

A Message from Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly



August is winding down which means the end of summer vacations and..... back to school!

To those parents, guardians and caretakers in our DCF family who may be experiencing a kindergartener attending the first day of school up through nervously watching your child enter a college campus - good luck and we are here to support you!

Thank you to our licensed foster and kinship caregivers for all they give to our children as they start a new school year!

Best of luck to **Educational Professionals** across the state as they prepare for a challenging year ahead!



We are grateful for our relationships with **CT State Department of Education Commissioner Charlene M. Russell -Tucker**, and local **Superintendents**. We are so proud of the **DCF USD II staff**



and the **DCF JJ Education Oversight Division** for the impact they have on children's lives.

The **post-secondary education journey** for youth in care can be difficult. National statistics show that only 3-7% of youth in foster care across the country will graduate from college as compared to 30% of all Americans.



Connecticut is fortunate to have **Sun Scholars Inc.** a non-profit organization supporting youth in our colleges and universities who experienced foster care, adoption and transfers of guardianship. Through academic coaching, peer mentoring and resource coordination, they assist youth to reach their fullest potential. Watch **Executive Director Christopher Baker Scott** and

Student Support Coordinator Alan Abutin on the **WFSB Great Day at 9a** program discussing their work: [Sun Scholars Inc.](http://SunScholarsInc.com)

Read this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" newsletter for the list of programs - as far away as **California, Utah and Colorado** - where our transitional aged youth will be attending this Fall!

Our newsletter also highlights two youth who are part of that list and have benefitted from the Sun Scholars Inc. program.

Zion is studying **Social Work** at **Central Connecticut State University**. While on an international trip with Sun Scholars Inc., he saw the hardships of children across the globe which have inspired him to serve others. He speaks with such enthusiasm and is described as an



"amazing young man with a great spirit." Read his story in the newsletter.



Also read about **Gavin** who attends the **University of Hartford** as he describes his work towards a major in **Entrepreneurship** and a minor in **Finance**. He has a *"greater purpose"* to *"cultivate my creativity and my ideas and turn them into real life projects to help everyday people."* Gavin gives credit to both the **Wilderness School** and **Sun Scholars Inc.** for supporting him.

Congratulations once again to the **July 2024 Employees of the Month!** Who has been nominated to receive the **August Award?** Is it you? Read on...



Our **Transitional Supports and Success Division (TSS)** put on the first annual ***Building Wings Convention!*** Up



to 50 youth took part in interactive learning and skill building in the three core areas of housing, financial literacy and relationship/communication/conflict resolution. Thank you to **Sana Cotton of Unashamed Inc.** for providing her inspirational message!

The **Wilderness School** had another great summer of **1-day programs up to 20-day expeditions!** With activities that include hiking, camping, rock climbing, and canoeing, the programs emphasize team building, peer relations, self-reliance, responsibility, improved self-concept, and conflict resolution for teens across the state. We are grateful for **Representative Mark Anderson** who attended a graduation to support our youth and staff!



Speaking of youth, Region 3 hosted the quarterly **Youth Advisory Board Meeting** in New Haven. Our youth are resilient, insightful, strong and have such great ideas on how to improve the system! Thank you to **DCF Solnit South Nurse, Danielle Hallway**, for telling us her **journey to success** and the lessons she learned along the way.

Connecticut was represented well in Washington, DC for the **Chapin Hall & Casey Family Programs Community Pathways Convening**. **Karrol-Ann Brown, Dr. Nicole Taylor, Samaris Rose and I**, met with Child Welfare jurisdictions from across the country to discuss **Prevention** efforts, community collaboration and other topics to support children and families. **Ken Mysogland** brilliantly led discussions about the **Care Management Entity** in Connecticut which has received national attention! We are so proud of our work!



A special thanks to **Rebecca Jones Gaston** who is the Commissioner of the **Administration on Children, Youth, and Families**, at the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and **Miranda Lynch-Smith**, Senior Policy Advisor for Child and Family Well-Being, Domestic Policy Council, **The White House** for their ongoing support of Connecticut!

Our work also was highlighted during the *47th Annual NACC Child Welfare Law Conference* in Utah. I served on a panel with **Ira Lustbader, Litigation Director and Chief Program Officer at Children's Rights** and **Josh Michtom an Attorney at the Office of the Chief Public Defender** entitled: *Alignment on Family: System Change, Racial Justice, Consent Decree Exit, and a Culture of Safely Preserving Families* while attending with **Susan Hamilton and Zoe Stout**.



After a late-night flight - which turned into an early morning one - I was the keynote speaker for the **Governor's Prevention Partnership Healing, Empower and Resilience (H.E.R.) Summit**. The summit aimed to "ignite the fire" within every girl and to empower BIPOC girls between 12-17 years of age and their adult mentors with the skills to achieve overall success!



Thank you to **Senator Richard Blumenthal, Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, Comptroller Sean Scanlon, Representative Jill Barry and Senator MD Rahman** for attending "*The Olive Branch end of summer backpack and school supply giveaway!*" Hundreds of children across the state benefit



from the supports of the Olive Branch each year. Thank you as well to **Dr. Joyce Taylor** for her remarks!

The unique roles Fathers play in the life of a child were on display during the "*Fatherhood - The Next Level 2024*" conference. Participants took



part in hearing from leaders across our state - and fathers themselves - about their experiences and ideas for the future. Thank you to **Anthony Gay** and all on the planning committee for making this day special!

