibling Camp 2023



State Comptroller Sean Scanlon rolled up his sleeves, painted birdhouses and jewelry boxes then fed farm animals during this month's edition of *COMP TIME* on location at **Kelly's Kids Farm** in Prospect, CT for DCF's Annual Sibling Camp. Despite a devastating fire, earlier this year that claimed the lives of many of the large animals who called this farm home, owner **Kelly Cronin** rallied her staff together when she heard DCF was looking for a new host site.

For children and youth in care, siblings are a connection to their identity and sense of belonging. We make every effort to place and keep siblings together. When that can't happen, opportunities like these make memories that can last a lifetime. Kelly's Kids provided a camp filled with wonderful

activities, arts, and crafts, and an interactive petting zoo. There is nothing more special than the bond between siblings.

BONUS KUDOS *The Comptroller's office continued its tradition of collecting back packs and school supplies just in time to be personally delivered to DCF's **OLIVE BRANCH** at its new permanent location! Social workers can contact Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov to schedule an appointment for parents to pick up needed items for their children free of charge! Thank You Jackie!*

I am so grateful for others to experience **the DCF I know** and the work you all do to enhance the lives of children and families every day!

" I was sick and tired of being sick and tired."



"It's finally over. I can finally breathe again."

These are the words Tyler DiChichio thought to himself the day he went to the foster home for the last time to bring his son, Tyler Jr., home.

Someday, he will explain to his little boy, the extensive efforts he put forth to completely change his life, gain sobriety and have reunification day forever etched in his memory. "I always wanted to have a child," Tyler stated. "God blessed me with a beautiful, healthy son, and the ball's in my court, and I had to just take control of it."

Over a decade ago, Tyler suffered one of three car accidents which shattered his elbow. He was prescribed Oxycodone for the pain. This led to seeking cheaper drugs such as Heroin and Percocet to purchase on the street. "At one point, I had a 300 dollar a day habit," Tyler explained.

With the support of family members, Tyler entered detox twice along with other programs. Relapses continued. He was not working, and his weight escalated to 280 pounds in part from the multiple psychotropic medications he was prescribed. "At one point, I had five prescriptions," he stated. "I almost felt like a test dummy for prescriptions."

Methadone maintenance was Tyler's choice of treatment when he did attempt to remain sober. While in a program, he met a woman who would later become Tyler's mother. "We were being support systems for each other," is how he described their relationship.

They both began substance misuse again. Tyler indicated he had "no clue" of the pregnancy and when Tyler Jr. was born, DCF became involved. A difficult decision was made to place Tyler Jr. into foster care.

Tyler was intent on not only helping himself, but Tyler's mother. "I risked my health trying to help her," he stated. At one point, he went to find her only to have a gun pointed at him. "I'll blow your head off," a drug dealer threatened him, and he left.

Tyler continued efforts to remain sober. He was prescribed Suboxone which "altered" his taste buds and Methadone which made his mouth dry, "messed up" his teeth and resulted in pain throughout his body yet he still went each day, often waiting three hours at a time, for his daily Methadone clinic visits.



"Addiction ends in weird ways," Tyler stated. He contracted COVID-19, was very sick and could not make it to the clinic. That was the turning point in his life. "I'm doing this my own way," he stated.

"I was sick and tired of being sick and tired."

He has been sober ever since.

Tyler admits that he was overwhelmed by the requirements DCF placed upon him in order to reunify. "I was like the top CEO of a company," he stated when looking back at all the meetings and programs he was expected to participate in along with the court orders.



DCF connected him with behavioral health supports as well as a parenting coach. Given a difficult work history, he was also enrolled in a program called Platform to Employment.

Tyler began working up to 63 hours each week at Dunkin' Donuts - taking the night shift so he could be available for his daytime treatment and other meetings.

As consistent visits with Tyler Jr. occurred, he developed a relationship with the foster parents. "They were kind," as he describes them with exchanges of pictures and videos of Tyler Jr. occurring.

"DCF helped me get back to a normal life," Tyler stated. "There is no going back now."

