

Commissioner January 2023 Message



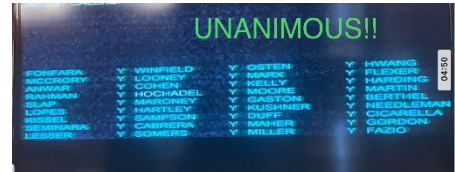
We are now into 2023 but let me take you back one more time to 2022 and say.....Thank you!

For everything you did for the children and families we serve and each other.

Without our collective efforts, such incredible work - across offices, divisions, and facilities - could not have been accomplished.

I am honored to inform you that Governor Lamont has reappointed me to be

Commissioner.



With great pride, I testified at the re-confirmation hearing about all of our great work over the past 4 years! This week, in a unanimous vote, the Senate confirmed the appointment by consensus.

In this month's "Spotlight on What's Right" newsletter, we provide you the Best of 2022! Spend a few moments to read and to celebrate our successes.

After 11,782 days, the clock stopped, and we exited the Juan F. Consent Decree!

DCF was featured on the NBC Today show and was referred to as a "model for the nation." Watch it again here: [Today Show](#)



Our succession planning for retirements allowed us to maintain our focus and produce high quality work and outcomes as changes in personnel took place.

With great pride, we brought parents with lived expertise with us to the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioner and Directors' Pathways to Partnership Regional convening to learn how our service delivery system can ensure parents feel more included, heard, and respected.

We also began creating and implementing new behavioral health supports for children!

Read more of our highlights in the Spotlight!



January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month. Last year, the Department received almost 300 referrals pertaining to youth suspected of currently being trafficked or at-risk of being trafficked. Read more here about the Department's resources: [DCF HART](#)

Survivors of trafficking tell powerful stories of resilience and strength. Read about "the life" as told firsthand by a DCF employee, and trafficking survivor, who provides us keen insight into the coercion, control, and dynamics of his epidemic in our society.



Behind each of the great outcomes stand committed and diligent staff! DeShawn Jennings contacted DCF to express his gratitude for Kim Somaroo-Rodriguez, Program Supervisor for Housing/Homeless Services. A father of 8 children, he was desperate for a place to call home. "What she did for my family is beyond words," he stated. Read his story and see how a few kind words can change life's outlook!

Onto a fantastic 2023!

The Best of 2022!

We have many successes to celebrate across our Department!

Our community partners, the children, and families we serve make CT DCF one of the best child welfare jurisdictions in the country! How do we know this to be true?

Check out this list of just some of our accomplishments during 2022:

- Exited the Juan F. Consent Decree after 30 years of federal oversight (that's 11,782 days but who's counting 😊)
- CT DCF was featured on NBC's Today show and was referred to as "*a model for the nation.*"
- Commissioner Dorantes serves as the Chair of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators.
- Along with our provider, foster parents and court partners established permanency for over 1,500 children in 2022 which includes more than 450 Reunifications, 350 Transfers of Guardianship and almost 500 Adoptions.
  - During the Dorantes Administration thus far, reduced the number of children in care by 30% and permanency was established for 5,789 children resulting in 2,402 Reunifications, 1,495 Transfers of Guardianship and 1,892 Adoptions.
- Developed succession planning in anticipation of retirements across the Department leading to seamless transitions in many areas. (We know it hasn't all been smooth --- we continue to work thru an unprecedented number of staffing refills and vacancies --- THANK YOU Human Resources --- even in the midst of your own staff turnovers!)
- Speaking of our workforce, the CT Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities has approved DCF's Affirmative Action plan for the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive year! Shout out to our EOO Div!
- Commissioner Dorantes received the CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS Excellence for Children Leadership Award, St Joseph Parenting Center IMAGINE Award and The Alyssiah Wiley MAKING a DIFFERENCE in the COMMUNITY Award in 2022.
- Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly was the sole Child Welfare representative selected as a CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS Leadership Fellow in 2022.
- Our Statewide Racial Justice Workgroup championed the implementation of the Department's anti-racist framework leading to becoming a racially just organization. Division of Multi-Cultural Affairs published our annual RJ legislative report --- Stay tuned ... the new one is on deck to be submitted soon.
- Speaking of legislative reports--- our Program Dir of Legislative Affairs embarked on a project and was successful in streamlining the number of reports required by our agency to reduce duplication and redundancy.



