

## DCF Staff Honored by Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence



October is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Awareness Month. The intersection of IPV and child maltreatment is widely understood highlighting the need for collaboration across systems.

Department of Children and Families staff members Kris Robles, Alison Karimi and Dr. Polly Marston were honored this year by the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) at their 12<sup>th</sup> Annual *First 100 Plus Breakfast and Awards* ceremony.

In front of 400 people, they were acknowledged - along with other leaders across the state - for their efforts to improve outcomes for survivors and their children.

Each of these DCF leaders brings a unique perspective and passion for the work. Their messages also reflect the evolving way IPV is being responded to within our Agency.

IPV work within DCF is led by Behavioral Health Clinical Manager Kris Robles who oversees Substance Use, Intimate Partner Violence and Recovery Services. Kris joined the Department in 2014 as a Mental Health Consultant within the Regional Resource Group. He is quick to give praise to his staff and prefers to work "behind the scenes."

"I told them that honestly, I did not need to be recognized," Kris stated. Rather, the true staff who should be acknowledged are "the ones that are on the lines meeting with the providers, talking with the social workers," who have the toughest jobs.

Kris stresses the importance of looking beyond someone's behaviors while engaging with the individual expressing coercive behavior. "The theme that we continue to talk about, and I think as an agency we continue to see and hear from those with negative experience is that they want to be seen as a person, not by an incident that occurred," he stated.



"And when we can see them as people and talk to them as people and not talk at them as a case or a number or an incident, we have better engagement which will allow for them to be more engaged with us and continue to help them get the support that they need."

After acting as an IPV Specialist in the Hartford Office for over 9 years, Alison Karimi is now the Program Lead for IPV Services Statewide. On occasion, she may be referred to as the "OG" of the group as she was one of the original IPV Specialists in the state at one point covering the entire Region 4 and eventually only the Hartford Office. Her experiences within DCF are vast, starting her career over 23 years ago at the former Connecticut's Children's Place, now known as Solnit North, and as a Social Worker in the Regional Office.



"While I was extremely honored to receive the award from CCADV, it isn't just an award for me but it's an award for the entire Department because we don't do this work alone," Alison stated. "A big recognition on collaboration," is how she described the event. "I'm really proud of the work our agency has put into developing our workforce's knowledge and understanding of how to work with individuals who have been impacted by IPV. We have come a long way in our engagement process of all of

the family members", she stated, stressing everyone's safety and well-being within the family unit must be taken into consideration.

Dr. Polly Marsten described feeling "humbled" and "excited" to represent DCF while being honored by CCADV. "I cried during the whole thing. It was so touching to me." Dr. Marsten has been with DCF approximately 16 years with the last five of them as an IPVS in the Manchester Office. She was drawn to this work given it was her area of research while pursuing her Ph.D.

"All violence is my passion whether I work at Central Office or the Manchester Office," she stated. Dr. Marsten uses her research background to send out "research-based source documents, sources, tips how to engage using resourced gender specific research guided tactics" to the staff. A large emphasis is "how we speak and talk to people."

She refers to the DCF staff as "brilliant."

Dr. Marston points out that "everybody" who lives under the context of family violence is unsafe. "Literally everyone, including the person who is struggling with it," she stated. Her own research identified violence as form of "support seeking behavior" and because of the conditions created by "racism and sexism," often it is not properly addressed.

The Department's work has evolved regarding IPV, which includes the development of an advanced IPV practice series training offered to both DCF staff and community members. Alison stated in addition to the IPV trainings, routinely being offered by the Department, our agency could not be doing the great work that is being done to address IPV, without the IPV Specialists. IPV Specialists are located in each area office and are instrumental to CPS teams working with impacted families. "They work tirelessly to assist with ongoing safety planning and to find the most appropriate support services for each individual involved," she stated.



Engagement is a key component of successful interventions.

"Changing how we engage the individuals that are using violence, recognizing their strengths and that many of them have desire to want to change that behavior," is how Alison describes the approach. She cited an example of a man referred to the Department over 15 times and no one could ever meet with him. Learning he was incarcerated, she went to Hartford Correctional Facility with the Investigator. "I wanted to sit across the table from this individual," she stated.

They spoke for over two hours with Alison asking him if his youngest child could speak, how would he describe what he witnessed? "He would say I am a monster," the father replied. Alison then asked him how he would want to be described by his young child. "I want him to say I am his hero," was the response.

During the conversation they talked about services, obtained signed releases and set up a plan for when he would be released from prison. "Engagement goes a long way because at the end of the day, we haven't walked a day in any of their shoes and we can't pretend to know what their experiences have been. Our job is to engage, collaborate and support individuals to get to a place of wanting to change behavior," Alison stated.

"I think at the end of the day, I think people recognize we're here for the same vision and mission which is to help people," Kris stated.

Dr. Marson pointed out that how we speak and talk about all people is a major component of our work.

Alison has a quote on her wall from Marianne Etelman:

***"Children don't come in pieces, they come from families and communities, so if you care about them, you have to care about all of them."***

"I have it on my wall because it stuck with me, we are a child protection agency and we care very much about child safety, but we care about everyone. Those parents and those family members are just as important. Their safety and well-being are just as important," Alison stated.

Thank you, Kris, Alison and Dr. Marston for your leadership and congratulations on being honored by CCADV!