

A Message from Commissioner Dorantes



"It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" And boy do we have a lot to celebrate!

Leading you, these past 5 years, has been the absolute pinnacle of my professional career. *In 1992 as a 'baby' Social Worker*, would I ever have imagined capping off a 30+ year journey in public child welfare sitting in the Commissioner's seat. It has been an honor and privilege to hold you all in my head and heart in what has been called *"...one of the toughest jobs in state government."*

Over the next month, we will have opportunities to reflect on our time together before I transition into my next phase of Servant Leadership.

I would often humbly refer to my leadership experience as *"... pouring into the development of the NextUps."* Now I can proudly proclaim that I am passing the baton to the **BestUp!** Deputy Commissioner **Jodi Hill-Lilly** has exceptional prowess in workforce development, leadership coaching, strategic planning and embodies the components of the **Implementation Science* model in her approach to field. She has accepted the nomination by Governor Ned Lamont to be the next DCF Commissioner! The press conference announcing her appointment had an amazing turnout of family, friends DCF staff, community leaders and the media!



our



<https://ct-n.com/ctnplayer.asp?odID=22416> DCF Press Conference 12/13/23

This season also highlights our collective diversity and the unique ways if we choose to celebrate. A few examples are: **Hanukkah** is the Festival of Lights, **Christmas** is represented as the birth of Christ, **El Dia de los Reyes** (Three Kings Day) occurs on the 12th day of Christmas, the African American experience is reflected during **Kwanzaa** and members of the Orthodox Church celebrate Jesus' birth the week *after* December 25th and **Winter Solstice** marks the first day of winter & it is also the shortest day of the year.



Thank you, **Governor Lamont**, for hosting members of our Youth Advisory Board (**YAB**) for a holiday celebration. Some very talented, dapper-dressed young people completed the evening by playing pool, ping-pong, and foosball along with a few piano tunes!

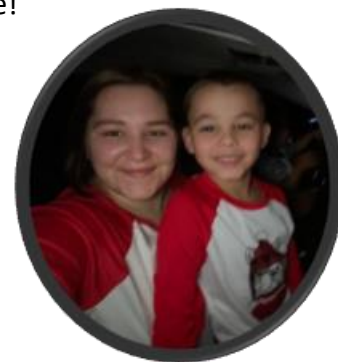
Implementation Science developed in the health care field, as researchers realized that proven treatments often failed to be implemented strategically or sustained... human services are applying its concepts in a quest for sustained efforts and better outcomes. **Implementation drivers — such as policies, procedures, leadership, resources, coaching and training — that help ensure effective strategies are implemented well enough to achieve their intended outcomes.*
AECF, 2017

"Home for the Holidays" is the theme of this month's *Spotlight on What's Right*. Because of your tireless efforts and the collaboration with our community partners, foster parents, the Judicial Branch, and Attorneys, we have achieved permanency for 1,216 children including **459 reunifications** this year.

Since 2019, we have reunified over 3,217 children!

Families we work with have had to overcome many challenges. **Kelsey Murphy** described herself as "*very bad at the time*" while pregnant and using drugs. Read about the special relationship she developed with her Social Worker which led to three-year-old Gio now celebrating his birthday and Christmas with his mom for the first time!

"Men don't cry... I cried" is a powerful story of **Ron** - who spent over half his life in prison - and his remarkable journey to be reunified with Kayla. He has a long history with DCF and describes the department today as "*transformed*" compared to his experience in years past. Read his insights and about that day when he created a very special memory with his daughter just before her Homecoming dance.



The **DCF Olive Branch Shop** is a community space which extends goodwill to children, teens and families receiving support from DCF. So far in 2023, approximately 130 families have received items such as toys, clothes, household items and gift cards for a variety of occasions all year long. An estimated 300 overall families and approximately 1,000+ children over the course of three years have received support. Watch coverage here: [The Olive Branch Sunday Spotlight](#) or visit the website: [Olive Branch](#)

Holiday time is not always happy or merry for everyone. It also brings added stress. Seeking support is a sign of strength. **Deer Oaks** is the Employee Assistance Program for Connecticut State Employees. Confidential Deer Oaks EAP Services can be contacted via telephone at 1-888-993-7650 or via e-mail at eap@deeroaks.com

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"I have a picture of how I want to be."



It was a busy Friday afternoon for Kelsey Murphy. Between leaving work to pick up 7-year-old Eli, going to the bank, dropping off clothes at the laundromat and driving to 3-year-old Gio's daycare, she shared critical points of her life's journey - ones both difficult and extraordinarily successful.