- Re-aligned leadership structure in the Area Offices resulting in Administrative Program Directors overseeing functions/practice resulting in great consistency across the state. Child Welfare Bureau on the move and getting it done!
- The Legal Division turned around 5683 record requests to attorneys, courts, families, and other parties who are entitled to receive them.
- Promoted and hired a new leadership team in the Fiscal Department and expanded their roles given the significant increase in Federal money to support programs during post pandemic recovery.
- Increased the percentage of children under the age of 18 years placed with kinship families to 50%. Kudos to FASU staff for supporting core and kin homes and to TEAM CT; a leader in the QPI national network!
- Continued to collaborate and shared best practices in our work with the Governor's Office, sister state agencies, child welfare jurisdictions across the country, community partners and families with lived expertise.
- CARELINE stood-up a fully established on-line portal for all mandated reporters to make non-emergent reports of child maltreatment. Why is this significant? Because they also took over 65,000 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect last year!!! The new Five9 system is getting A LOT of use from our fantastic CARELINE crew!
- More phones ringing in the Bureau of External Affairs. Not only did they stand up a TEXT chat line for young people in care last year! They also answered over 900 inquiries and over 600 informational calls!! "Hello --- Can you hear me now???"
- CT DCF Senior leaders have presented nationally regarding topics such as: Connecticut's Quality Parenting Initiative, Communications Strategies, Child Safety, Strategic Planning, Racial Justice, and more.
- Also, Team CT, which included parents with lived expertise, represented the Department at the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors' *Pathways to Partnership* New England Regional convening to learn more about how our system can ensure parents feel more included, heard, and respected.
- CT DCF was solicited to host a group of congressional staffers to share highlights of how federal funding is put into use here in our state.
- Actively participated in the National Governor's Association (NGA) Children and Family Learning Cohort leading to sharing our best-case practices with other states across the country.
- Engaged in regular communication with key legislators, Juvenile Court Administration, Attorney General's Office, Public Defenders Office, and Office of the Child Advocate to provide Department updates and resolve issues brought to their attention.
- Legal management collaborated with the Attorney General's Office on all stages of child protection appeals, including providing feedback on briefs and participating in moot arguments.
- Commissioner Dorantes serves as Vice-Chair of the Governor's Council on Women and Girls with Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz.

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- To enhance our Children's Behavioral Health mandate CT DCF established the Director of Community Mental Health. Continued implementation of Children's Behavioral Health Plan and created the structures for innovative programming, with community partners, in response to an increase in the behavioral health needs of children.
- Oversaw the creation of new behavioral health programs for children including Enhanced Care Coordination, expansion of Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services, increases to Access Mental Health, the establishment of the Urban Trauma Network, and began planning to develop Urgent Crisis Centers, and Sub-Acute Stabilization Centers.
- Fully implemented a policy and practice to review, on an emergency basis, Central Registry decisions that were barriers to placement of children with relatives and fictive kin. When appropriate, reversed Registry placement, leading to an increase in safely placing children in a home with someone they know.
- Engaged with Legislators throughout the year providing invitations to key Department activities, DCF materials and responding to constituent questions.
- Hired a Director of Organizational Wellness. Reinforced with CTDCF personnel the importance of establishing a healthy work/life balance and the utilization of internal supports including the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).



- Monitored services to vulnerable populations such as children with specialized needs, and children and families in disproportionately impacted communities.
- Creatively provided uninterrupted treatment to youth with complex needs on our Solnit North and Solnit South campuses while mitigating virus transmission. Both facilities welcomed new Superintendents in 2022!
- Produced "*DCF News*" highlighting positive efforts of the workforce and information regarding supports available for children, families, and staff.
- Published a "*Spotlight on What's Right*" monthly newsletter highlighting the collaborative work of the Department and community partners leading to successful outcomes for families.
- Established the unit of Educational Administration for Juvenile Justice Services.
- Answered questions and clarified operational procedures on a routine basis with leadership from 8 different state employee labor unions for staff throughout the department.
- Maintained consistent meeting cadence with Children's League of Connecticut (CLOC) and Non-Profit Alliance to ensure information sharing and problem solving with their member providers.
- Conducted virtual and in-person listening tours with the DCF Area Offices and Facilities.
- Held a "Connecticut Adoption Day" where over 45 children achieved formal permanency both during in-person and remote hearings thanks to collaboration with Judicial Partners.
- Coordinated the Leadership Academy for Social Work Supervisors, Leadership Academy for Middle Managers, and the Mentoring program to develop staff in preparation for succession planning.

- Completed the first Executive Fellowship Program for senior leaders within DCF including two administrators from the Office of Early Childhood.
- Included Attorney General's Office in particularly complex cases including Critical Incident Case Conferences.
- Commissioner Dorantes serves with DMHAS Commissioner Navaretta as Co-Chairs of Connecticut's Alcohol and Drug Policy Council.
- CT DCF established interim guidelines where fentanyl use is suspected or known in families where children are present.
- Opened the DCF "Olive Branch" Toy Shop, where families came to pick out holiday gifts for their own children year-round.
- Implemented the third round of the ChildStat process in each Regional Office leading to enhanced knowledge of data, trends, and case practices towards successful outcomes.
- The Bureau conducted over 1,800 Quality Case Reviews and 9,400 Administrative Case Reviews, processed FOIA requests w the Legal Div, produced data sharing agreements, research projects with UCONN, ACR tool redesign, self-assessment tool and much much more!
- Did you know the CT DCF HelpDesk responded to over 27,000 tickets last year? That's how we keep all of our amazing work going!
- CT DCF developed and implemented the ABCD Child Safety Practice Model



- The crafting of the V.I.T.A.L. Practice Model is just one of the many ways the Transitional Supports and Success Division supports programming for older youth in care. By September of 2022, over \$450,000 had been dispersed to assist Transitional Age Youth (TAY) with daily living expenses and other emergent costs. Along with Adolescent services units in our area offices, over \$75,000 in expenditures were allocated to young people for car maintenance, repairs and insurance.
- Milestone activities are fun rites of passage. Critical to youth in care. So much so that another \$140, 465.53 was spent on 101 milestone activities!
- Along with majority representation on the New England Youth Coalition, CT DCF will be well represented this year at the *Think of Us* conference in Washington DC where they were invited to attend by the US Administration for Children and Families Associate Commissioner Aisha Schomburg.
- And if ALL that wasn't enough, the TSS Division also launched the TAYTalk newsletter last year. Preparing youth in care to AGE-INTO young adulthood with a little extra support.
- TSS unit continued follow up with over 100 young adults who had transitioned from care following the pandemic moratorium to ensure their needs were met and they were connected to resources.
- Moved the Meriden Area office to a new location and worked with Department of Transportation to ensure families who need to get to the office can do so safely through public transit.
- Successfully opened the Waterbury Office Annex to reduce overcrowded conditions in that office.

- Expanded the Special Qualitative Review process to include the Safe System Improvement Tool (SSIT) under the National Partnership for Child Safety as an important part of our Safe and sound Practice Model.

**This list is not at all exhaustive of the tremendous work happening across the Department. Do you have a fun fact or stat you'd like to highlight not mentioned here? We are always looking for new Spotlight stories to illuminate the great things you do every day ... Contact [Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov](mailto:Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov) or Ken [Mysogland@ct.gov](mailto:Mysogland@ct.gov)**

## "Surviving Trafficking"

### *The story of a DCF Employee and CT Survivor of Child Sex Trafficking*



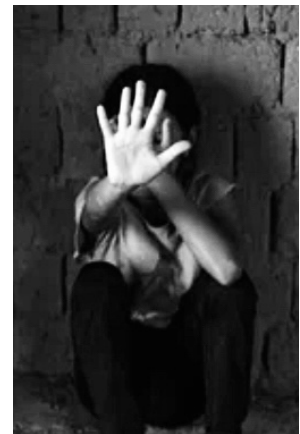
Mark grew up in a loving home with involved parents. He was active in his school, talented, engaged in extracurricular activities and was visible. Sound familiar?

What doesn't make sense is that he was a Connecticut victim of child sex trafficking - and no one knew it. Recruited by peers, who were coerced by an adult male in the community, Mark was forced into sex trafficking. The beginning is all too familiar. During an

impressionable time, Mark was looking for acceptance as a teen.

Mark estimates he was sold to over 500 men and women - White married men being the biggest buyers.

For over 5 years, daily coercive tactics from his trafficker and even fellow victims served as reminders that Mark was to do what they said or be faced with violence, embarrassment, and shame. Mark never had "serious injuries" from his traffickers but was threatened at one point with a gun to his head. "This was one of many instances when they showed harm could be caused," according to Mark.



"They know what they are doing in a very smart way," Mark stated. "They take what they know about you and use it against you in a calculated negative way." For example, those same protective factors which apparently made Mark less of a text-book target, were "flipped" against him to keep his compliance and secrecy.

He did not drink or engage in substance use. Mark followed the rules. Boys are socialized to be strong, able to defend themselves and it is socially accepted that they engage in sexual activity. "If you do not do this, you are not a guy," he would be told. Sexually explicit photos taken of him were held against him and threatened to be released if he wavered in his compliance. This issue of sextortion is becoming increasingly common and is an easy tactic for traffickers to use through online solicitation.



Tammy Sneed is the Department's Director, Office of Human Trafficking Services. "We don't give boys and men permission to be victims," she stated. In Connecticut, only 9% of reported trafficking victims are boys and nationally the number is approximately 36%. According to Tammy, the numbers are low because of how we socialize males, the negative stigma attached to males reporting themselves as victims and the greater community not talking about males being harmed.

"Prevention and awareness are key to being kept out of 'the life.' Once you are in, it is so hard to get out," stated Tammy.



One form of trafficking was to have Mark be paid as a stripper in front of men. He told some of his classmates at school to "test" their reaction. "I do this and get paid," he explained. His Math teacher became aware and did nothing - if they only had today's training and awareness.

The trafficking ended when Mark was a young adult. He reports feeling that growing older made him "less desirable... buyers wanted children." Perhaps the most influential factor was a violent assault which he considers his "rock bottom." Mark escaped "the life" but it was not without threats from his traffickers.

"So much shame comes with it. So much stigma. For boys, this is viewed as a weakness."

Mark also reports that race was a major factor in his experience. "We were sold for a certain amount of money for 30 minutes or an hour. Allow me to repeat myself: we were SOLD. In my case, being a person of color sold by a White person to other White people was painful on multiple levels... Trafficking is horrible for all victims, regardless of race. But the factor of race can't be overlooked. Traffickers use your race as a selling point for their advertisement of you. White kids were priced higher. I was literally worth less in this market."

Mark completed college and gained employment at the Department of Children and Families. All of what he was subjected to was still a struggle for him when he started at DCF. "I knew something happened to me and had experienced horrible things, but I didn't have a name for it," he stated.

That changed one day when he was in DCF's training on Child Sex Trafficking - now he had the words. "We gotta talk," Mark stated to the trainer.



"Gray on details," is how Mark remembers exactly what happened to him. This is a component of his trauma response and that he may remember "things in the minute" about his experiences including when he is educating members of the community about sex trafficking.

"Still a battle," is how Mark describes the impact of trafficking on his self-esteem which he states is the "biggest impact on (him)." Educating others assists him with overcoming some of the trauma. DCF staff and community members have come up to him after he speaks to disclose their own victimization.

Given the unique harm for trafficking victims, traditional therapy may not prove beneficial. Therapists may be unable to understand the dynamics and coercive control unless they've received highly specialized training. There is no known Evidenced Based Program (EBP) for trafficking victims across the country. Mark found pro-social activities to be more therapeutic than any traditional therapy models.

Great misunderstanding is present throughout our communities. A child displaying runaway behaviors, school truancy, aggressive behaviors or engaging in substance use could all be manifestations of trauma associated with trafficking. "You have to pull back the layers, victims will never present as just a victim," according to Mark.

"If a child is forced to have sex with their father, we know what to do," stated Tammy. "If a child is forced to have sex with a 20, 30 or 40 year old, we blame them." Victim blaming needs to stop.

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"In order to believe the victim, you have to acknowledge the adult is exploiting them," confirmed Tammy.

"It is the adult who is the criminal here."

"Being a professional is therapeutic," Mark stated. "Repurpose the trauma in a positive way."



Mark stands among us as a leader in the Department and community. While few may know his story, hundreds will feel the effects of his words and insights he imparts to others and perhaps without ever remembering his name.