Tyler's extended family remain his greatest support. He has a "limited circle" of friends outside of family. "I had to make a big change," Tyler stated as he knew previous friends and acquaintances would only pull him back down into substance misuse.



What is his message for others involved with DCF? "Don't give up," he emphatically stated. "Stick to a routine and stay clear from anything that will deter you from your goal."

From DCF he gained support and knows how the Agency staff sincerely wanted him to succeed. "If you mess up, tell them, he stated. "Don't think you are set up for failure, don't give up."

"Believe in yourself."

"Tyler has demonstrated a firm commitment to his son and as a result, permanency has been achieved in a timely fashion. Mr. DiChichio continues to show the Department that he is committed to the process of being a sober functional parent who is determined to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for his son. I am very proud of him," stated Social Worker Natalie Farquharson of the New Britain office.

Likewise, Tyler expressed much gratitude and thanks to the following individuals who assisted him in his journey:

- Terry Kennedy LCSW - Therapist at Community Matters LLC
- Stacey Mastergeorge - Family Therapist at Wheeler Clinic
- Ana Erazo - Senior Counselor at Wheeler Clinic Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time program
- Natalie Faquharson LMSW - Social Worker at the Department of Children and Families
- Geo Weatherington - Family Engagement Supervisor at the Quality Parenting Center
- Alison Cormier - Social Worker at Community Mental Health Affiliates

Tyler now enjoys going outside to the park with his son, going for a walk each day in a stroller and experiencing each of those fun moments being Dad and son.

"He has so much energy," Tyler stated about his little boy. Well, so does his father!

Congratulation to Tyler DiChichio for all your successes!

Urgent Crisis Centers - The Vision of Michael Williams



Deputy Commissioner of Operations Michael Williams had a vision for impacting the children's behavioral health system - it is now a reality.

For children experiencing a behavior health crisis, the waiting room in an emergency department is not the optimal setting to receive an assessment.

"During a Behavioral Health Summit in 2021 attended by key community stakeholders, sister state agencies and families, the message was clear that change was needed," Michael stated.

What was the alternative?

It was Michael who began thinking of how the medical community created urgent care centers as an alternative to a hospital visit. "Could this be replicated in the behavioral health community?" he asked.

Michael took this idea to Lori Szczygiel who at the time was the CT Market President at Beacon Health Options, an organization currently known as Carelon Behavioral Health. Lori pointed Michael to other states across the country who were developing similar programs.

"This is what we need in Connecticut," Michael remembers thinking after conducting initial research. From there, he sketched out the vision, key services the program could offer and the intended outcomes for children and families.

It was a team approach with then Senior Administrators JoShonda Guerrier and Tim Marshal working with the Child Health and Development Institute (CHDI) and the Children's Behavioral Health Plan Advisory Board to develop this vision further and put the "meat on the bones."

"It was JoShonda and Tim, working side by side with our partners to explore how this concept could be developed. Without their early work and efforts, we would not be here today," Michael stated.

Michael's vision became closer to reality.

The Office of Policy and Management (OPM) then agreed to fund the UCCs with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars.

The structural work of JoShonda and Tim transitioned to Dr. Frank Gregory Administrator of Children's Behavioral Health Community Service System to award contracts to four community providers and oversee the difficult task of implementing these long-anticipated programs.

In late Spring 2023, the vision became a reality.

Urgent Crisis Centers (UCC) are now available for children who are experiencing a behavioral health crisis but do not require emergency department level of care.

As Connecticut's lead children's behavioral health agency, DCF's vision for creating the centers was to have walk-in clinics, providing youths and their families with immediate access to resources while they are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-injury, feelings of depression or anxiety, out-of-control behaviors, substance misuse, etc.

"These children's urgent crisis centers are being created to provide an immediate and direct resource to families whenever a behavioral health situation arises among children and teens," stated Governor Lamont. "The centers will provide intensive assessment, stabilization, and ongoing connection to care."

Licensed and funded by DCF, the centers are aimed at diverting youths and their families from making visits to emergency rooms to address a behavioral health crisis.

Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes compared the treatment options to visiting a medical urgent care center when you have a sprained ankle as compared to going to an emergency department when you have been injured in a car accident and require surgery. "We are committed to making sure children know that when they are experiencing fear and crisis and anxiety that we're here to prop them up," she stated.



No appointment is needed, and parents and guardians can bring their child directly to one of the UCC locations.

"The Urgent Crisis Centers have been 'on the drawing board' for a long time. The result of extensive discussion and collaboration among DCF staff, families, community providers and other stakeholders, it would be hard to overestimate the amount of strategizing and shepherding that have gone into this initiative," stated Dr. Gregory. "The UCCs bridge a critical gap in our service array, providing comprehensive assessment and crisis stabilization for youth and their families in a setting that is welcoming and engaging. The UCCs are a true milestone in our system of care, and they add to the record of innovation and leadership in behavioral healthcare for which Connecticut is known."

“When children are in crisis, sometimes they do not even know how to express that,” Commissioner Dorantes stated. “If we can get underneath what is going on with our children and our families, and support them, we can stem the tide of some of the things we see happening in our community.”



What has been observed by UCC staff in the short time they have been opened?

1. Family discord resulting in parent/child conflicts.
2. Youth presenting as anxious or depressed.
3. Expression of suicidal ideation as well as active substance abuse by adolescents.
4. Referrals from Pediatricians after a youth scored at risk during a mental health screening.
5. Families commenting on the convenience of the UCC versus the experiences they previous encountered while accessing help in an emergency department.

Current capacity for the four centers is 72 daily slots. They are strategically located across Connecticut and are operated by:

- [The Village for Families and Children](#) in Hartford;
- [Yale New Haven Hospital](#) in New Haven;
- [The Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut](#) in New London; and
- [Wellmore Behavioral Health](#) in Waterbury.

"This was truly a team effort, with professionals internal and external to the Department coming together on behalf of our families across the state. We look forward to hearing how children and families experience these centers as our systems continue to evolve with the ever-changing needs within our communities," Michael stated.

From vision to reality - The Urgent Crisis Centers are up and running!

DCF Youth Attending Colleges and Programs Across the Country!



For the academic year 2023-2024, over 50 transitional aged youth (TAY) will be attending 4-year colleges and universities across the country - as far away as California and Florida!

Some are staying local and are enrolled in one of 11 community colleges.

Our youth will also take part in vocational, technical and job training programs leading to careers as Phlebotomists, Cosmetologists, Commercial Drivers, Electricians, and many other trades.

Congratulations to the Regional Office staff who have supported their older youth to reach this point in their lives!

Read on for the specific programs where youth will be attending:

4-year Colleges and Universities

Academy of Art University
Albertus Magnus University
American International College
Barry University
Bluefield College
Central Connecticut State University
Clark University
Curry College
Eastern Connecticut State University
Goodwin University
Gratz College
Howard University
Johnson and Wales University
Keuka College
Mercy College
Mitchell College
Nova Southeastern University, Inc.
Paier College of Art
Post University
Purchase College
Purdue University
Rutgers University
St. Joseph's University

Santa Monica College
Southern Connecticut State University
Southern New Hampshire University
Springfield College
University of Bridgeport
University of Connecticut
University of Hartford
University of New Haven
University of Rhode Island
University of Virginia

2- Year and Community Colleges

Asnuntuck Community College
Capital Community College
Gateway Community College
Housatonic Community College
Manchester Community College
Middlesex Community College
Naugatuck Community College
Norwalk Community College
Quinebaug Community College
Three Rivers Community College
Tunxis Community College

Vocational, Technical and Job Training Schools

Academy Di Capelli - Cosmetology
Branford Academy of Hair and Cosmetology
Florida Institute of Technology
Fox Institute of Business
Lincoln Technical Institute
Harborview School of Phlebotomy
New England Technical School
New England Tractor Trailer Driving School
New Hampshire Training Institute Community College
Porter and Chester Institute