We all face challenges. Kelsey's substance use began in high school with her first experience with heroin. After Eli was born, she was introduced to cocaine. What followed was involvement with the Department of Children and Families.

Kelsey admits at that point in her life she was "not 100% ready" to commit to working on herself or to put in the effort to develop tools to gain sobriety. The relationship established with her DCF worker was not positive and eventually, she lost custody of Eli to his father. "It was not a good outcome," Kelsey recalled.

Describing herself as "very bad at the time" Kelsey found herself years later pregnant, and suffering from polysubstance use including heroin, cocaine and now fentanyl - the highly potent and life-threatening drug that has claimed thousands of lives across the country. She checked herself into the Wellmore Women and Children's program in Waterbury, an intermediate treatment program for pregnant or parenting women with a young child. Kelsey gave birth to Gio two months later and was given permission for him to live with her at the program.

DCF again became involved.

Gio did not sleep, wanted Kelsey to constantly carry him and facility staff were limited in how they could support her given programmatic issues. "He wanted me to hold him all the time and not put him down," Kelsey stated. Allegations of co-sleeping surfaced and Kelsey's overall compliance with Wellmore was in question.

A week before Kelsey's scheduled discharge, Gio was separated from her and placed into kinship care. "Oh God," Kelsey thought. For the second time, she lost custody of her child. Although Gio was eventually placed with his Maternal Grandmother, the pain of removal was palpable. "That was hard," she stated.

Kelsey admits she was "stuck in my ways. Rude. Ignorant." Having already lost one child, would the trajectory for Gio be the same?

This time was different - Kelsey met Social Worker Bryonna Geiste from the Waterbury Regional Office.



"She never gave up on me," is how Kesley describes the relationship that developed. "I trusted her and knew she wanted what was best for Gio." Kesley allowed herself to be vulnerable, gave input on her course of treatment, disclosed to Bryonna an unhealthy relationship she was experiencing with her son's father and adamantly confirmed her sobriety while yearning for Gio to come home.

"I always wanted to do better," Kelsey stated. She and Bryonna made a great team.

Kesley began working hard on herself. Attending the Root Center in Hartford, she completed multiple agency programs ranging from Intensive Out-Patient to Relapse Prevention. Her work continued with Community Health Resources and 12 hours of parenting education through Community Residence Inc.

Through the Connection's Supportive Housing for Families Program, Kesley obtained a two-bedroom apartment in Enfield - the first time she ever had her own place to live. It also presented challenges as Enfield was out of the Waterbury Office catchment area, traditionally requiring a case transfer, which could have potentially ended Bryonna supporting her.



When the thought of a new worker was presented, Kelsey "refused anyone else" and given their "great connection" an exception was made for the relationship to continue.

"Working with Kelsey has been a pleasure but that is not to say we didn't have our challenges in the beginning," Bryonna stated. "Open lines of communication, clear expectations, and mutual respect were paramount to building a successful partnership."

Kelsey and Gio completed a Reunification Readiness Assessment with the Village for Children and Families. The outcome of the work was all positive and the assessment recommended reunification.

There was one last hurdle to climb - a family team meeting held virtually to gain insights from Kelsey's entire team of support. In attendance were her clinician, staff from The Village, Gio's kinship provider, who was also her maternal grandmother, and Gio's Attorney, the group talked openly about the future.

"I just knew if I stayed clean, eventually the truth would come out," she stated.

The decision - Reunification.

On 6/27/23, Gio came home! This will be the first time that he spends his birthday and Christmas with his mother.

"I will never lose him again," she stated.

Throughout this difficult journey, Kelsey remained a constant in the life of Eli who remains under his father's care. She has plans to apply to have her guardianship reinstated to him, once the DCF case is closed.

Eli is a delightful little boy in the 2nd grade. Kelsey has made extensive efforts to help Eli understand the circumstances under which he lives with his father, DCF involvement and why - during periods of his young life - she was not around as much as she wanted.

"Fantastic" is how Eli describes spending time with his mother and little brother as they watch movies and go to the park as a family. The boys' bedroom is furnished with bunk beds and their own television.

Eli plays football and Ja'Marr Chase of the Cincinnati Bengals is his favorite athlete.

"I think my boots are still covered in mud," Kelsey stated from the time she ran onto the field with Eli and other parents at the start of his Homecoming team's game. With Gio in her arms and Eli on her side, they all ran under a balloon filled overpass in the rain.

Would Kelsey have imagined this would be her life three years earlier? Is she satisfied? Does she feel accomplished as a parent? "I need to do better," Kelsey stated.

"I have a picture of how I want to be."

