

Social Worker Appreciation Month and Women's History Month



"I understand this work because I did it Yet I can never understand because I didn't do it during a pandemic." Cmsr V Dorantes

That was the crux of the conversation we had with the amazing staff in the Norwalk office where we visited last week. They candidly shared challenges they experience and expressed appreciation for each other as they navigate these trying times. We were grateful for the time we spent hearing from our colleagues. In this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter, we highlight career Social Worker **Yolanda Chapman-Smith** and her incredible strength as she leads the Norwalk Office.

While in Region 1, Director of Immigration Services, **Jennifer Avenia**, Esq. facilitated a mtg with the leadership of two advocacy groups **CIRI** (CT Institute for Refugees & Immigrants) and **IRIS** (Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services) to discuss our work with undocumented families and unaccompanied minors.

As a career Social Worker, I appreciate those of you pouring into the next generation of change agents like **Bureau Chief Ken Mysogland** at Sacred Heart University and Waterbury **SWS Maria Cosgrove**. I visited with her students at the UCONN School of Social Work & I'll be talking to another BSW class next week at CCSU.



The US Dept of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children & Families (ACF) broke barriers as it hosted the '*...first federally-sponsored national conference solely devoted to creating an inclusive human services delivery system and will serve as the nation's leading educational event for practitioners, advocates, and researchers within the field,*' where I was honored to present our anti-racist framework on a panel discussion towards advancing racial justice and equitable outcomes.

In service to others, we are moved by the circumstance of **Ryan Poudrier** and **Megan Dydo** as they recount how they overcame significant substance misuse to now leading a life they at one point never imagined possible. "*It is hard not to smile and be grateful,*" stated Ryan when talking about his two boys. Megan's passion is to share her "*experience and story*" to inspire others to make changes in their own life.



Thanks to the staff in the *Transitional Supports and Success* team for putting on the fantastic "**Beyond All Limits**" Transitional Age Youth (TAY) Leadership Forum. An excellent opportunity to understand the supports and services offered to our youth, innovative practices and the collaborative efforts with various community partners across the state.

Speaking of collaboration..... Senior Leaders and I met with the **Connecticut Education Association (CEA)** to have a "candid conversation" to discuss our work with education professionals → [CEA Conversation](#)



In March, we also celebrate **Women's History Month**.



As co-chair of the [Governor's Council on Women and Girls](#) with **Lt Gov Susan Bysiewicz**, we continue to advocate for gender parity in pay, promotions and the inclusion of women across systems. With great pride, I stood with colleagues from all three branches of CT state government on **International Women's Day** to further highlight the dynamic women leaders serving Connecticut.

Finally, this past weekend, we continued to highlight the powerful stories of women breaking barriers at **Atnekv Rodriguez Executive Leadership LLC's *Women in Leadership*** conference where I spoke on an amazing panel, spent time with female entrepreneurs and even got to meet the 2023 CT Teacher of the Year -- **Carolyn Kielma** who is also a finalist for National Teacher of the Year!



PHEW ...What a month!!! My heart remains full of gratitude for Social Workers inside and outside of DCF who each day address the structural, systemic and intergenerational barriers which prevent individuals and families from reaching their fullest potential. Our work is not only hard work but "*heart work*". As we serve others, we must pay close attention to our own needs and those of our families. Supports are always available through [Deer Oaks EAP](#) or by contacting Lenisa.Mathew@ct.gov.

"The fact that we are still here, and kicking is amazing"



"I used to play drug dealers and drug buyers instead of cops and robbers," stated Ryan Poudrier as he recalled painful childhood experiences. He speaks of his mother's substance abuse, years in the custody of the Department of Children and Families, frequent moves, and the psychological effects of unstable living conditions.

"My parents put drugs first," Ryan explained. He remembers as a young 10-year-old boy thinking drugs were "cool." Despite his mother's warning that addiction was "in your genes" Ryan began using and the intergenerational pattern of substance use continued as Ryan found

himself heavy into addiction.