Lastly, our new **Mandated Reporter Training** was finalized! Important changes to the law - such as Mandated Reporters now being able to conduct a "**preliminary inquiry**" into the information brought to their attention to determine if it meets the "**reasonable suspicion**" of child abuse and neglect threshold requiring a report to be made to the Careline are explained.

The training also includes an interactive "**roadmap**" of supports for families. Watch it here: [Seeking Support is a Sign of Strength.](#)

We encourage everyone to take the new training!

Thank you for all that you do!

Stay strong everyone!

How the Common Thread Between Superheroes and Social Workers Put One College Student on the Path to His Life Calling



Zion poses for a photo at a recent DCF "life skills" event for transition aged youth.

"Be a creator." That was the advice Zion, a junior and social work major at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), had for his peers as they gear up to return for the fall semester. It is a mantra he uses in his own approach to life because, in more ways than one, Zion is a creator. He has been described as a 'Renaissance Man' for his ability to blend his musical talent with his artistic endeavors such as his original graphic novel series starring superhero "Braggadocious". He was even approached by Netflix to be featured in a documentary.

Zion possesses a personal charisma that is obvious from the start. Ketsy Ramirez, Zion's DCF-assigned worker, said she met Zion for the first time when she helped him move back to college. But even after that short interaction, Ketsy recognized that he is "an amazing young man with a great spirit."

"After talking to him, I can see that his passion is directed toward helping and encouraging young kids to do better and to focus on the importance of education. He is the first one in his family to go to college, and he is very proud of it. Most importantly, he is grateful to the people who have guided him to where he is now," she said.

Meeting upbeat Zion, you would never assume that he faced some very real challenges in his life. Zion's mother passed away when he was a young child - 14 days before his birthday. He does not know his father and has been in the care and custody of DCF since his early years. While he is now thriving heading into his third year of college, he admitted that he got to a point during freshman year where things got rocky. He said he seriously considered quitting school.

"I'm not going to sugar coat it - I was lost. I followed the crowd and was having fun more than I was taking class seriously."

Zion credits his turnaround to his mentor Alan, who was also in foster care, with helping him not only correct course but start learning how to persevere and believe in himself and his abilities. Zion said Alan is like an "older cousin" and they easily bonded over their shared experience and similar interests.

"When I said to myself college is not for me and was going to give up, it was Alan who told me 'no that's not you.'"



Zion with his "older cousin" Alan pictured in the head scarf.

Alan remembers comforting Zion during that rough patch of freshman year and telling him it is okay to slow down and take stock of what is truly important in your life. Alan said it clicked and he took it upon himself to say he would not be defined by his past.

"Zion reminds me of a young version of me. Kind of had all the right intentions but the distractions around him had him going in all the wrong directions. Sometimes that means being more thoughtful about the people we're giving our time to. It's okay to accept yourself and then begin accepting people who are willing to accept you for you."

As Zion grew into himself, and really began to think about his goals and dreams, Alan saw Zion began to flourish and strive to be his best self. He said Zion is a natural leader and a sponge for the advice of the positive adults in his life.

"Alan helps me understand the value of relationships. That's an issue for people in foster care. It's hard to build relationships and trust people sometimes," Zion said.



SUN Scholars founder Chris Scott and colleague Alan Abutin appear on WFSB.

Zion met Alan through SUN Scholars, which is an organization that works with foster and adopted students throughout their college experiences.

SUN Scholars is unique in that its staff, including Alan, consists entirely of former foster and adopted youth. That shared background was a reason that Zion and Alan were able to form that "older cousin-younger cousin" relationship. He knows Alan 'gets him.'

Of the closeness between Zion and Alan, SUN Scholars founder Chris Scott said, "That's the type of relationship we intentionally strive to build. We know what they're going through, and they know we're here to help them grow."

The lived experience of SUN's staff, as well as the lived experience of 50 percent of its board members, is the reason why the organization refers to and treats all their students as "future colleagues," explained Chris.

"As a community agency it's really important for us to be part of the community we serve. I tell the students 'you are our future colleagues' so I'm going to treat you with the respect and dignity that colleagues should have for each other. They see that [the SUN staff] quote, unquote 'made it' and seeing us they know they can make it too in these roles."

Zion recently returned from an educational group trip to Peru organized by SUN as part of their Robert & Anthony Dudchik SUN Memorial Fund Program. He said the experience was life changing. Sitting atop Machu Pichu, in a moment of self-reflection, Alan said he got inspired to go bigger with his creative side and began envisioning what the future held in store for him. More specifically, what career might be a good fit for him.

Feeling fortunate to have been able to experience Peru in a way that admittedly many Peruvians he encountered could not afford to do, he just knew he wanted to return to Connecticut and to pay it forward.

"I thought, I hope I'm in the position to do this for someone else when I'm able to. I couldn't even dream of going to a place like Peru before."

Staring off at the cloud covered mountain tops and feeling close to the heavens, he started to think about how this trip was made possible. This SUN trip, and many other enrichment activities, were funded through a foundation formed in memory of two former SUN students, brothers, who died tragically in a car accident.

With those guardian angels in mind and with Alan - his "guardian angel" on earth - having his back, Zion vowed not to squander the opportunities afforded to him.

