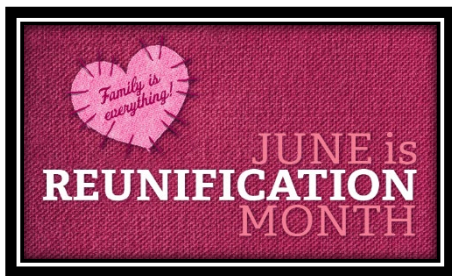




Thank you to DCF staff at our 24/7 Careline and Facilities as the State of Connecticut observed Juneteenth Independence Day for the first time in the state's history on Monday, June 19, 2023.

Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. While the Emancipation Proclamation became effective on January 1, 1863, the news took time to make its way around the country. As such, it was not until **June 19, 1865**, when the Union army brought word of the proclamation to enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, making them among the last to be freed.

*"For far too long, Juneteenth and the end of slavery have not been truly appreciated as a major part of United States history to the extent that they should," Governor Lamont said. "Embracing this history is an important component of educating everyone about how our nation was built and the significance of what this day means. When we ignore the impact of slavery, we ignore who we are as Americans and the extraordinary injustice that it created..."*



The month of June also gives us opportunity to reinforce the expectation of **Reunification** as a core value guiding our work. Foster Care is intended to be brief and only used to help mitigate child safety concerns with concurrent planning from everyone toward family reunification.

Over 2,800 children have been reunified since 2019 with almost 200 so far in 2023! As we continue to strengthen our system to prevent separating children from their parents, it is important to acknowledge the collective efforts of the entire child & family well-being system. Click [here](#) to learn more about how we are **all** striving to become **QPI CHAMPIONS!** Thank you to our foster parents, contracted providers, community partners and DCF staff for a job well done!

In this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" read the inspiring story of Vanessa Hernandez. "I made it" describes her journey to leave an abusive and coercive partner after being forced to live in abandoned buildings, walk 2.5 miles to and from work, having her money taken and struggling to eat each day. She now lives safely after being reunified with her son, Camden - living a life at one point she could not imagine.



In June 1969, the Stonewall Uprising was the result of a courageous group of individuals protesting the violence and oppression they faced as identifying as gay and lesbian in our society. Their strength and courage resulted in a movement shaped by empowerment and changed the way we celebrate the differences among us. Their efforts also brought us **June as Pride** month. Read the [President's Proclamation](#) about the importance of this time of the year.

"This is who I am," is the story of Alexander Lopes, a 17-year-old youth in the care and custody of the Department. Alexander is in the process of fully transitioning from female to male and provides us his unique perspective on being part of the LGBTQ+ community. "Be proud of who you are," is his message for youth across Connecticut.

**CT DCF will always stand for inclusion, belonging and love.**



This past week, I was on faculty for Casey Family Program's **Leadership Academy** in Seattle, Washington. Kicking off my presentation was a quick clip from Gov Lamont ( [link](#) )helping me to highlight the importance of stakeholder relationships in support of our work.

Join us in welcoming the next class of Child Welfare jurisdictional leaders from across the country.

Special thank you to **Vinny Russo** our Chief Administrator of Government Relations and Policy for his outstanding efforts during the 2023 legislative session. I also want to acknowledge the support provided by Assistant Legal Director **Kate Dwyer** and the quick and comprehensive work of Chief Fiscal Officer **Melanie Sparks**! I am proud of our DCF Team & you all should be too!



School is out for the summer! **Congratulations** to all parents and guardians for the support provided to children enabling them to have another successful year as they grow and thrive! And as a TK (= teacher's kid) myself, THANK YOU to all of CT's educators!

Did you enjoy visiting CT museums last summer??? Well museums across the state are again offering **Connecticut residents ages 18 and under, along with one adult caregiver, FREE admission between July 1 and Sept. 4!** CLICK here for a press release highlighting other fun activities as we safely get outside and PLAY!!! [Summer Season Kick Off!](#)

## "I made it"



Vanessa Hernandez has a message for those around her. "If you look at me, you will never know what I have been through."

Gone are the days when her text messages were monitored, paychecks were taken, and she was not free to speak openly as she lived in daily fear of her coercive and abusive partner.