What Ryan also developed was an "instinctive" pattern of moving around - mirroring his experiences in foster care and the multiple homes and facilities where he was placed. Starting at 16 years of age, Ryan lived in Vermont, Maine and up and down the East Coast. He moved 37 times during a 5-year period when he was on probation.

Ryan eventually had a daughter and made the choice to stay out of her life so that child was spared the pain of seeing her father struggle.

Ryan met Megan Dydo in 2016. She as well had a child who was being raised by a relative due to her substance use and early "partying."

The couple traveled to North Carolina, begged for change on the streets of California and lived in a tent held up by tree branches. They endured overdoses, fentanyl use and not knowing when they would eat again.

"I've hit some really low, lows. Being a homeless meth addict was one of them," stated Ryan.

"We met as addicts and are still addicts."



Megan became pregnant and the couple seemingly faced insurmountable challenges. "Just because you are pregnant does not mean you stop being an addict," explained Megan.

Their son Donovan was born and after receiving concerns from medical staff, DCF came to the hospital. Donovan was assessed to be unsafe and with limited family resources, he was placed into a DCF foster home.

"There is no pain like having a newborn taken from your arms," stated Megan. Ryan recalls feeling guilty and knew what he was setting his son up for in his foster care placement. "I did not want my son to go through what I went through," he stated.

Megan advocated to get into a mother/child rehabilitation program. Donovan was placed back with her after a two-month separation only to be removed and placed into foster care again after Megan was told to leave the program due to non-compliance.

The couple continued to use, endured overdoses and the Department filed to terminate their rights with the goal to have Donovan adopted by his current foster parent.



"Why am I using over my own children," Megan asked herself.

"What is making me go back?"

Now their story began to change.

The couple moved to Manchester and had a new DCF team assigned to them. "It was the staff who made all the difference," Ryan stated.

"Let's do this together" was the approach they felt.

Megan engaged in extensive therapy at Wheeler Clinic and was afforded the supports of a Recovery Manager, Samantha Nisler, to not just hold her accountable but assist her in her overall

"recovery life." She worked hard on herself while conducting an "inventory" of her journey.

Equally, Ryan engaged with services and speaks so highly of Don Crocker from Fatherhood Engagement Services at the Village for Children and Families. "Don was pivotal," explained Ryan who emphasized that Don visited, called him and was present in his life during some of his most dark and desolate days.

In one poignant moment, Ryan was visiting Donovan at the DCF office, and he was overcome with a panic attack. He even asked the security staff to call an ambulance. Despite Ryan not wanting him to come, Don came to the office anyway to support him and when he saw Ryan lying on the floor, he picked him up to calm him.

Don facilitated groups with other fathers that Ryan attended. "We're not just dads, we're struggling dads," Ryan stated. "We don't have a lot of experience seeing fathers being good fathers."

With both parents now in recovery, Megan again became pregnant and baby Dominic was born. This time, with supports in place, the Department's assessment was much different, and the baby was allowed to come home from the hospital.

The couple progressed well and eventually Donovan was reunified. Who would have imagined that after a TPR was once filed, the end result would be reunification?



"When I was assigned Megan and Ryan's case a little over a year ago, it was clear that they both had an extensive history but it was also clear that they were motivated and invested in being the best version of themselves for their children. They were committed to themselves as individuals, as a couple and as parents. It was amazing to see their honesty, dedication, and commitment to remaining sober. They never shied away from the tough topics that were addressed at every meeting. They shared stories of where they came from until now and were able to connect how their past has impacted their older children and their younger children. I am very proud of Ryan and Megan's accomplishments and I will forever remember the dedication, commitment and growth that I was able to witness happens with this

family. I am honored to be a small part of their journey and team of people that are cheering and supporting them," stated Social Worker Tiffany Broughton.