"I started imagining what my future life could be. That's what the Peru trip did for me. Before then I didn't really believe in myself. It's crazy how far you can go and where life can take you when you believe in yourself. Alan taught me that. My belief became so strong that I could foresee my future."

As a place, people and culture, Peru is unique and beautiful. It is also a culture shock for SUN students - and anyone else - who has never traveled out of the country. But getting out of your comfort zone also allows you to open your mind and grow your perspective.

"It was different that's for sure," Zion laughs. "That first day in Peru, I didn't recognize anything on the breakfast plate. By the end of the trip I started thinking, when I get home, I need to hit up a Peruvian restaurant."

Yes, many SUN scholars have not had it easy in their young lives. However, during this trip, they got to interact with Peruvians in much less fortunate situations than they could imagine in Connecticut. Zion said seeing little children about aged seven who were begging for food is etched in his mind. It's not a cakewalk being in foster care and not knowing your parents but,



Zion (standing second from left) with his fellow SUN Scholars at Machu Pichu - the site of his "ah ha" moment.

he said, at seven he remembers hanging out with friends and playing video games - not out in the streets looking for his next meal.

The trip allowed for deep introspection. It allowed Zion to have that moment of realization where he knew his calling was to help others and give back to the community.



Zion and Alan enjoying each other's company....and the view!

When Chris Scott started planning these international trips, he said that "ah ha" moment Zion had, and many SUN students past and present have had, was exactly the point.

He said these experiences do in fact inspire SUN students to start seeing the glass as half full instead of half empty. Chris said he wants the students to come back to Connecticut and say 'I have a lot of blessings that I didn't realize were blessings.'

He said almost every student whose gone on one of these trips has come home and asked 'how do I get more involved, how do I help out in Connecticut, how do I do more?'

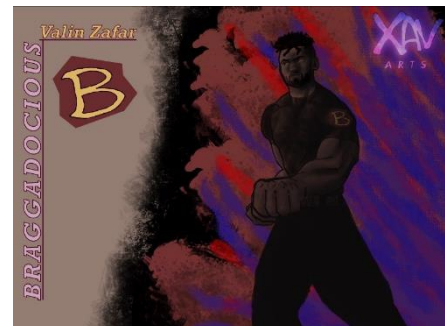
Chris, who had his own eye-opening experience visiting Peru, said, "I came back and I was like I haven't had it easy but I'm in college, I've never worried about food, or a shower or clean water. It changes the way you see everything."

More than anything, Chris wants his students to realize that, while they may not have the means to give back at this point, he wants them to say 'let me invest in myself, let me build my dignity and when I have the time and means let me give in the future.'

"[In the U.S.] we have opportunities to break generational trauma that exists amongst many of our families, we have the opportunity for upward mobility, we have the opportunity to build special lives for ourselves."

He and Alan have witnessed Zion's self-discovery, his maturity and growth, and his calling for the giving professions. Zion has a passion for it that cannot be taught because his heart is truly 'in it'.

"Zion is definitely the 'next generation'. Myself and my colleagues [at SUN], we're the stewards for this generation. I know Zion is going to be the steward for the next generation."



Cover art for Zion's "Braggadocious" graphic novel series.

It was Alan's guidance that helped Zion turn this vision into a reality by getting him on the path to a degree in social work. In addition to talking it through together, Alan literally brought Zion to the CCSU campus to meet the program staff and register for classes.

Beyond school, Alan has had a big influence on the development of Zion's personal and interpersonal skills as a young man but also on his creative pursuits like his graphic novel series titled "Braggadocious" which is the name of the main character. The comic was the brainchild of Zion and his colleague Xavier.

"If it wasn't for Alan, I wouldn't have thought to have started the comic. But Alan said this is your time to shine."



The progression of Valin Zafar - aka "Braggadocious" - throughout the years.

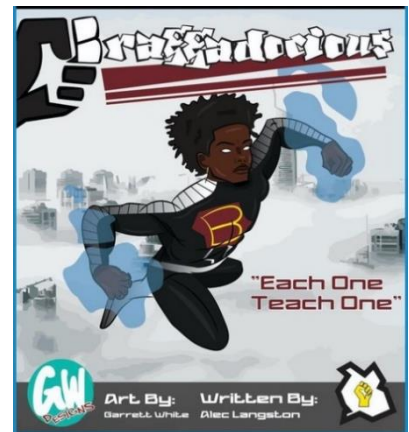
Zion took that advice and ran with it. The main character reflects Zion's own traits, experiences and resilience. Zion is big on creating community and was happy to bring in classmates and friends to contribute to the comic series. The successes and obstacles those peers face and have faced are also interwoven in the story of Braggadocious.

At some point, everybody goes through a transformational period of self-exploration. For foster youth who never met or lost their birth parents at an early age, just like Zion and Braggadocious, it may be a little more difficult to form a self-identity without knowledge of your roots.

However, Zion said, foster kid or not, people inevitably start asking themselves "who am I?" He said his artistic expression is not only an expression of his own journey but it also helps in answering that question of who he is as a person. He hopes it will be a source of inspiration for others.

"Even people who know their families ask that question of themselves. The story of Braggadocious comics represents what I go through and what other foster kids go through."

Zion's hero does not fly or break through walls. Instead, Braggadocious is "here for the community." He is here for young kids in poverty like the youth Zion met in Peru. He is here for people who are struggling to find jobs, pay bills and get a college education. Zion said Braggadocious is the representation of hip hop and its principles including peace, love, unity, and having fun. It then combines the influences of "Western world and Eastern world" cultures.