"He drilled it in my head that there was nobody else but him," Vanessa stated. "I knew he would harm me. I had no support around me and nowhere to go."

The story of Vanessa's survival, and impeccable strength, began when DCF was called to her home while she was caring for Elijah, her oldest child.

The conditions in the home were found to be unsafe, and placement into a domestic violence shelter was the best option. "It was traumatic to share everything with everybody," she remembers.

At the time, Vanessa was also pregnant with Camden and shortly after he was born, the decision was made that placement into foster care was the best option to keep him safe while Elijah was placed with relatives.

Over the next couple of years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, what Vanessa endured for the love of her children is nothing short of remarkable.

While separated, Vanessa consistently visited and yearned for the day reunification would occur. Yet, the control she was under almost forced her into accepting her children would never come home.

"I was with a guy who thought he was right all the time. He was abusive," she stated.

While she worked at Dunkin' Donuts and Waterbury Hospital, she was not allowed to accept rides from other people. The couple had no car, forcing Vanessa to walk approximately 2.5 miles to and from work each day regardless of the weather or temperature.

Her partner controlled the money, took her paychecks, and convinced Vanessa the rent was paid. The couple was evicted, forcing them to live in abandoned buildings for almost a year. They struggled to eat. "I would wash myself in a sink in the bathroom across from a motel," Vanessa stated. Despite these enormous challenges, she never missed a day of work.

She left Connecticut to live with relatives out of state.

He found her and she came back to Waterbury.

"I felt hopeless," Vanessa recalls.

Visits continued with the boys. At each one, her partner was present to keep a close watch on her, monitoring every move and not allowing her to express herself when Agency personnel were present.

It was determined to be in Elijah's best interests to remain in his current placement with relatives and his guardianship was transferred accordingly. Camden remained in care.



After years of referrals for service, court orders and assessments, the Agency was put in the unenviable position to now seek permanency for Camden - not believing either parent would be able or willing to provide them a safe and stable home. A Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) petition was filed and the court process - to sever parental rights forever - had begun.

"I was coming to the conclusion he would never come home," Vanessa recalls thinking.

One courageous decision changed the trajectory of Vanessa's life and that of Camden.

"I got tired," Vanessa stated, reflecting on the day she visited with Camden alone, against her partner's demands, and finally left him. "I knew he was not going to change."

"I am still seeing the same you and same attitude," she told him.

Vanessa moved in with a friend of hers until she could afford an apartment of her own.

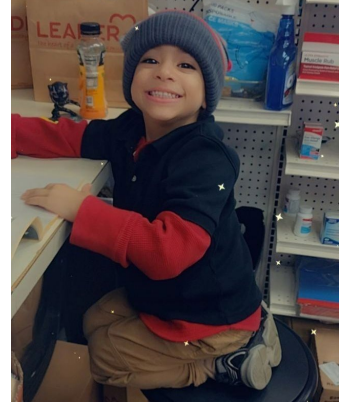
What followed were more acts of violence on his part, arrest warrants, protective orders, and Vanessa, along with multiple community agencies, working together to maintain her safety.

Most importantly, to work towards Camden coming home.

Around this time, Vanessa was assigned to Social Worker Kellie Hougasian of the Waterbury Office. "We had a connection," is how Vanessa describes their relationship. "Kellie was honest. I trusted her. She did not hide anything." Kellie answered all of Vanessa's questions and began to see a much different side of her.

"She helped me out so much. She saw my progress."

"It was an absolute pleasure working with Vanessa, as she showed resiliency and commitment to reunify with Camden. Vanessa always had a positive attitude and despite unforeseen obstacles at times, she never gave up," stated Kellie. "This positive outcome and amazing story are a true testament to Vanessa's hard work and love for her children. Needless to say, I was the one who was truly blessed to be her worker."



Vanessa was no longer under anyone's control. She made a strong connection with the DCF staff, engaged in supports and continued visiting Camden.

By agreement, the decision was made to send Camden home! "Is this really happening," Vanessa remembers saying to herself.

"I was super excited."

Camden is now home with a mother who loves him and overcame what appeared to be inescapable odds to be reunited with her little boy. "I am a big boy mommy," he was heard saying in the background during this interview.

Vanessa does intend to maintain the relationship with Camden's foster parent. "He knows her as mom," she stated in reference to the years Camden was raised by another family. "I know what it's like not to see your child."