"I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to witness Kelsey's confidence and trust in herself and as a parent grow exponentially over the years," Bryonna added. "I couldn't be happier to see Gio achieve permanency in time for the holidays."



What is Kelsey's message for others involved with the Department of Children and Families? "Keep sticking with it," she stated. "Be honest." While families may be concerned about the potential for their children to be removed, she thinks families need to focus on the "issues which brought you to this point in your life" and work on yourself.

Ultimately the families decide their path and the outcome.

On overcoming addiction, she has equally helpful words. "You have to be ready for yourself, not just for the kids," she stated.

Ultimately, her actions exemplify the concept of "radical acceptance" she learned through Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Pain is a part of life and radical acceptance allows us to keep that pain from becoming suffering. "I accept the things I can and cannot change," Kelsey stated.

"Over the past three years, I have learned as much as I can to be a better person," she stated. One key piece of insight Kelsey now has is to ensure she takes care of herself first. Kelsey has

learned from her "mistakes" and saw the intergenerational pattern in her own family of others neglecting their physical and mental health at the expense of others.

"You can't fill their cup from an empty cup," Kesley stated in relation to what her children need.

Let us all celebrate Gio being home for the holidays and Eli experiencing his little brother's joy during Christmas.

Our holiday wish for Kelsey is for her to pause for a few moments, look at her family and know she has changed her life - and the lives of two little boys - who will someday understand the strength and resilience of the woman they call "Mom".

"Men don't cry. I cried."



Kayla's red Homecoming dress was beautiful. Her shoes matched perfectly, as did the earrings. Makeup was expertly applied after the trip to the salon earlier that afternoon.

Yet, the outfit was missing one important piece.

The necklace.

Ron placed the necklace around his daughter's neck - she was now ready for the dance!

His journey to share this day with Kayla was not easy, in fact, improbable at certain points.

Ron has spent over half of his life in prison. Decades of substance abuse, associations with the wrong people, criminal activity and "faking the moves" that resulted in periods of incarceration and separation from his daughter.

"I was an addict," Ron stated. His first experience with cocaine left him thinking this was the "greatest thing ever." The delusions and paranoia came into play as his use continued. Drugs caused him "live in misery" and when he felt pain or sorrow, the substances had a numbing effect.

"It is not an enjoyable moment getting high," he stated. "In the moment, you think it is, but it is not."

"No feelings, no morals. I had to steal and rob," was how Ron described his life. "I was out of control and really didn't care."

Ron's last incarceration was at Osborn Correctional in Somers, Connecticut during which time Kayla entered DCF care. Placements for adolescents are difficult to come by and she moved between both kinship and regular foster homes. "The fear of her being bounced around and me being helpless in jail motivated me," Ron stated.

Ron was fortunate to be accepted into the New Horizons Program, taking part in a unique 6-month in-patient rehabilitation style program housed in the prison followed by one year of aftercare.

"Like a street program" is how Ron describes inmates receiving individual and group counseling and support from peer mentors. The inmates are expected to show sustained progress and engage in both written and verbal activities toward their recovery. "You cannot go there if you



are going to fake the moves," Ron stated. If an individual demonstrates negative behaviors, you are expected to "pull people up."

Addiction Recovery

"My motivation was me not being able to rescue my child," Ron stated. "I faked the moves too many times in my life. This time, I did it for me."

Upon completion of New Horizons and serving his sentence, Ron was paroled to a halfway house and continually tested negative for substances. He began working closely with DCF, taking part in visitation programs through the newly established Quality Parenting Center along with the Therapeutic Family Time program through Boys and Girls

Village.

The goal was reunification with Kayla who continually expressed her desires to live with her father.

The DCF Ron experienced is "much different" than the one he remembers of years past. He credits social worker, Shawna Jacobs, with "always being straight with me." Today's DCF he says is "more organized" and less of a bureaucratic Agency which had previously been hard to navigate.

"It way different than the past. It is more than just taking kids out of their home and into other homes," Ron stated.

"Transformed" is a word he now associates with DCF.

Kayla continually expressed that she wanted to come home and live with her father.

Ron has sat in a lot of courtrooms in his lifetime. On a particular day in July 2023, the legal system felt different when a Judge in the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters revoked Kayla's commitment and Ron was reinstated as her guardian.

Kayla was coming home.

How did it feel when he heard the Judge's words? "Great, I actually cried when the Judge said it," Ron articulated.

"Men don't cry. I cried."



By his side was his fiancé, Jen, who remains one of his biggest supporters. "This really turned out great," she stated. "I love Kayla. She is daddy's little girl. She smiles and Ronny lights up."