Inspired by true events. Support hero in the Braggadocious series with credits given to two members of Zion's 'community of collaborators'.

"Certain things college students or young people go through on a day-to-day basis. He's here for them and everyone in those situations."

Zion said he has expanded his network through the creation of "Braggadocious", such as the connection he made with his colleague Jonathan Smith who runs Rising Geniuses, LLC. Jonathan got them on Hot 93.7 to introduce Braggadocious to a larger audience.

Zion's time in Peru helped him lock in on social work as a major. However, as a dedicated Marvel and DC comic fan, and an emerging visual media artist, Zion's response to why he ultimately settled on pursuing social work was not surprising.

"Social workers are like superheroes. They are like celebrities. You see people on TV but forget that...social workers are really out there doing it."

As he reflected on his experiences and on his past and future accomplishments, Zion mused, "If I can do all this as a college student then what can I accomplish when I actually get my degree and become a social worker?"

Meet Gavin - Future Entrepreneur and Community Leader



Profound statements can be made in the most unassuming places - like on a shuttle bus at Bradley International Airport.

"This is another adventure. A start of something new," Gavin stated to his Social Worker Saverio Mancini as they rode closer to the departure gate.

"Keep doing the things you love and never give up on creating new relationships," Gavin remembers Saverio responding.

That day, Gavin was leaving to study abroad. "American Airlines flight 2729 to Dallas Forth Worth," was the first destination on his journey to Sydney Australia where he would spend another semester studying in another country - following a series of classes he completed in Costa Rica the previous semester!

Creating new relationships and never giving up on himself are part of Gavin's fabric as a strong and determined 19-year-old young adult. He shows great insights into his future - and the bigger meaning of his life.

"I saw myself in a greater purpose other than just being a foster youth or being labeled as such," Gavin stated.

He aspires to be an entrepreneur so he can "cultivate my creativity and my ideas and turn them into real life projects to help everyday people."



Gavin wants to give back just like others poured into him.



Gavin firmly believes the Wilderness School is "one of the main factors" which contributed to his growth as a person and led to current successes.

The DCF Wilderness School is a prevention, intervention, and transition program for adolescents from Connecticut. Programs emphasize team building, peer relations, self-reliance, responsibility, improved self-concept, and conflict resolution.

"The staff have diverse experiences and that's why I feel like it makes it very unique when it comes to bringing us all together," Gavin stated.

While in High School, Gavin credits his experiences during 5-day and 20-day expeditions in the woods for aiding him to get out of his "comfort zone" and for "building a relationship with the outdoors." Those times showed him about what the power of a group can do.

"I'll be honest with you, that is something I will never forget," Gavin stated as he remembers repelled down rocks, rafting through rivers and kayaking. "It was just so fun."



Peers and staff all faced "challenges together." At the end of the day, they regrouped, strengthened and gathered to process the day. They formed unbreakable bonds.

The skills Gavin learned through team building and connecting with others at the Wilderness School motivated him to play sports. "It is that unity that I feel like is really going to be applied and is very applicable to anything that I would want to do." He joined the football team and played wide receiver and linebacker for his high school. "Pink panther" was his nickname given the pink arm bands he wore while "sneaking behind the offensive line."

"There it came football, there it came wrestling, there it came college and there it came entrepreneurship."

Gavin's world was opening. A focus on education was next.

"I wanted to see into the bigger picture. So, what I did was I started looking for my education. I started trying to peek at some of my interests. It really started to resonate with me especially when I can create things," Gavin stated.

Gavin is shaping his future while at the University of Hartford studying for a major in Entrepreneurship and a minor in Finance. High School at times was a challenge, but his grit pulled him through. Given his current academic success, Gavin received a Presidential Scholarship, that provides him with \$31,000 of funding above the current Post Secondary Education budget.

Early at the University, Gavin came into contact with Sun Scholars Inc. a non-profit organization funded in part by the Department of Children and Families to support youth in colleges and universities who experienced foster care, adoption and transfers of guardianship. Through academic coaching, peer mentoring and resource coordination, they assist youth to reach their fullest potential.



Gavin was introduced to Executive Director Christopher Baker Scott. "Chris' personality is so marvelous. You would speak to him, and you would basically be enlightened by his presence," he stated.

"Chris was an entrepreneur himself to develop Sun. I just learned so much from him. The whole program is just great. I would highly recommend it. They help solve the question of what the college experience is."

Sun Scholars Inc. is unique in that the staff all have lived expertise as they themselves were involved in the Child Welfare system. They "talk the talk" and can easily relate to the youth they mentor and support. "I can basically have a community that I can talk to that supports me and understands me," Gavin stated.



"You are with people who understand you and the circumstances that came to you in your life."

Gavin felt the staff and youth involved with the program all communicate with the same language and innately understand their collective and shared experiences.

Gavin has also cultivated personal mentors to round out his skills. "The mentors I have had, they are all business owners," he stated. This includes an Executive from Bass Pro Shops who gave advice. "Don't stop moving," he said. Gavin's former football coach who owns two Shop Rite stores is a role model as well for how he balances his personal and professional life.

According to Gavin, true entrepreneurs care about the "community and not just the profits."

