

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 Celeron 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!