

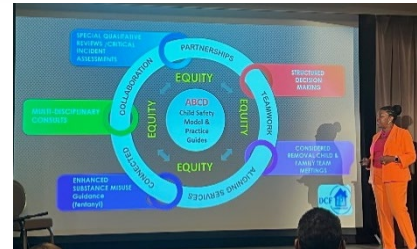


February is Black History Month. "**Black Resistance**" is the national theme for 2023 which highlights the historic and ongoing disadvantage and oppression experienced by African Americans throughout history.

Over the past four weeks, many events and opportunities drew attention to the Department's commitment to addressing disproportionate outcomes and disparity experienced by those we serve.

We will continue to hold ourselves accountable as we strive to become an anti-racist organization.

Please read our [2023 Racial Justice Data, Activities and Strategies Report](#) recently submitted to the Connecticut Legislature. Thank you once again to Monica Rams, Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs/Office of Diversity and Equity for compiling the great work across DCF offices, divisions and facilities!



Leslie Mayes and NBC 30 featured DCF's Racial Justice work in their [Color of Connecticut segment](#).

Our work is known nationally. I was honored to provide a keynote address at the Mahoning County Division of Children's Services Diversity Committee conference in Ohio! See the media coverage here: [Mahoning County Keynote](#)



This month we had our 25th annual Black History Month celebration! Lead by Master of Ceremonies Toni Ligon, we honored African American history, heard beautiful music from our youth and Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly provided us a phenomenal rendition of Amazing Grace - over Microsoft Teams!

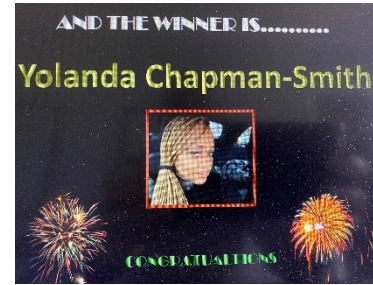
Thank you to our panel members - leaders inside and outside of the Department - who recited stories of their own struggles in life, those who inspired them and their visions for the future.

"No matter what you got, not matter what you have, make the most of it," said Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams during his remarks to the over 100 participants. "Look at what we've done with this month."

Congratulations to Yolanda Chapman-Smith, Office Director for Norwalk, on being named the 2023 recipient of the Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award! Read more about Dr. Williams in our Spotlight story.

Lastly, it is with gratitude and pride I begin a second term as CT DCF's first Black Commissioner. We cannot be in these seats unless we leverage our power and privilege for the good.

Being the first means nothing if you are the last.



"We are just a family unit"



Three-year-old Kayden sits between his two most important men in his life. His birth father, John Allen, and his adoptive father/grandfather, Craig Shepard. He may read this article some day and realize the unique bond these two men have while placing his best interests at the forefront of everything they do.

Although, this beautiful story had a difficult beginning.

Craig received a call that Kayden was about to be born. At the hospital, he encountered an Investigator from the Department of Children and Families who advised him he was named as a resource if Kayden could not be taken home by his parents.

Craig had already raised one grandchild who was now almost a young adult, and he had no plans, at 59 years of age, to raise another child. He clearly told the social worker he was not a resource.

That all changed very quickly.

Kayden was born and required placement into the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) given his fragile physical state. Grandpa Craig came to visit and when Kayden grabbed his finger the plans all changed. "He was coming home with us," was Craig's thought as expressed through an emotional tone in his voice.

Craig advised the DCF worker that he and his wife were willing to become a kinship resource. When asked when that changed, his response was quite clear. "That changed about 15 minutes ago," he said.

The placement was made but it was quite difficult at first.

Kayden suffered tremors for about six months. "We would hug him and hold him all night," Craig stated. He and his family received significant supports from DCF especially Social Worker Betty Thompson.

"Thank God for Betty Thompson," Craig stated. "She stepped in and was a big help."

Kayden's father, John Allen, was incarcerated at the time Kayden was born. "It was an unfortunate situation at birth," he stated.





John did not initially see his son for the first six or seven months of his life given his struggles. He knew Craig was a "good father" and was already raising a granddaughter.

Visitation between John and Kayden was "almost impossible" due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What also complicated matters was that John fell into a "deep depression" for almost a year and visits stopped altogether.

DCF moved towards a permanent plan of Termination of Parental Rights with the goal of Craig and his wife adopting Kayden.

John reached back out to Craig in an effort to begin developing a relationship with his son. "You can't be popping in and out of Kayden's life," Craig said to him. "Where have you been?"