Gavin wants to mentor and support youth himself in the future.



Gavin thanks Saverio for their 4+ year relationship. "A good worker. I think he is very supportive and understands me very well. He understands what I went through in the system, and he understands where I am in the system as well," Gavin stated.

"He understands what I want to be. He has a really good relationship he maintains with me and other youth as well."

Likewise, Saverio expressed his admiration for Gavin and the years they have spent together. "Gavin is hard working, self-motivated and determined to have a better outcome for his future than the path that was laid out for him as a young person who encountered the Department. He has developed a one-track mind, success at all costs. Gavin has been active with Sun Scholars and has developed a profound

connection to this agency which has assisted in propelling his life forward. Gavin even traveled to Florida in 1/2023 as part of the Robert and Anthony Dudchik SUN Memorial Fund," he stated.

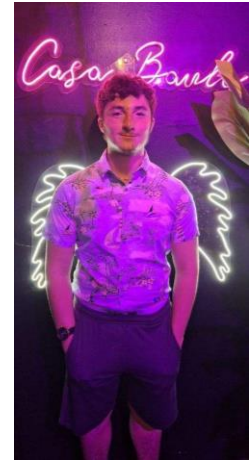
Gavin continues to actively work on resetting his life and allowing his past shortcomings to fuel his future success. As evidenced by the fact that in addition to studying abroad for the past year, this Summer he obtained and successfully completed his first internship at the Liberty Bank Corporate Office in Middletown, CT.

"These experiences have expanded his global view, built his self-confidence and self-reliance, and allowed him to see first-hand that his upbringing doesn't have to repeat itself or identify his life as he launches towards adulthood," Saverio stated.

Gavin should be commended for his earnest and sincere desires to give back, lead and mentor.

In the near future - somewhere in Connecticut or maybe even somewhere around the globe - the welfare of a community will be enhanced, and Gavin will be leading the way!

Congratulation Gavin on all your successes and best of luck in the future.





Employee of the Month Awards!

Congratulations to the following staff who have been nominated within their respective Divisions to receive the August Employee of the Month Award!

Beverly Green - Foster Care Division

Beverly has worked tirelessly on behalf of children in Region 1 and CT to ensure they have stable placements where they can grow and thrive. She leads the Statewide Placement Specialist Transformation Committee as well as Region 1's Quality Parenting Initiative and ensures the Agency's mission of incorporating fathers into the process, whether that is foster fathers or biological fathers. As a Program Supervisor, she leads her staff to go the extra mile in ensuring kinship placements by completing robust assessments and is "hand-on" with the work, as she makes calls to foster parents and maintains relationships with caregivers and community providers as a means of building the foster care program within Region 1. She recognizes the complexity of the work that needs to be done in order to provide children removed from their homes with the best possible outcomes and strives to achieve those outcomes by seeing cases through to permanency for the child. She is creative in her approach to the work and challenges her staff to do the same, by utilizing all outlets for communication, placement and permanency to make the work more fluid and beneficial for the children and families we serve.



Maria I. Gonzalez - Careline

We are thrilled to recognize Maria I. Gonzalez, a Processing Technician in our Background Check Unit, as our Employee of the Month! Since joining Careline in 2019, Maria has been a cornerstone of our team, making significant contributions with her unwavering dedication and exceptional skills. Maria's role has evolved over the years, and her impact has been profound. Since taking on the responsibility of managing the Careline staffing schedule last year, she has showcased remarkable organizational abilities and attention to detail. Her efforts ensure that our schedules run smoothly and efficiently, which is crucial for our team's success. In addition to her scheduling responsibilities, Maria has demonstrated a remarkable willingness to take on new projects and tackle challenges with enthusiasm. Her proactive approach and readiness to go above and beyond make her an invaluable asset to our team. She embodies the spirit of

collaboration and teamwork, always ready to support her colleagues and contribute wherever needed. This recognition is a testament to her hard work and commitment.

Stacy Andrews - Bridgeport Area Office

The Bridgeport Office would like to recognize Social Work Supervisor Stacy Andrews as this month's employee of the month. Only 8 months into her new role as a Social Work Supervisor, Stacey has shown a level of leadership and resiliency in supervising both Ongoing Services and Intake in such short span. Since transitioning into Intake a short while ago, Stacey has made a very smooth transition and upon her arrival, she took it upon herself to learn as much as she could from her peers. Stacy has already made great connections with her unit and has gained the trust and respect of the work group. Stacy handles cases with critical thinking and asks very educated questions. She handles tough situations with grace and humility and demonstrates the highest form of professionalism every day. We are very lucky to have Stacy join the Bridgeport Intake workgroup. She has shown the true definition of leadership in a very unsure moment in her career.

Milton Soriano - Norwalk Area Office

Milton Soriano has been with the Department for 13 years. He is currently a Social Worker Case Aide in the Norwalk office. Milton is a reliable force within the office and for the families he serves. Milton is a true definition of integrity. He is always where he's supposed to be, supporting our staff and families, caring for our children and filling in the gaps. He's dependable and reliable. Milton is always ready and willing to provide assistance in whatever area he can, whenever he is asked. Milton is always pleasant. Rest assured, whatever kind of day you are having, you can guarantee that when you see Milton, his smile, his greeting and his genuine spirit, will put a smile on your face.



