



**September is National Kinship Care Month.** Recognizing the unique role extended family members, friends, neighbors, teachers, and other important adults play while caring for children who cannot remain safely at home. In Connecticut, approximately 50% of children under the age of 18 years old who are placed into a family setting reside with kin - proudly one of the highest percentages in the country because of your hard work.

Hispanic and Latino (a,e) Heritage Month is celebrated between 9/15/23 - 10/15/23. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary theme "**Latinos: Driving Prosperity, Power and Progress in America,**" pays tribute to the significant economic and political strides Hispanics/Latinos have made in the United States. Approximately 19% of the US population identifies as Hispanic/Latino as does 17% of DCF's workforce! Across the state, we honor our diversity, and the important contributions Hispanic/Latinos play within our Agency, communities, and families we serve. A listing of events this month can be found here: [2023 Events](#)



Commissioners from Dept of Banking, Dept of Housing, Dept of Corrections, Dept of Economic Community Development join Gov Lamont in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month



**Maribel Martinez**, Senior Administrator for Clinical and Community Consultation Support Division, appeared on **Radio Dinamica 1120 AM** this month to discuss the critical work of the Department including the importance of understanding a family's culture during engagement.

## HOPE IS REAL National Recovery Month 2023

**"Recovery is for Everyone. Every Person. Every Family. Every Community,"** Recovery truly is possible for anyone. To honor the memory of the 1,464 lives lost in CT to overdose in 2022, flags for each of their lives were placed in New Britain during an annual ceremonial remembrance to raise awareness and reinforce continued efforts.



*"Your addiction is our addiction...your recovery is our recovery ...And recovery is contagious." Gov Ned Lamont*

In this month's "**Spotlight on What's Right**" newsletter, read how **Mindy Richardson** overcame addiction. Now sober, she has reunified with her children, and is a Regional Manager for Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR) supervising Recovery Coaches. *"My purpose is to help others find their way,"* she stated about those she serves. *"I support them and am their biggest cheerleader."*

During **Child Welfare Workforce Development Month**, we focus attention on the unique relationships with those we serve. Read how **JonDez** describes his relationship with **Social Worker Torrance Jennings**. *"Torrance has been there for my entire journey," JonDez stated. "Everyone has a story. Torrance has been a part of mine from the beginning. He is family."*

The **Academy for Workforce Development Mentoring Program** is now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year



matching DCF Senior leaders with mentees plucked from our workforce to build and shape leadership capacity. The mentors share their development experiences and *secret sauce* to their own success by pouring into the *NEXT Ups*. Beginning in 2002, the program has seen **146** mentors (many volunteering their time with multiple pairings!) connected to **385** mentees. Mentees will pick the mentor's brain, shadow meetings, and attend forums that they wouldn't ordinarily be exposed to during their daily work.

**DAS BITS & DCF** represented Team Connecticut on a panel discussion "*Working Together for Better Outcomes*" at the 2023 ISM + PHSA Education Conference & Expo produced by the American Public Human Service Association (APHSA) held in Kissimmee, Florida. **Treena**



**Mazzotta, Eric Nixon, Kate Dwyer** along with a team from the state of Nebraska participated in this national conference attended by 1500 participants including DCF's own **Michelle Laboy** who is on the conference planning committee and **Elizabeth Stokes** who was among the 2023 cohort of **Emerging Leaders**. Congrats Liz!

Congratulations to **Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut** for opening our state's 4<sup>th</sup> Urgent Crisis Center! The UCCs are designed to divert children experiencing a behavioral health crisis from an emergency department visit if not warranted. Almost 200 children across Connecticut have benefitted from this type of intervention. For other locations and more information on UCCs: [Urgent Crisis Centers](#)

We all must continue to lift the stigma of seeking support during **Suicide Awareness Prevention Month** and throughout the year. Across the country, **988** has been designated as the three-digit dialing code that will route callers to the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#). Connecticut has experienced a 125% increase in calls over the past year. Keeping spreading awareness!

I appreciate all of your efforts!

"It's up to you to pick your path."



Mindy Richardson has a message for others struggling with substance use and involved with the Department of Children and Families. "Stop kicking and screaming and completely surrender," she stated.

"Treat DCF like a resource."

Stating these words was hard to imagine at one point in Mindy's life. A teenaged mother, entrenched in violent gang related activity as a "Head Queen" and selling drugs in some of the more notoriously difficult parts of Stamford, she was "addicted to the lifestyle."

Fast money, cars, material possessions and power.

Crack cocaine was the drug of choice, and its use was criminalized. Mindy became accustomed to the "environment and always having it around."

At 25 years of age, she took her first "hit" of cocaine. "I became a closet smoker for a while," is how she described her use. She found herself "trying to sell and use safely" but addiction followed a series of traumas.

Coercive and oppressive relationships with men were present in her life. She was assaulted by her boyfriend who found out she was secretly taking his drugs. This same man abducted her baby, against court order, for three months. "I saw a picture of my daughter on the news while I was in substance abuse treatment," Mindy remembers.

Mindy eventually found herself caring for three children, "one in pull ups and two in diapers," while her oldest lived with his grandmother. Her apartment was raided due to continued substance use and narcotics sales.

The children were eventually placed into the care and custody of the Department as Mindy once again sought rehabilitation after a period of incarceration. "I missed my son's first steps," she remembers about this painful period in her life.

Mindy was able to regain her true self again and reunification occurred. She was working in a pharmaceutical corporation, achieved affordable housing and was sober.

Circumstances changed when one of the children's fathers moved in with her only to begin dealing out of the home.

"Unaddressed issues will address themselves," Mindy stated. She stopped going to church and meetings as she developed trust issues with women. She describes bringing the "street mentality" to support groups which was not received well by the other participants. "This really had to do with me and not others," she stated. "I was in my own head and didn't want to be there anyway. This was all a part of self-sabotage."



Mindy vividly remembers having a glass of wine - White Zinfandel - which "moved to 10 glasses." She went home at 2:00 a.m. and saw a woman standing across the street from her home with whom she previously used cocaine over five years ago.

"I waited for the crack man with her."

Yet, her family thought she was doing well. "My father brought a cake to celebrate six years of sobriety. No way I could tell him I was using again."

"Across the street was my get high spot," Mindy recalls. She would use cocaine before her children went to school, and after she put them to bed. The drug dealing began again and despite interventions from her family, she wound up in a "crack house."



For a second time, her children were placed into the Department's care.

In the next stage of Mindy's journey, she found Social Worker Alicia Andriopoulos whom she describes as "part of my extended family."

For years, Alicia encouraged, pushed and motivated Mindy to achieve sobriety and reunification with her children. "I was tough at times, but Mindy needed that," Alicia stated. "She needed somebody who would not give up on her." The "tough love" approach worked best.

It was Alicia who calmed the children after Mindy missed visits and told Mindy they would stop altogether if she came again under the influence.

The Department filed for Termination of Parental Rights and sought adoptive homes for the children given Mindy's limited progress and the chronicity of her failure to rehabilitate.

Looking back, Mindy admits she was afraid of success given her past failures. "I did not feel I was deserving," she stated. "I had to do the work."

A turning point in Mindy's life was being in substance abuse treatment and reaching out to her Probation Officer who disclosed a warrant was out for her arrest. "If I am going to jail, I am going to go clean," she told her.



Mindy was raised in a two-parent family. With her mother being a Reverend and her father working construction, they did the best they could to raise the children. "I just chose to go down the wrong path," Mindy stated.

Mindy called her mother and asked to come live in her house.

"I promise you I'm done," she told her mother. "This lady believed in me."

"My mother's prayers saved my life," Mindy recalls. "God preserved me because of her."

From that point on Mindy attended an intensive out-patient program, church fellowships, meetings and worked on past traumas. "I forgave those who harmed me as a little girl," Mindy stated. "I developed a network of supports all around me including a sponsor."

"When I stopped kicking and screaming and allowed the process to be the process, it became a lot easier," Mindy stated.

Alicia was right by her side. "Alicia believed in me, she thought there was a rainbow at the end," Mindy recalls. "When I got back on the wagon, she believed I was on the wagon."

Mindy avoided jail after significant advocacy to the Judge from her family, friends and community partners who spoke on her behalf and wrote letters about her progress.

"You made a believer out of me," Alicia told her.

The children were reunified, and even though the Department's involvement ended, the relationship between Mindy and Alicia continued.



When Mindy was asked to be the keynote speaker for The Connection's Masquerade Auction Ball, she invited Alicia. She thanked Alicia in her speech and asked her to stand and be recognized. The audience gave Alicia a standing ovation.

Mindy is also grateful for Rose Smalls, the foster mother who cared for her children. They still remain in contact as she considers Rose part of "the village" of support for her

family.

Mindy is now giving back to the community. She began working as a Recovery Coach - being dispatched to emergency departments to sit bedside individuals struggling with addiction to support and connect them to services. Recovery Coaches primarily look for open detoxification beds and will call the individual daily for the first 10 days and then weekly to continue advocacy and support.

Mindy knew a lot of people on a personal level - those she formerly used with - when she began the work. "They saw me as a beacon of hope." Mindy believes she has "planted the seeds" of hope and recovery with over 700 people.

Now as the Regional Manager for the Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR) program, Mindy supervises Recovery Coaches across the Western Region which includes towns where she previously lived, used, and sold drugs. "I make a positive impact in my community where I previously wreaked havoc," she stated.



"My purpose in life is to help others find their way."

Mindy earned a bachelor's degree in business management and is now pursuing a master's degree in social work. She recently received a full pardon of past criminal charges and was inducted into the Connecticut Hall of Change which memorializes and recognizes the contributions of formerly incarcerated men and women that have made an impact on their communities.

What is her message for others involved with DCF?

"Know DCF can be a great resource versus being a burden or an enemy," she stated.

"If DCF took your kid, something happened. Take ownership."

Mindy believes the Department's work can serve as the "little push" someone needs to get into the "right direction."

Looking back, it is hard to compare the Mindy Richardson of the past versus the Mindy Richardson of today. She has so much to teach all of us about hope, resiliency, change and strength.

How is all of this possible from Mindy's perspective?

"It's up to you to pick your path."



“I beat the odds.”



On the day that JonDez and his siblings were due to be reunified with their mom, tragedy struck, and each child bore witness to an awful and life-changing experience. “We lost my mom to a massive asthma attack; she died right there in front of us,” explained JonDez. “They couldn't bring her back.”

Parenting was difficult for his mom due to many societal factors, prompting the Department to provide years of support and services. JonDez’s extended family continuously offered unconditional love and support throughout these tumultuous times.

After his mother's death, JonDez remained with his grandmother until he was twelve years of age, at which time DCF transitioned him into traditional foster care settings. He later spent time in a residential treatment facility, and group homes. Torrance Jennings, who has been JonDez’s DCF Social Worker for the past seven years, recalled that day in court JonDez was committed to the Department.



The presiding Judge stated to his grandmother that she had done the best job she could possibly do with JonDez, and the "state will take care of him now." This marked the beginning of his years in state care.

JonDez spoke with absolute adoration for his grandmother. “Caring for me took a huge toll on her health, but she was my everything; she was my #1,” he explained. His grandmother shared that same adoration for JonDez, admitting that he, too, was her #1.

Monica, JonDez’s cousin, spoke candidly about their relationship. "When my grandmother was at the end stage of her dementia, she made a family announcement - calling us all to her bedside - confirming that JonDez was her favorite grandchild and there was nothing anyone could do about it," Monica laughed, adding that everyone knew he was her favorite, but it was nice to hear her admit it.

Monica recalls moments when she was a parent figure to JonDez, sometimes disappointed with his behaviors and choices, but recalled her being his go-to for help when he needed that help. Now, despite the nearly ten-year age difference, Monica sees him as her go-to for help. She values his friendship and support, helping her navigate difficult decisions. Monica sees JonDez as kind and caring and very in tune with other people's feelings and believes his musical talent has been a true gift from God and a saving grace.



JonDez spent time in the foster home of Edith Peters, who welcomed a candid conversation about JonDez, affectionately referring to him as “my son.” She cared for JonDez as a single mom with the help of her adult nephew, who was a strong father figure for JonDez during this influential time in his life. JonDez recalls that moment when he met Edith. "I was at Waterford Country Day School and felt like I had been forgotten. I saw kids coming and going, but God placed me where he wanted me to be," he stated. "That’s when I met Edith."



Edith and her nephew co-parented him through some challenging behaviors and loved him like a child of their own. Still, when her brother had a family emergency in California that caused him to move away, it was best for JonDez to transition into another family.

JonDez stays in close touch with Edith. He visits their home often and they spend holidays together. Edith considers him a brother to her daughters and a cousin to her grandchildren. JonDez acknowledges that during this placement he exhibited many self-sabotaging behaviors and doing “stupid teen-aged things” consistent with adolescent behaviors. "I could only stay for two years, but the love and acceptance that I have received from Edith and her family made a big difference and still does," JonDez stated.

A self-taught musician and artist and a leader within the DCF Youth Advisory Board (YAB), JonDez values his role and responsibilities. “These opportunities have provided me a platform to speak and use my voice to create change, and everyone gets along well,” he added.

Sharing a recent opportunity to perform his music at a Black History Month event and the Juvenile Youth Summit this past summer, JonDez feels that music can be therapeutic for him. See him perform here: [JonDez performs.](#)

Acknowledging JonDez’s innate talents, his social worker, Torrance, explained that the support and encouragement he has received made him “popular” and improved his sense of self.

JonDez loves music and is a gifted artist. JonDez attributes his love of music to his mom. “I think that because of my mom’s talent, as a singer and sketching artist, the arts are just in me,” he stated. "I’ll do anything to help develop my talent, just listening and teaching myself, playing by ear and drawing.”



JonDez also works full-time for Our Piece of the Pie (OPP). As a youth, he was involved in the program and said he always dreamed of working there.

“OPP gives me something to live for. My work allows me to help youth. To be an example and role model.” He added, “There was a time when losing my mom and recently, my grandmother made me want to give up, but being able to help others gives me a sense of purpose and steady happiness.”



He also attributes finding his younger sister as a true blessing that gives him a greater purpose in life. The two had been separated many years ago and adopted by a local family. They are now in close touch and are a big part of one another's lives.



When asked to reflect back on defining moments over the last seven years, JonDez spoke of Torrance sharing, “Sometimes I call him dad, and he’s cool with that.” JonDez explained that Torrance has been there for him through the good times and the bad. “He has never given up on me, not once, and he is the reason why I am getting my own apartment in a few weeks.”

Torrance recalls difficult moments for JonDez, with placement disruptions and slow engagement to others. “He would frequently refuse to go to school, and I would, at least once to twice a week, go to the group home, snatch him up out of bed, and tell him I was taking him to school.” Throughout those early years, Torrance explained, “We bonded,” noting a pivotal moment when Torrance had experienced a sudden loss, and JonDez showed empathy and compassion.

JonDez is currently living in his own apartment and receives continued support from the Department.

Reflecting on the interview, he notes that he has “quite a story” but that he never let it define him.

He followed his passions and leaned on the support of his social worker, his birth family, and his chosen family.

“I beat the odds,” he said.

## Commissioner Dorantes Assigned to Lead the Governor's Kid Cabinet



At a roundtable to highlight his administration's cross system efforts around Children's Behavioral Health, Governor Ned Lamont announced the formation of a "Kids Cabinet" led by DCF's own Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes. The Cabinet will serve as an advisory panel made up of state agency leaders responsible for collaborating on a multi-agency approach toward positive outcomes related to the well-being of children and young people in Connecticut.

In addition to recommending policies and strategy, Commissioner Dorantes said the Cabinet will offer the Governor a "report card" on the progress of children and youth statewide.

"Whenever the Governor sees me, he asks 'how are the kids?'" said Commissioner Dorantes. "[The Cabinet] will be an advisory body to the Governor to make sure that he knows how the kids are doing. It will be the opportunity for us to elevate those topical areas like children's behavioral health, like juvenile justice, like housing for kids."

Now in his second term, Governor Lamont reflected on overlapping themes that demonstrate his administration's attention to collaboration across agencies and with partners outside of the Executive branch. At the top of the list is a focus on the well-being of children and youth three years out of the height of the pandemic.

Many of the agency heads represented on the Cabinet have already been innovating and problem solving together on key health and human services issues specific to children and families. The Cabinet will bring together under one umbrella all of that work across systems in order to have a more coordinated approach to optimize their respective agencies' overlapping responsibilities and functions.



"Connecticut is an amazing place for families, and protecting the health and well-being of children is a priority for our administration," Governor Lamont said. "I want to ensure that all parts of the child well-being system in state government are innovating and problem solving together. This group will enhance communication and partnership among these stakeholders and promote equitable policies to ensure children's safety and well-being and encourage their preparedness to thrive into young adulthood."

Governor Lamont specifically is asking the Cabinet to focus their efforts on several child well-being indicators, such as behavioral health, social determinants of health, and housing stability.

This includes improving partnerships across the child well-being system, and also developing policy proposals to better improve these areas.

“We want to make sure that the state continues to remain a place where families can raise their children and they will thrive,” said Commissioner Dorantes. “And in order for that to happen, their families need to be OK, and we need to make sure that our systems are working in conjunction with each other.”



With Commissioner Dorantes assigned to serve as its chairperson, in addition to DCF, members of the Governor’s Kids Cabinet will include the heads of the following state agencies:

- The Office of Early Childhood
- The State Department of Education
- The Department of Social Services
- The Department of Public Health
- The Department of Developmental Services
- The Department of Housing
- The Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- The Office of Health Strategy
- The Office of Policy and Management

The first meeting of the full Kids Cabinet will take place in October.