It is his hope that by telling his courageous story, there will be one less victim of child sex trafficking and one more person will be rescued from "the life."

*The name of the individual in the story has been changed to ensure confidentiality.*

"I feel you are put in my path for a reason."



Kim Somaroo-Rodriguez is at the forefront of one of society's greatest challenges - homelessness. "Give people hope," is how she describes her role as the Program Supervisor for Housing/Homelessness at the Department of Children and Families. "I just try to hear them out and offer a little guidance."

It is her calm and engaging ways which impacted DeShawn Jennings as he sought housing for his family consisting of 8 children. So much, that DeShawn took the time to express his sincere gratitude for Kim and her efforts.

"What she did for my family is beyond words. She renewed my faith in people."

In May 2022, DeShawn found himself in a crisis as he and his family were unexpectedly given 24 hours to vacate their home. DeShawn has physical custody of his children who range in age from 15 years to two years of age requiring a four-bedroom living environment. He is a single parent and options, and finances, were limited. "I think I am going to sleep in the car," was his initial thought until he was able to secure funding for a hotel from a relative.

DeShawn then contacted the United Way of Connecticut's 211 Housing Line. Approval was granted for the family to be placed into temporary housing. The family experienced stays at the Best Western, Red Roof Inn, Motel 6, and the Comfort Inn. "I was going everywhere looking for houses," DeShawn explained.



United Way of Connecticut

"I was disheartened by the situation," he stated. "The loss was because my kids could not be stable."

This determined father conducted "research" on his own regarding housing programs across Connecticut. He located the DCF Supportive Housing program which acts to provide families served by DCF with support services and access to quality, affordable and safe housing.



Not only did he find the resource he needed - he also found Kim Somaroo-Rodriguez - Supportive Housing's Program Lead at DCF.

A 23-year Department veteran, Kim engages in a family-centered approach with those she serves. "Find whatever asset the family has because they are in a crisis. Give them some hope," she stated.

One strategy to keep families focused during a time of need is to have them visualize what their new housing may look like including the color schemes in their children's rooms and meals they will be preparing in their own kitchen. She assists them to look at the "big picture" knowing that good things will

come.

She had a specific message to Deshawn. "You kept at it. You are the patriarch of your family," Kim told him.

Kim was initially concerned that DeShawn's family was so large and finding a home to accommodate may prove burdensome in an already overwhelmed system. "He had every door seemingly closed," she

stated. Upon review of the case record, Kim assessed DeShawn as meeting the criteria for Supporting Housing for Families program. She facilitated the housing application process with DCF Worker Samuel Agyei. The wait list was long, but DeShawn was able to be prioritized due to his family's size. But, that still did not mean the process would be quick.

Days and weeks went by which then turned into months as the search for housing continued. "Some days I didn't even want to wake up," DeShawn stated. He always found comfort with Kim. "This is what we are doing," DeShawn was told by Kim. "Any issues give me a call."

"Kim never gave me the runaround." DeShawn remembers so clearly Kim's constant words of encouragement. "This is temporary," she told him. "It's going to get better."

"When she talked, she talked like she understood," DeShawn stated.

Right before Christmas, the journey ended and DeShawn family's located a place to call their own.

"We found a home," DeShawn told Kim.

What is life like now that the family has a permanent place to live? "I coached football while homeless. I coach football now," stated DeShawn. Raising 8 children alone is not easy. "We have to learn the day to day activities and keep the house clean."

The Supporting Housing for Families provided by the Connection continues to assist the family to ensure their housing will remain stable and permanent. Once housing is found, the program and the family work together to make it a "home" even after their CPS case is closed. The program continues to provide ongoing support to Deshawn and his family. The program can make referrals for therapeutic services or assist with summer clothes or camp for the children.

DeShawn will never forget Kim. Just like the family whom Kim helped in 2021 find housing, leading to reunification of their two daughters. "We found a home," that family said as they called and told Kim a couple of years ago. That same family recently sent her pictures of their family around the holidays. Like DeShawn, Kim will forever be a part of their family history.

Kim is humble as she discusses the families she has encountered over the years.

"I feel like you are put in my path for a reason," she stated. For the hundreds of families Kim serves each year, they are forever grateful their paths crossed as well.