What is the message both Ryan and Megan would have for others who are struggling? In her answer, Megan uses the analogy of a flight attendant telling the passengers that if the airplane loses pressure, you must put the oxygen mask on yourself first before you can help anyone else. "If your cup is not full, you cannot help others," Megan stated.

Megan realized that she had tried to get sober for the wrong reasons - for other people and not herself. "If you are not on top of the list, you are going to fall," she explained.

"There is no such thing as an addict without a mind full of guilt and shame," Ryan stated. "Connecticut is amazing in the way we treat addiction and mental health."

Megan also has a message for families involved with DCF. "You can't make them your enemy," she stated. "They are doing their job. The more you hide from yourself, the more they will become involved."

"Don't do it for them, do it for you."

Ryan and Megan want to give back to others in need. They hope by sharing their experiences and story, others will benefit. Ryan desires to open a sober house and a shelter someday as a safe and welcoming place for others battling addiction.

When Ryan looks at his little boys what does he think?

"They are the first Poudrier's to have a great childhood."

"The fact that we are still here, and kicking is amazing," stated Megan.

**“Everything that happens is an opportunity.
It’s what we do with those opportunities that matter.”**



Surprised, honored, and humbled were the profound emotions expressed by Yolanda Chapman-Smith when asked about being the recipient of the 2023 “Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award”.

A thirty-year Department of Children and Families veteran, Yolanda serves as the Office Director for Norwalk where she began her career over three decades ago.

Yolanda was nominated for this prestigious award by her friend and colleague, Kim Watson, who stated, “Yolanda Chapman-Smith stands accomplished and respected as a Black woman, who brings intelligence, strength, humility, cultural values, and an incessant passion to the table for the children and families we serve,” adding, “If I had to choose one word to best describe Yolanda, it would be passionate. Her passion for the children and families involved in the CPS system shows through her core values, her purpose, and her continuous action for better and more equitable outcomes.”

“I saw this award as an opportunity to serve the needs of others,” Yolanda explained, adding that she feels she was no more worthy of this award than any other candidate. Yolanda is a fierce leader, a mentor, a devoted community champion, an ambassador in her church, and a cancer survivor. She exemplifies the true essence of this humanitarian award.

Yolanda is a wife and proud mother of three daughters Sierra, Rayonea and Sanora. Yolanda knows this work through a personal journey as well; she and her husband, Brian – who she calls her, “anchor”, adopted their middle daughter through the department in 2006. She is a fierce advocate of permanency for children in CPS care.



Yolanda speaks passionately about her work within the Faith Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church, where she serves as a clerk responsible for operations and administrative duties. Yolanda also leads the youth drama ministry and is in the planning stages of developing a CDC so that her church community can have access to resources for mental health services and food insecurities by bridging the gap and making help accessible and equitable.

Yolanda also volunteers as a liaison to her youngest daughter's social work division at her school. She is aware of racially oppressive attitudes, biases, and inequities within the educational system and uses her voice and her experiences at DCF to help others.

In 2017, Yolanda was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma, a form of cancer. Throughout this uncertain journey, Yolanda continued to work at DCF, enduring ongoing symptoms, and traveling to Memorial Sloan Kettering Center in New York for treatment. While fighting a painful and frightening disease, Yolanda served as Head Basketball Coach for her daughter's middle school team at St. Ann's Academy. She used her influence as a role model to inspire youth.



Yolanda said that it was because of her faith and her family that she was able to persevere. Now in remission, Yolanda serves as a board member for Sloan Memorial's Center.

“I don't do any of this work alone,” explained Yolanda, adding, “my staff at DCF helps me lift this, and when I look at my children, and my husband and my mother, I realize that there are no coincidences. Everything that happens is an opportunity. It's what we do with those opportunities that matter.”

On behalf of the Department of Children and Families, we thank you, Yolanda Chapman-Smith. Your devotion to the welfare of humanity through your work has improved the quality of life within our state and mirrors the life led and examples set forth by our dear friend and colleague, Dr. Janet E. Williams.