"It feels safe here."

"I have truly enjoyed working with Ron, he never wavered in his commitment to have Kayla return to his care, his motivation and determination was really inspiring. During the court hearing when commitment was revoked, watching his reaction brought tears to my eyes. It was a true testament to all his hard work to ensure Kayla no longer was in foster care," stated Shawna. "During home visits Kayla always reports how happy and safe she is, she loves spending time with her dad and stepmother. She is truly thriving in his care! I'm really grateful to be a part of their journey."

Ron remains a protective father, knowing all too well the risks teenagers face. "I let her know the choices in life and the consequences," he stated.

"I worry because she's a teenager."

Kayla's adjustment home has gone well. She has an interest in early education and can work at a daycare right in her high school. Kayla is involved in the Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC), does well in school and is making friends.

"There's no sheltering her from life," Ron stated. What he wants for his daughter is quite simple. "Do what's she's supposed to do," he stated.

Ron's days are filled with his responsibilities working for a property management company and has opened his own business as well. He is learning about buying and flipping houses given the vast network of lawyers, accountants, and real estate agents he knows.



"I've done a lot this year to move ahead."

Ron has a message for others, especially fathers, who are struggling and involved with DCF. "You're not going to get clean until you are ready to get clean. Don't do it for anyone else and not because your child was taken."

He also speaks clearly about moving on from the past. "You can only move forward. You will never move forward if you focus on the past," he stated.

Congratulations to you Ron, for all your successes and thank you for sharing your story with us.

Testimonials - The DCF Olive Branch Shop



“Being able to get in the car and get groceries for my kids when they need it is something I didn't think I could do,” May-Williams said, explaining a fear of going out in public. “And here I am, and I get to do Christmas shopping. And I get to know that when my kids wake up on Christmas morning, it's because of the hard work that we all put in.”

- Ashley May Williams

The Olive Branch Shop is hosted by the Department of Children and Families. This shop offers a variety of new toys, gifts, school supplies, and handmade items that are donated by members of the community. The shop is open by appointment only and is housed in a donated space at St. Luke's Church in Glastonbury.

The mission of The Olive Branch Shop is to help DCF families by offering free items that may alleviate a burden or stressor in their lives.

I'm from Harford and thank you so much, you made me feel so much better. I was crying all morning terrified I wouldn't be able to give them a Christmas anymore. You are an angel.

- Anonymous Mother

The Olive Branch serves families with in-home service cases, [non-foster care], as well as our youth who are residing in group homes or independent living settings as well as birth parents who are actively engaged in the reunification process.

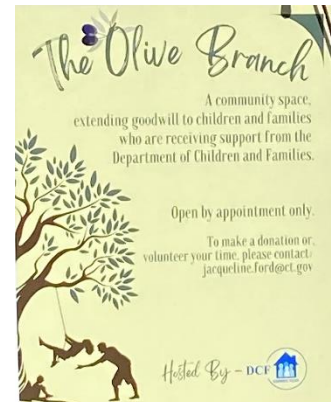


The Olive Branch first opened in December 2021 as a “pop-up” holiday shop and soon became a staple in the

Glastonbury community. The shop is open year-round to provide support for families being served by the department. Families are invited in to shop for birthday gifts, religious milestones, and other celebrations.

Jacqueline, just wanted to say thank you so much and how I appreciate you for helping me and my children this year. I don't know what I would of done without your help, I appreciate you so much!

- Chastity, Birth Mom





In 2021, it is estimated that fifty 50 families were served. In 2022, that number doubled to approximately 100 families. This year the Olive Branch relaunched in April 2023 to a permanent space and is open all year. The shop is on track to increase the number of families served by 30 percent which will bring us to an estimated 300 overall families and approximately 1,000+ children over the course of three years.

Since the inception of the Olive Branch, the department has collected approximately 5,000 new toys from community members, corporations, state agencies, public and private schools, colleges, rotary and civic clubs, government officials, financial institutions, former foster youth, and foster and adoptive parents.

The Olive Branch has served approximately 500 families which include one and two-parent households and approximately 1,500 children.



Good afternoon Lysa. It was such a pleasure to meet Jacqueline and see her view all that she is doing for families. The Olive Branch helped our family this holiday season. We found really fun Goods for the girls. Thank you.

-Noellie, Birth Mom



The family referral sources include: DCF, NAFI, CHR, Wheeler, the Interval House, and self-referrals from parents. Families from all six DCF regions have shopped at the Olive Branch. Families who lack adequate transportation have been supported by DCF's CTU Division, DCF staff, and private providers.

For more information including making a donation please contact Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov