

Commissioner's Monthly Message



The month of July typically brings with it vacations, time off from work and a slight reduction in new reports of child maltreatment.

This year feels different.

Children and families across Connecticut are experiencing very difficult traumatic events that have left many to grieve the loss of loved ones.

The youngest children in our communities - those under the age of 5 - require collective efforts to empower and support their

parents/caregivers during the less structured days of summer.

We've included a video this month to discuss these issues in more detail → [Commissioner July 2023](#)

In my 30yrs at DCF, I thought I had heard it ALL ... nope.

We regularly lift-up the strength of our staff however, none as brave as the three Wilderness School employees, **Allaith Ghaibah, Ellen Stumph, and Eric Carlson**. Because of their courageous efforts during a bobcat attack while on expedition, the safety of the youth-campers was maintained, and kids were not harmed.



Gratitude is hardly enough.

Have you seen the new branding???

CT FOSTERS: Mobilizing Love - Unifying Families New logo and Messaging!



KUDOS to the **Foster Care Division** for a fantastic series of presentations at our DCF Leadership Forum. Director Natalia Liriano's team developed an agenda that reinforced the **QPi principle** of ensuring every child receives excellent parenting every single day while in the custody of the Department.

Thank You also to our Functional Family Therapy (FFT) partners and agency clinicians from CCP, Klingberg FC, The Village and Wheeler Clinic for a very enlightening panel discussion on the evolution of our therapeutic foster care model.

Keynote speaker, **Brandy Hudson** of the Youth Law Center referenced the single most influential factor contributing to stability of children in foster care is the relationships between the child welfare agency and the caregiver. Reflecting on her own lived expertise which included **32**

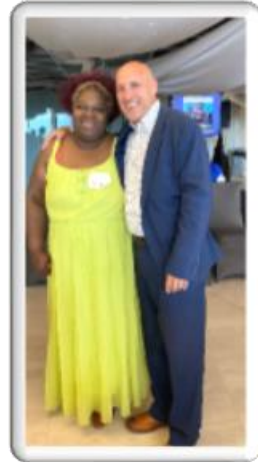
placements, urged attendees to work collaboratively across divisions for the sake of children we serve.

←A special thanks to members of our **Caregiver Advisory Council** → for their impassioned CALL TO ACTION! Caregivers deserve respect, communication, and consideration of their time as an equal team member.

Foster Care Appreciation activities are in full SWING!

Take a look at a few photos from Region 4's foster family sunny

afternoon at the ballpark:



Read in this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter the story of **Jackson**, a three-year-old boy reunified with his mother, **Amy**. She credits foster mother, **Michelle Gonzalez**, for teaching her "how to

be a mother," and never giving up on her. "I thank DCF for placing my son with her. Without [DCF], I never would have met her," Amy stated.

We also tell Michelle's story. "I am going to make a difference," she remembers thinking about when she finally decided to become licensed. Over the past 7 years, Michelle has developed a relationship with each family of the children placed into her home. "I make it known from the first icebreaker that I am not here to replace them," is how Michelle wants the family to understand her role.

Our practice continues to evolve.

The Executive Team and I have received recommendations from the *Post Consent Decree Workgroups*- Intake, Visitation, Case Plans and Caseload Weighting - to ensure our practice reflects the needs of Connecticut's children and families in 2023. Stay tuned for more information!



Lastly, the **Deer Oaks** EAP program has recently started an **EAP for first Responders**. This is a confidential, 24/7 helpline staffed by Master's Level Clinicians with in-the-moment telephonic support and crisis intervention available.

This program can be accessed by calling **1-833-253-1129**. When contacting them, please make sure to identify yourself as a calling from the Department of Children and Families.

Stay safe --- Stay strong --- Support Each Other!

"I can be Mama, you can be Mommy."



Three-year-old Jackson has the support of the two most important people in his life - "Mommy" and "Mama."

"Mommy" is Amy his birth mother and "Mama" is previous foster mother Michelle Gonzalez. It is the bond between these two women which has allowed this little boy to feel loved, connected to his family, flourish and have a great developmental foundation to succeed the rest of his life.

This story exemplifies exactly what happens with birth and foster parents join together - on behalf of a child.

"My past was ugly," explained Amy when describing her years of substance abuse and transient lifestyle. Pregnant with Jackson while incarcerated, she had no resources for him upon birth and placement into foster care was necessary.

Amy admits she was "petrified" when hearing Jackson was going to be placed into foster care. "You hear a lot of bad stories," she stated. Concurrently, COVID-19 was present in our communities and no visits could occur between Amy and Jackson at the prison. She went a full calendar year before seeing her son.

It was at Jackson's Administrative Case Review (ACR) that Amy first met Michelle. "At first I was really jealous. I know it was because I did not have my baby," she stated. Upon hearing Michelle's voice, listening to her speak, and sensing her the genuine care and concern she had for her little boy that put Amy at ease.

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"I could sleep at night knowing how he was doing."

From that point forward, their relationship grew. "She never once looked down upon me for my past," Amy stated. "She made it known she was there for me," is how Amy described her interactions with Michelle.

Visits between Amy and Jackson started virtually with Michelle showing Amy where Jackson sleeps. She explained to Amy that she put a picture of her next to Jackson's bed. "He always knew about me. Michelle always made sure he knew who I was," Amy recalls.

During that first visit, a poignant moment occurred when Amy heard Jackson call Michelle "Mama."

"That's your Mommy there," Amy remembers Michelle telling Jackson. She then had a clear message for Amy - "I can be Mama, you can be Mommy."

As time went by, the relationship strengthened. Amy was invited to Sunday dinners with Michelle and her family. She was present at picnics, holiday celebrations and other important events. "I guess you could say I was family from day one," Amy stated.

"They are my family."

Reunification occurred after Jackson was in care over three years. "I was scared," Amy remembers. Staying sober is a "struggle" and "scary" to now have your child in your custody. "Being a mom is new to me."

Two weeks after Jackson went home, Amy relapsed, and Jackson came back into care with Michelle. "Michelle never left my side," Amy emphatically stated. She took time off work, drove Amy to appointments and was her biggest support as she again gained sobriety.

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When someone truly
can be trusted to see who
you are and want what's
best for you, no matter
your official relationship,
they are family.

OPRAH WINFREY

Once stable and able to provide a safe home for Jackson, Amy was once again reunified. She has maintained her sobriety and works in a factory operating machinery while Jackson goes to daycare. Amy continues to receive support from Michelle who provides respite for Jackson and is always a phone call away.

"Just hearing her voice calms me down," Amy stated.

To this day, Jackson still refers to Michelle as "Mama" and Amy as "Mommy."

"DCF can send you to meetings and for therapy. They do not teach you how to be a mom. Michelle taught me how to be a mom."

What would Amy say to other parents who are in a similar situation as her?

"Don't listen to what other people involved with DCF say or the negative words. You will hear the horror stories," was Amy's message. "Do the work for yourself."

"Don't lost the fight. Don't give up."

Amy's gratitude and admiration for Michelle is clearly evident. "I thank DCF for placing my son with her. Without them, I never would have met her," Amy stated.

"She never gave up on me. She the biggest part of my village. I am where I am at today because of her."

The names of the birth mother and child have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.

"Mommy and Daddy are sending their love."



"I have an idea for you, what about foster care?" For Michelle Gonzalez, she probably never imagined her former boss would encourage her to open her home to children in need. Yet, he saw something in Michelle which is undeniable - she has a gift for caring for others.

As time went by, his questioning continued. "Okay Michelle, what do you think?" Michelle talked to her family - who she refers to as her "biggest support" - and all agreed for her to become licensed. "I am going to make a difference," she remembers thinking.

Over the past 7 years, Michelle has developed a relationship with each family of the children placed into her home. "I make it known from the first icebreaker that I am not here to replace them," is how Michelle wants the family to understand her role.

"I put myself in their shoes. This could happen to anyone any day. What would I want? I would want to know who my child is with and have that relationship," she added.

In fact, it is Michelle's entire family, her mother, three adult children, three grandchildren and her young, adopted son, who embrace the children placed with her. "Any child that comes through the door is treated like a sibling," Michelle explained. This includes her children rocking to sleep a child in distress or simply being patient when Michelle is going to numerous medical appointments or other meetings on behalf of the children needing her attention.

"They are wonderful."

Every Sunday, the family gets together for a family dinner. The invites are also extended to the birth families.

Michelle's role in serving others started when she was a Family Advocate with a Head Start program providing supports to up to 40 families at a time. It was clear she would do literally anything to assist - even showing up at a family's home with a mop and vacuum - to aid in cleaning up the house. "Let's do this together," she would say.

"I want them to know I'm there for them."

The families responded and as their trust in Michelle grew, so did the phone calls at all hours of the night. "I just need someone to listen to me," is what one parent said to her during a 10:00 p.m. outreach.





Michelle is currently a liaison for the pediatric and neonatal intensive care units at Danbury Hospital. She connects families to services and has vast experience working with DCF staff. Supporting families with high-risk newborns is everyday part of her job. It is easy to understand why DCF quickly moved to place infants in her home.

One could say she cares for babies day and night.....

Michelle has had a total of 5 placements which includes one baby currently in her care. One child left her home to be placed with a kinship family and they still Facetime, recently making plans to visit a farm together. Michelle exchanges pictures with the grandparents caring for another little boy whom she previously provided care.

Michelle has also adopted a little boy who is now 4 years of age. The parents voluntarily terminated their rights with the mother stating in court, "As long as you can guarantee Michelle can stay with him, I will sign." This an open adoption with consistent communication still occurring with his birth family. "They gave me one of the best things. To trust me to raise their child," is how Michelle views her son's birth family.

For one special little boy, Jackson, and his mother, Amy, Michelle was the guiding force that led to their reunification. It is probably the best of example of how a team of a foster parent and birth parent working together is clearly in a child's best interests.

For three years, Jackson was placed with Michelle during the COVID-19 pandemic which presented many barriers to permanency. Amy was incarcerated at the time of her son's birth and suffered from years of a substance abuse disorder. "She never looked down on me for my past," is how Amy describes Michelle's relationship with her.

Amy was a consistent visitor to Michelle's home. "I guess you could say I was family from day one," Amy stated as she was invited to picnics, dinners, and holiday events. "They are my family."



Shortly after Jackson was reunified, Amy relapsed, and Jackson was again placed with Michelle. "You are not going to fail this," Michelle told Amy.

Michelle took two weeks off from work, drove Amy to her appointments and continued to tell her, "You are going to get Jackson back."

"I wanted to make sure she was good."

Michelle advocated for Amy with DCF. "I want a voice with DCF," Michelle stated. Parents need to feel that support.

"I couldn't be prouder of her," is how Michelle describes Amy now that Jackson has once again been reunified.

Read more about Amy's story and her relationship with Michelle in the story entitled, "I can be Mama, you can be Mommy."

Throughout her journey in foster care, Michelle credits the "humungous support" and relationship she has with Robyn Wood of the Foster Care Division. "Any hour day or night she makes sure she reaches out and gets back to you," Michelle stated. After one emotionally difficult reunification, it was Robyn who encouraged Michelle to continue fostering.

"This is your calling. This is what you are meant to do," Robyn told her. No truer words.



"You would be surprised about all the avenues DCF can help you reach," she wants birth families to know.

What is Michelle's message to other foster parents?

"Keep an open mind and do not judge," she stated. "The family needs you. That child needs you."

"What is healthiest for that child is to have interactions with their birth parents. They need to know their family still loves them," Michelle emphatically stated.

For any child placed into her home, Michelle delivers a special message as she is putting them to sleep. "Mommy and Daddy are sending their love," she tells them and gives them an extra hug.

Thank you, Michelle, on behalf of those little children, who cannot yet voice their gratitude to you, for all you have done for them and their families!

The names of the birth mother and child have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.

Deer Oaks EAP Program for First Responders - Support is a Phone Call Away



As you take care of CT's most vulnerable children and families, we need you to take care of yourself first!

Child Welfare can be intense and emotional - believed to be one of the toughest jobs in state government and around the country amongst all professions.

Over the past month, we have seen an increase in violent and traumatic incidents involving children. As our work becomes more complex and demanding, so does the potential impact of working with those experiencing these conditions and the emotional toll it may take on us.

Seeking support is a sign of strength.

Within the Department of Children and Families, Lenisa Mathew is the Director of Organizational Development. She is called upon to coordinate workforce support after a critical incident with a child, an employee experiencing a traumatic event, or to speak with a staff member who is seeking guidance to address a career related or personal issue.

Lenisa is also the lead in making the connection between staff at all levels of the Department to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

She can be contacted at Lenisa.Mathew@ct.gov or (860) 936-7504 to discuss an issue and be connected to supports.

Deer Oaks is the Employee Assistance Provider for the State of Connecticut. They offer a variety of supports for not only employees - but also for the families of employees.

They have recently started an EAP for first Responders. This is a confidential, 24/7 helpline staffed by Master's Level Clinicians with in-the-moment telephonic support and crisis intervention available.

This program can be accessed by calling 1-833-253-1129. When contacting them, please make sure to identify yourself as a calling from the Department of Children and Families.

Please visit their website at www.deeroaks.eap.com for more information or email the program at: eap@deeroaks.com