Bryonna Geiste - Waterbury Area Office

The Waterbury Office is pleased to nominate Ms. Bryonna Geiste as our employee of the month. Ms. Geiste has been employed with the Department since 2019 and is currently in the Permanency Unit. In a short 5 years dedicated to the well-being of children and families, Bryonna exemplifies the true spirit of a Social Worker. As an unwavering advocate for children AND families, she goes above and beyond to support and empower families, ensuring their voices are heard, understood and their needs are met. Ms. Geiste makes it a priority to attend special events such as graduations and applauds her family's accomplishments. Ms. Geiste also steps in when needed to bridge any gaps between birth and foster families recognizing the importance of relationships and collaboration for our children. Ms. Geiste ensures permanency is at the forefront in every aspect of her work and works collaboratively with her peers and providers to ensure this is accomplished timely for the children on her caseload. Ms. Geiste is planful in her approach with familiarizing herself with families on a new case. She makes it a point to gather relevant case information upon meeting a family, to ensure for a thorough

assessment. She adapts well to changing situations and demonstrates an abundance of flexibility and willingness to address new challenges. Her commitment doesn't stop there; she is a guiding light for her peers and goes out of her way as a support in the office. As a newer staff member, she remembers the challenges of acclimating to this work and ensures that she welcomes and support trainees by offering assistance, mentorship, and fostering a supportive and effective work environment. Ms. Geiste is described by her peers and supervisors as dependable, dedicated and a source of strength to all those she interacts with and promoting cohesion and solidity amongst her peers. Her professionalism, engagement skills, and compassion for the work we do is evident in her work both internally and externally. Ms. Geiste also serves on the CQI, and Wellness team. Ms. Geiste recently completed her MSW from Sacred Heart University while carrying a full caseload. Ms. Geiste's passion and dedication are making a profound impact on the lives of those she serves and the colleagues who have the privilege of working alongside her.

Brian Trentacosta - Danbury Area Office

Brian is humble with an incredible work ethic. He is committed in multiple areas of the work, such as but not limited to his commitment to his unit, service to families, and

willingness to help peers and coworkers. Team player is an understatement, as Brian often rises to the occasion whenever a peer/coworker is in need. Most notable is the fact he is helpful without complaint or dismay. He is truly a wonderful role model, as he exemplifies the philosophy of teamwork. Brian is an asset to the Danbury office, evidenced by his ability to facilitate and achieve timely permanency for numerous children assigned to his unit. He is receptive to constructive criticism, eager to learn, and his potential for both personal and professional growth within the agency is beyond measure.



Ryan Therriault - Torrington Area Office

Ryan has a real strength to engage fathers. We commend Ryan for his fatherhood work with his families. We recently received a letter from an incarcerated father praising Ryan for keeping in contact with him, for ensuring his two children stay connected and as he noted, showing him "a side of the system that no one talks about." This father expressed how grateful he was for Ryan's efforts. Ryan did not let this father's incarceration become a barrier to engaging him and more importantly he made this father feel valued as a dad, while helping to shift people's perception of the work we do.

Kristine Florio and Dave Cohen - New Haven Area Office

I read a lot of protocols in my position as you can imagine (Not as many as you Novella) yet I am always struck with the sensitivity and compassion that SW Florio approaches the newborns and their families on her caseload. She is at the hospital so frequently when she needs to make a removal, and I have been able to imagine/easily visualize her holding the baby in a very

comforting way when she describes her face-to-face visits with our clients in her protocol. Dave's supervisory notes are clear and concise and speak to the next steps needed to finalize the plan for safety and placement. In my position, it is quite reassuring and appreciated that this team works together so well that we know our babies and families are in good hands. From my point of view, there are rarely any questions/ confusion or concerns regarding the protocol but rather a swift investigation drafted with individualized family sensitivity and a planful CPS purpose all wrapped into one.

David Divincenzo - Milford Area Office

David is an amazing Case Aid. Parents and children really appreciate how punctual he is and kind. He is a really good listener, and he writes everything they say. Every time I read one of David's notes, they are a wealth of information. Clients trust him and don't see him as an entity of DCF. In turn, they just talk freely with and around David. When we say we want to offer families "family time" he truly is able to do that without someone feeling that have someone watching over them. His documentation is always in timely and has been an excellent course for court, trial and testifying. He is also always willing to be flexible about his schedule to help out. He has been assigned some difficult clients and truly takes on the cases with the sincere intent to not only manage the difficult behaviors but at the end allow for children and parents to have visits free of the stress that is related to having a DCF case. He is such a valued partner.

Antina Falk - Norwich Area Office

Antina is an asset to the Norwich Office in terms of her abilities as a Supervisor as well as an advocate for staff wellness. Antina has been a Permanency Supervisor the past 3 years, and recently volunteered to become a Training Supervisor within the office. Antina is a dedicated and supportive supervisor. She values working with individuals, whether staff or case

participants, from where they are, and building off of their strengths. Antina is able to motivate staff and case participants in trying to achieve their greatest potential. Antina was the co-chair of the office's Wellness Committee for several years and runs the office's weekly support group. She is a member of the office's Welcome Committee, Racial Justice Workgroup, and ChildStat Permanency Subcommittee. She is an out-of-the-box thinker and spearheaded the initial idea to implement Case Partnering in the office (and was part of the office's first Case Partner team). Antina is an Office leader, who always volunteers to help organize staff events, including teambuilding and summer outing events.