That conversation led to others and the bond between these two men began to develop.

John wanted Kayden in his custody. "I have to have my son," is what he wanted. Those thoughts quickly changed to "Is that in Kayden's best interests?"

"He is rooted there. He has had a hard beginning since birth," John recalls thinking.

John recognized Kayden needed to stay with Craig and his family on a permanent basis. However, he wanted to remain an active participant in his son's life.

What John saw Kayden being afforded was something he did not have growing up. John himself was adopted and always wanted a tight knit family yet his family was not that close. Looking at Craig and his wife, he saw that they could "break the mold" for Kayden and wanted him to stay.

John agreed to having Craig and his wife adopt Kayden and voluntarily terminated his parental rights.

"You can come here anytime and see your son," Craig told John. Craig saw himself in John as Craig had experienced his own issues with substance abuse 30+ years ago and finally became sober after three attempts at rehab. He also experienced a difficult first marriage. "I can't phantom the thought of someone not seeing their child."





John describes Craig mentoring him. "He guided me with Kayden."

John actively participates in his son's life. They Facetime, celebrate holidays together and go on vacation. John has met Craig's extended family and they embraced him.

When Kayden recently had double pink eye, it was John who took him during the day. "Yes buddy," John stated to him during the interview when Kayden quickly grabbed his attention.

"We're all just one big family. Like the Waltons," John stated. "It's a family relationship. I have genuine love for them."

Craig points out that in the "long run" having John involved in Kayden's life is the best. Kayden knows John as "Dad" and Craig as "Pappa Craig."

He will need them both as Kayden is described as "little fast guy" full of energy. While Craig admits he is not getting any younger, he wants to experience all he can with this little boy. "We have some wrestling to do," he stated.

For little Kayden, he will have questions about his life as he grows older. No better than these two men to answer them and to model for him what a true family and relationships are all about.

Samaris Rose - A True Advocate



Samaris Rose gave birth to the first of her five boys when she was 15 years old. As a teenage mother, she remained in school and had a job while her son went to daycare. Her second child came a few years later.

So did her first interaction with the Department of Children and Families.

Samaris' baby had an unexplained mark on his body. A call from the daycare to DCF prompted an investigation - and removal of her two children who were placed into a core foster home. "I did not believe it," Samaris stated when thinking back on the day her children were separated from her.

Samaris denies to this day she ever hurt her son. In fact, the professionals involved in her case even disagreed amongst themselves about what happened. It appears she was caught up in the risk adverse mindset of the Agency at that time.

Samaris saw the child protective services system from the inside, and it was not a good look. "Everyone thought it was a joke," is how she described the court process and the steps she was given to regain custody. Samaris recalls the visits with her children in a DCF office and how her own mother was told "no" when she offered herself as a kinship resource. This was reflective of the practice decades ago when the Department did not actively engage relatives in caring for their family members.

Samaris described how her little boy developed separation anxiety while placed into foster care which now manifests itself as adjustment disorder as an adult. "He does not want to be out of my presence," is how Samaris describes her oldest son and the long-term effects of this experience.

Samaris and her boys were reunified after a long 6 months.

Samaris went on to have a third child. In a twist of irony, he also presented with the same type of unexplained mark on his body which prompted the removal of her two other children years earlier. This time, the outcome was different. It was determined that the child caused the mark himself by rubbing his leg on a Velcro piece of the divider to keep a child on their side. Samaris firmly believes this is what caused her first son's injury, yet no one listened.

"What I experienced is not what I see today," is how Samaris describes the current practices at DCF. She is now on the frontline of listening to families, advocating for them and she brings the



knowledge she has gained to the Statewide Advisory Council (SAC) for DCF where she has been a member for over five years.

The SAC provides the Department of Children and Families with oversight and advisement. This diverse group of private providers, parents with lived expertise and community advocates meet monthly to receive updates about the Department and provide feedback on policies, practices, legislation, and budgets.

Samaris is vocal and provides valuable insights.

"Five years ago, they were looking for a parent," Samaris stated and she has been an active member ever since.

Little did Samaris know she would one day use her circumstances to shape that same system which she believes treated her so poorly so the next family's experience would be better.

"Years ago, it was call DCF and they will take your children. That is not what happens today," Samaris stated. 'You guys do absolutely everything you can to keep families together.'

Over the years, Samaris has since contacted the Department herself to access specialized behavioral health services for a couple of her adolescent boys when Voluntary Services was still administered by the Department and before Voluntary Care Management was established through Beacon Health. Although at first, contacting the Department caused an adverse reaction given her prior experiences.

"They really get you the support you need," is how she describes today's DCF.



Samaris is a leader in her community and found herself in a position where families would frequently ask her questions about the system, where to go for help and how to work through the negative stigma attached to those seeking supports.

"I have this situation," parents would say to her.

She was also frequently asked how to navigate DCF and respond to the Agency.

Samaris began networking and building relationships with providers. She wanted to use her life's journey to give back.

Samaris started a non-profit with her own money and established a website called Justasksammy.org

"People should have their dignity and pride even when seeking help," she stated.

Upon accessing the website, families can articulate the issue they are having. In a unique approach, Samaris then does an intake with the family, refers them to a provider and speaks directly to the community agency to ensure the full context of support is understood.

"We stick around to make sure the organization is held accountable," she stated.

The number of families she has assisted is in the hundreds.

Samaris realizes the struggles families face especially as she raises five African American young men between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age. She has interfaced with the education, law enforcement and other systems which has not been an easy experience.



"Scary," is how Samaris describes the violence on the streets.

When her God son was lost to gun violence, she connected a second group to her existing non-profit called "Restoring Effective Support and Treatment" (REST). Modeled after a program in New Jersey, REST provides mentorship and is aimed at keeping youth off the streets. It directly addresses gun violence.

Her days are full.

She sees a lot, hears a lot but continues to serve others. "My relationship with the Lord allows me to make it through," she clearly articulated.

What does Samaris say to those who are concerned about DCF involvement? "Don't worry. Don't be afraid and cooperate," she tells them.

"Don't be in denial of what is happening for fear of where the help is coming from."

Thank you, Samaris, for your never-ending positive spirit, for sharing your story, and for advocating on behalf of Connecticut's children and families.

Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award 2023 Recipient and Nominees

Dr. Janet E. Williams served as the agency's Medical Director for several years. She was known for her devotion to Connecticut's children and families, the compassion in how she interacted with others and the teachings she imparted to staff across the agency.

An active presence in her community, Dr. Williams gave back in unique ways.



To honor her legacy, the Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award is given to a DCF staff person who has demonstrated a strong passion for children and families, shown an unyielding concern, and has taken action towards the advancement and betterment of those on their caseload, or within the Black community.

Congratulations to **Yolanda Chapman-Smith** for receiving the 2023 Janet E. Williams award! Yolanda was nominated for using her voice, platform, and influence as a Black woman in leadership, both internally and within the community, through advocacy for racial justice and equitably responsive systems within the Black community.

Congratulations to all of the Nominees:

- **Elena Conde, Social Worker, Danbury Office** - Nominated for her work and advocacy in schools by being a liaison and advocating for more extracurricular activities for lower income families.
- **Elizabeth Wyatt-Friedman, Social Worker, Danbury Office** - Nominated for always supporting and bringing to the forefront racial injustice issues that present themselves on her caseload.
- **Shante' Powers-Gaskins, RRG Supervisor, Region 4** - Nominated for her commitment to racial justice through advocacy in schools, the community, and always working to ensure inclusion of Black and Brown staff within DCF.
- **Teresa Jenkins, Social Work Supervisor, Norwich Office** - Nominated for her involvement, support, and advocacy in wider Black communities through fundraising for youth scholarships through her local church and more.
- **Dr. Brett Rayford, Former Superintendent of Solnit North** - Nominated for being a trailblazer in racial justice work across the State of Connecticut, connecting many to resources and community conferences created by Dr. Rayford to ensure justice for youth, families, and the wider Black community.

- **Winston Taylor, Social Work Supervisor, Norwich Office** - Nominated for his dedication, 29 years of service, and work of supporting Black families within and outside of DCF as well as through ministry of supporting those who are incarcerated.
- **Lorraine Thomas, Social Work Supervisor, Norwich Office** - Nominated for her mentorship of young women and always approaching every situation with compassion.
- **Jacqueline Vidal, Social Worker, Waterbury Office** - Nominated for her dedication and support of identifying culturally competent providers to meet basic needs that are culturally sensitive to the children on her caseload and in the community.
- **Raven Wright, Clinical Intake Coordinator at Solnit South** - Nominated for being a champion for the LGBTQ+ community, hair care education for Black youth, and educating providers of how they can be clinically supportive to youth and families.