Likewise, she aims to continue the relationship with relatives raising Elijah.

Camden is described as having a "whole lot of energy" and his days with his mom are now filled with going to the park and playing with friends.

Vanessa has a dream of becoming a counselor some day and helping other women facing similar adverse circumstances. "I know the fear they are going through. It took me a long time before I left," she stated. "You know you are strong enough to leave even though you do not think you are."

Vanessa also has a message for other parents involved with the Department. "Hard work pays off," she would tell them. "Accept the help. Everything will come out for the better."

"Stick through it. Stick it out. With hard work comes progress," she added.

"I made it."



"This is who I am."



At the national Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) conference, 17-year-old Alexander Lopes captivated the audience.

He represented Connecticut and the New England Youth Coalition (NEYC) while articulating his views on how to improve the lives of children in care who are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

This was not the first, nor the last time Alex will impact the experiences of others.

Alex is a transgender youth transitioning from female to male. "I started questioning in 2019 but really even before," Alex stated. He remembers at 8 or 9 years of age cutting his hair very short while a "conservative" foster parent "shut down" his expression. "My 9–10-year-old self told me it was wrong."

Alex had no LGBTQ+ exposure growing up, or an outlet to explore his identity. This in part led to the deterioration of his self-respect and worth.

A number of years later, Alex took part in a 20-day DCF Wilderness school expedition for young people to develop leadership skills while backpacking, rock-climbing, canoeing and taking part in other challenges. He met a transgender youth who explained their identity. "A bunch of us were curious about it," Alex stated.

They listened intently, asked questions and the conversations continued throughout the journey. "Oh, this kind of makes sense of what I'm feeling," Alex thought to himself.

In Fall 2019 Alex "came out" to his friends and eventually his DCF Social Worker. "He/him pronouns feel the best for me," Alex articulated.



At the time, Alex was living with a foster family who did not acknowledge his expression or desires to change his name from Cecilia to Alex. "You are too young to know what you are talking about," he remembers hearing. "What if you change your mind in the future?" was a question posed to him.

"Are you sure?" Alex was asked repeatedly.

At the time, Alex's therapist of over five years was the most stable person in his life. He leaned heavily on this relationship. "She always supported me," Alex recalls. "She was one of my biggest supports when I came out."

How did Alex stay strong during this critical period in his life?

Alex knew he wanted more for not only himself, but for other youth in the care and custody of the Department. "My personality and my will to advocate for other kids kept me afloat," Alex emphatically stated.

As a freshman in high school, Alex founded the Gay-Straight Alliance, meeting with fellow students on a weekly basis to discuss healthy relationships and how to educate colleagues and peers about the LGBTQ+ community. That work evolved to include students and their allies.

The "fit" between Alex and his foster family was not healthy and as a Junior in high school, Alex remembers worrying about where he was going to live. He took it upon himself to ask his current and former teachers about their interest in providing a home for him.



Alex was bold in his approach.

"Hey, would you like a kid?" Alex asked school personnel as he knocked on each classroom door. He recognized it was a "big request."

Amy Brazauski was Alex's former English teacher who was approached by Alex's friend. "Alex needs a new mom," he stated. "I'm more like a big sister type," Amy initially thought and then realized Alex was actually looking for a foster parent. Amy "knew the gravity of the situation" and "had to think about it more."

the gravity of the situation" and "had to think about it more."

"At my age people get proposed to for marriage. I got proposed to for a foster child."

Due to a number of extenuating circumstances, time went by, and Alex remained in his current placement. Amy and her interests to provide a home were not far away.

Enter Social Worker Vincent Espino out of the Danbury Office.

Alex credits Vince, a former youth in care himself, for "making it happen." He outreached to Amy and again explained Alex's continued need. "I felt really honored that Alex went forward with my name," Amy stated.



Continuity of schooling is so critical to youth in care. It was brought to Amy's attention that Alex may need to leave his school community - where he has extensive LGBTQ+ supports - if a new family could not be located.

This was the "turning point" for Amy. "He is coming with me," Amy told Vince.

"Vince has been phenomenal."