EXCELLENT



Michele Gargiulo - Middletown Area Office

Michele is an experienced Social Worker in the Permanency Unit at the Middletown Area Office. She presents as very dedicated to the children and families on her caseload and is always willing to go the extra mile to ensure children get what they need. She has processed numerous adoptions in the past year but the case involving 7 siblings all needing adoptive homes stands

out as one where she really worked hard and faced every challenge head-on. Michele has ensured that each child felt special and was a part of the process along the way. Her foster families, providers and co-workers all rave about her communication style and willingness to help out when need. She is a positive and bubbly addition to our office who never hesitates to share compliments and accolades about other people. In my short time as the Office Director in Middletown, I have had several people internal and external to DCF stop me to talk about Michele's great work. She is a true reflection of the principles the Agency strives to instill in our staff.

Amanda Sykes - Willimantic Area Office

Amanda has been a great asset to the Willimantic team. She is a strong advocate for work- life balance and promotes wellness. Amanda is a team player, always willing to assist, without hesitation. In her short time at DCF, she has taken on a leadership role; she attends Child Stat meetings, played a critical role in planning the PRIDE month celebration, and she is always willing and eager to provide newer workers with shadowing opportunities. Amanda is organized, has developed great systems, and always gives her best effort to do what is best for families. Since joining the Department, Amanda has been open to connecting with others and ensuring that she contributes to the positive team we strive to be despite the difficulties in the work. She reminds us of the importance of collaboration and being there for each other.



Ferdinand Irizarry - Hartford Area Office

Ferdinand Irizarry is a Social Worker in the Hartford DCF Ongoing Services division who is more than worthy to be named Social Worker of the Month. Ferdinand constantly brings a positive attitude to his everyday work. He is always willing to help his peers and offers himself on a daily basis. Ferdinand often receives praise from the children and families he serves due to his hard work, his devotion, and his ability to go above and beyond to help them. He regularly receives recognition from his peers, AAG's, RRG's, and providers about his thoroughness and his ability to make positive changes in his cases. Ferdinand is often requested by social work staff and providers to be the assigned Social Worker for challenging cases as they know the impact he will have on helping improve the families' circumstances. There are numerous cases where he has partnered with families, natural supports, and providers to ensure that children remained safely in the home or achieved timely permanency. He partners with families to create all different types of decisions. He not only plants seed to assist with families with beginning to rebuild their family circumstance, but he avails himself throughout the case to ensure they grow. Ferdinand not only mentors the fathers and mothers he works with to enhance their skills, but he also believes in the development of himself, his peers, and interns. He has mentored newly hired Social Work Trainees and college Interns. He has been able to assist in their learning, guiding them to be good Social Workers, but helps his peers to see the value in the Agency, the

families, and the communities we serve. While he helps to enhance other's skills, he values learning and educating himself to grow as a person and a worker. He is able to hold mature and direct conversations with his families, the community, his Supervisor and Manager and has been able to effectively show his side to all of them. He advocates for his families and thinks outside the box in creative ways to help others reach their potential. Ferdinand has an exemplary record as a worker, an advocate, a peer and is held in the highest regard by everyone he comes in contact with.

Virgen Guadarrama - Manchester Area Office

Ms. Guadarrama was nominated by a co-worker who had nominated her whole unit for their help with a removal of six children, but when asked her for more information, she said that Ms. Guadarrama stood out the most. She said that she felt very welcomed by everyone and that although Ms. Guadarrama had her own OTC happening at the time, she made herself available to help her with transports and visits and was always right there to help her get information or documents when in need - this shows such amazing teamwork!!

Christine (Chris) Carlino - New Britain Area Office

Christine takes great pride in the work she does, her documentation is thorough, and she is easily able to engage parents and children. She is thoughtful with her approach and can manage challenging situations with ease. She is always willing to assist during after hour visits. Christine is a true team player and is flexible in helping where she is needed, even assisting with screening for Intake at times. Chris always goes above and beyond to be helpful and if she is not able to help with something (visit, transports, etc.) she has even helped to find someone who can. She is super responsive, gets the job done and on time, and cares about the children and families she serves. Chris is an asset to the New Britain office in supporting the work that we do every day.

The logo features the words "ONE of a KIND" in a serif font. The word "of" is written in a smaller, cursive script font and is positioned between "ONE" and "KIND".

Alexandra Chisholm - Meriden Area Office

I am honored to nominate Social Worker Alexandra Chisholm from the Meriden office for Employee of the Month. Her extraordinary dedication and commitment to her work have made a significant impact on the lives of the families she serves, particularly in the case of a medically complex child who has no resources or support within the state. Alexandra has shown exceptional skills in managing this medically complex case. Despite having the case for only a short period, she has worked tirelessly in collaboration with our Nursing staff to ensure this child's needs are met. Alexandra has gone above and beyond, not only in managing the case but in truly advocating for the child's best interests. Her dedication has given a voice to this child, who otherwise has no one in the state, is a testament to her exceptional character. For

her tireless dedication and compassionate advocacy, I wholeheartedly nominate SW, Alexandra Chisholm for Employee of the Month.