Why safety science is an essential tool to reducing critical incidents in child welfare

by Jodi Hill-Lilly, Chip Spinning and Michael Cull

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There is nothing harder in the work life of child welfare professionals than the loss of a child. While much of the work in child welfare is marked by success stories, thanks to the tireless efforts of those in the child welfare field who care deeply about the safety and well-being of children and families they serve, the reality is that no system or combination of systems can prevent all tragedies.

This is true for other systems, such as transportation and health care, but these systems have adapted to address critical incidents utilizing evidence-based, safety disciplines to mitigate future occurrences and create a more trustworthy system of transportation or health care delivery.

Today, the child welfare field is working toward a similar goal to implement safety science by better understanding system risks and how to reduce deaths from abuse or neglect.

How does this work in practice?

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) is one of 35 jurisdictions working to answer that question by adapting safety science in child welfare. As part of the National Partnership for Child Safety (NPCS), a quality improvement collaborative formed in 2018 to reduce child maltreatment fatalities through the application of safety science and shared data, Connecticut's DCF is joining with state, county and tribal child-serving agencies from across the nation to strengthen families, promote innovations, and foster a public health response to reducing and preventing child maltreatment and child fatalities.

As an evidence-based field of discipline, safety science expands the scope of learning beyond an individual case to a systemwide comprehensive analysis. This process reinforces that empowering and supporting families does not rest solely with the child protective services agency – but the entire child welfare system – of which the state agency is a part.

In the context of child welfare, it utilizes a standardized critical incident review process, coupled with data analysis across multiple jurisdictions to identify systemic challenges that serve as barriers to child safety.

In essence, safety science provides a framework and processes for child protection agencies to understand the inherently complex nature of the work and the factors that influence decision-making. Most importantly, it also provides a safe and supportive environment for professionals to process, share and learn from critical incidents to mitigate the potential for future

tragedies. That is why, in Connecticut, we have implemented a “Safe and Sound” culture across all levels of the DCF where staff openly express their views in an honest and straightforward manner regarding casework decisions to create an authentic learning environment.

A safety science approach must also be cultivated throughout the agency — from top to bottom — and with external partners, including constituent partners and those with lived expertise, to promote learning. Tools are created to collect data and identify and understand systemic barriers to child safety, and to guide recommendations to effectuate change.

Data sharing across jurisdictions is another important tool in safety science. When each jurisdiction looks at its own data in isolation, the numbers are small and less informative. Having a national collaborative approach to data collection allows for the identification of meaningful trends and patterns, enhancing the visibility of areas for child safety improvements. In Connecticut, we have already begun the data exchange process with other jurisdictions, both locally and nationally. Our data is collected as part of a Special Qualitative Review (SQR) process that we initiate after a child fatality or near fatality to assess all components of our case practice, adherence to policy and strengths. We then extrapolate major themes across the data to help generate a learning forum to examine outcomes and make recommendations for practice and systematic improvements.

All of these efforts and strategies reflect many of the recommendations of the federal [Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#), established by Congress as part of the [Protect Our Kids Act of 2012](#). In its groundbreaking 2016 report, the commission emphasized that fatalities are preventable and identified three fundamental components to improving our child welfare systems based on a public health approach: 1) leadership and accountability; 2) decisions grounded in better data and research; and 3) multidisciplinary support for families.

This concept integrates a broad spectrum of partners and systems to identify, test, and evaluate strategies to provide upstream, preventative, and earlier intervention supports and services that can strengthen the building blocks of healthy families. It represents a system that is focused less on a child protection response to abuse and neglect and more on building the well-being of all children throughout our communities.

As many child welfare systems are working toward a more preventative, upstream approach, safety science enables child welfare staff and leaders to work within jurisdictions and across the sector to build a learning community around safety science, shared data and the application of a standardized platform for critical incident review.

This work will help to strengthen families, promote innovations in safety culture, and, most importantly, reduce the potential for future tragedies from child maltreatment.

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