Amy was eventually licensed as a kinship placement and Alex was moved to his new family. They are supported by Children's Community Programs, a therapeutic foster care agency out of New Haven. Amy's describes the process to becoming licensed as "really doable" with each step along the way manageable.

As far as caring for adolescents? "Teenagers are often misunderstood," is her message to others. Having an adolescent was the perfect fit for her right now and could very well be for others.

Amy credits her family and friends for embracing her desires to accept Alex into her home and they have embraced Alex as part of a large supportive family network.

Alex and Amy have been together for approximately four months. "How luck am I? Not every teen ends up being who he is. He is such a treasure to have," Amy fondly stated about Alex.

"We have a really great way of communicating with each other."

What was the first day of placement like? Alex moved in and immediately the next day he was going to the previously mentioned CWLA conference in Washington DC. When a few items were absent his travel list, it was Amy - at 10:30 p.m. in her pajamas - going to Walmart with Alex to make sure Alex had all he needed!

"Despite his many hardships, Alex continues to smile, laugh and love who he is and who he is becoming. Saying I am proud of Alex doesn't quite define how I feel. It's youth like Alex who make the long hours and extra effort worth every second. He ignites a flame that makes you want to work harder, and makes you want to do the job with passion and determination to ensure our youth succeed. With every accomplishment he achieves I feel a sense of relief that maybe I'm doing this social work thing right after all," stated Vince.

With fierce self-determination and a growing "village," Alex continues changing lives.

Alex has been a member of the NEYC for three years and was chosen among 10 other applicants to attend the CWLA conference this past May. He has written a blog for Youth Action Month. "I am a published author," Alex stated as his work appeared in the Imprint Newsletter entitled ["Am I Really Accepted?"](#)

He is working to educate foster parents about LGBTQ+ youth. "We are not different than any other youth," he stated. "Foster parents may not react appropriately because they simply do not know." He is advocating to make training on LGBTQ+ policies mandatory for foster parents during the licensing process. He believes with more education will come "better preparedness for what is out there."

"No kid is too young to question themselves," he wants DCF staff to understand. "When a kid comes out, support and educate them."

"I truly believe the best part about working with Alex is that he isn't done yet. He has many goals and many dreams which means we still have much work to do. His journey is just getting started and I am grateful to be able witness his successes firsthand," Vince added.

What does Alex's future hold?

"I want to continue what I am doing. Enjoy what I am doing," he stated. He desires to stay close to his "village" and go to college in-state after graduation in 2024. His impact will further be felt someday as Alex aspires to be a public policy lawyer in order to "make a difference."

Alex has clear message for other youth in the LGBTQ+ community. "There will always be someone who accepts and supports you. Be true to yourself," he stated. "Get into a safe place and be proud of who you are."





What is he most proud of?

"How far I have come and how resilient I am."

Thank you, Alexander, for sharing your story and changing lives!

## The Stonewall Uprising - Inspiring Change



In the 1960s, hostility towards those who did not conform to broadly accepted norms was rampant. This was evident in the treatment to those who lived openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) person.

Perhaps surprising today, these sentiments were especially harsh in New York City. Laws provided you could be arrested for wearing less than three articles of clothing that -- according to convention - matched your sex.

It was illegal to serve alcoholic beverages to homosexuals. Married men and women needed to live their homosexual lives in secret.

Blackmail was not uncommon.

Fueled by this social context, in 1969, police raids of gay bars in Manhattan followed a standard path of behavior. Officers would enter the building, threatening, and beating staff and clientele. The bar patrons would then leave the building to line up in the street so police could arrest them.

On June 28, 1969 NYC police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. After police, acting without respect for human dignity, roughly forced employees and patrons out of the bar, the community took action.



What followed was the Stonewall Uprising - protests in the community that served to both draw attention to these injustices and launched the gay rights movement. At first, they were referred to as a "riot."



Two leading participants in the Stonewall Uprising were Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, both transgender women of color. A memorial to this brave pair is being built in Greenwich Village, the first monument to transgender activists in the world. This memorial is part of a national park dedicated to the memory of the Stonewall Uprising.

The first Pride march took place in New York City on June 28, 1970 on the one-year anniversary of that horrible scene in Greenwich Village.

Now over 50 years later, events occur across the country, and the world, on or about this date to celebrate Gay Pride and the rights and respect all people should experience.