Lauren Kittle - Behavioral Health and Community Services

Lauren Kittle began working for the department on January 13th, 2023. She came to the department with experience working in the Parks and Rec department for the Parent and Children's program as well as Bristol Hospital as a Clinical Supervisor for the Parent and Child Center. She also worked for Wheeler Clinic in their ECCP program and as a Clinical Care Manager in the Foster Care program. As we know shifting from the private sector to the public sector isn't easy. Lauren has demonstrated perseverance, leadership, professionalism, and is a great team player. As we know, transitioning to the public sector doesn't come without our professional growth and evolution. Lauren has demonstrated taking on personal and professional challenges. She currently is the program lead of FBR, manages the Substance Exposed Pregnancy initiative, works in close partnership with DMHAS surrounding pregnancy and postpartum for mothers/birthing individuals. She manages the MST BSF contracts and the MDFT/HYPE network. She maintains being open to learn, acceptance of constructive criticism and welcomes opportunities to help others in her team and providers.

Peter Yazbak - Bureau of External Affairs

Peter Yazbak is the Director of Communications for the Department and has been an excellent asset to the Bureau of External Affairs. Peter brings with him seasoned experiences in working for two Governors and multiple other state Agencies prior to his time with us. In a crisis, his calm and thoughtful demeanor goes far in educating members of the media about our work and presenting to them explanations and statements in honest and transparent fashion. Peter has excellent contacts across the state and easily engages with partners to include them in Agency events, highlighting the great work that we do. He has taken the Communications work to a level acknowledged nationally! It is clear that because of his tireless efforts, the reputation of the Department of Children and Families has been greatly enhanced. Thank you, Peter!



Mallorie Conroy - Transitional Supports and Success

Mallorie is one of the newest members of the Wilderness School Full-Time team. Mallorie has taken to the unique pace of the Wilderness School naturally. She approaches her work with a "can do" attitude and a high bar for quality and thoroughness. Additionally, Mallorie balances the mindset of a learner with that of a contributor; she works with existing systems and naturally applies innovative ideas. Without a pause, Mallorie integrated into the Wilderness School's culture with a deep belief in the capability for our participants and empathy for their

experiences. She has emerged as the right person in the right place at the right time. The Wilderness School and the Department is lucky to have her on the team.

Javier Perez - PRTF (South)

Javier Perez, the Supervising Nurse at Solnit South PRTF, exemplifies dedication and commitment, making him a deserving candidate for Employee of the Month. His unwavering support for the program and his team is evident in his daily actions, always going above and beyond to ensure the well-being of the children and the success of the facility. Javier's hard work was instrumental in the Solnit North and South PRTFs achieving their Joint Commission accreditation, with his exceptional preparation for the infection prevention segment earning high praise from the surveyor. As a supervisor, he consistently advocates for his Nurses, offering them unwavering support and availability, even when it means putting his own tasks on hold. Over the past six months, he has shouldered the responsibilities of the only Supervising Nurse on the PRTF, taking on additional roles in Infection Prevention and Pharmacy and Therapeutics, further demonstrating his reliability and dedication to the mission.

Kevin Clark - PRTF (North)

Kevin Clark is a member of the Maintenance crew who has consistently stepped up and taken responsibility for his roles and routinely works together with the other Maintenance personnel to help them whenever needed. Kevin was given a monumental task of moving 13 different employees from various departments to different offices in the Education building to the Clinical building. Kevin is always eager to assist anyone in whatever needs they may have, even if it's outside of his job scope. Kevin, all your hard work is appreciated at Solnit North!



Bis Abraham - Solnit South Hospital

Bis Abraham is a Registered Nurse Supervisor in the Solnit Hospital Operations office who, on a daily basis, keeps all hospital functions running in an efficient, calm, and organized way. Whether she is helping during moments of crisis or providing daily clinical support to all the units, patients, fellow employees and staffing office, she exhibits these collaborative efforts to consistently illustrate the mission of Solnit Hospital. Her efforts go above and beyond towards others, volunteering to fill in wherever she is needed, coming in to cover on weekends off, and help staffing, colleagues or patients. Bis shines with her steady, quiet confidence providing clinical guidance through her actions. We are grateful to have Bis as a leader on the Nursing Operations Team!

John DiPilla - Fiscal

John is a quiet force within DCF. With very little fanfare, he is a jack of all trades, performing many of the critical functions that support the infrastructure of our Agency and the safety of our

staff. He is the first-person staff go to with a security concern and he singularly navigates us through emergency operations as well as responsibility to the state's Continuity of Operations planning. Most recently, with statutory changes requiring accreditation of small Police Units, John has assumed responsibility for navigating the accreditation of DCF's Police Unit, successfully passing the Tier 1 accreditation process, making DCF's Police Unit the first in the state to pass accreditation on its first attempt! John is always ready with a joke, always willing to play a prank and always looking to make someone laugh. He brings levity to our work every day, while quietly managing all of the things that no one thinks about but are critical to making DCF run. He is essential to our Agency functioning and he embodies the character of DCF.

Adriano Calabrese - Juvenile Justice Education Unit

When you think about what makes a great professional, a few things come to mind: Having a dedicated work ethic, great communication skills and a mind for solving unique challenges are essential ingredients. All of these attributes are who Adriano Calabrese, Pupil Service Specialist

for the Juvenile Justice Education Unit, is on a daily basis. From the very beginning, Adriano has offered his expertise and experience to this work in a way that has helped grow our unit. He has not only done this by being accessible and available to his colleagues, but also in his thorough and detailed approach to all tasks that are before him. Adriano's excellence is seen in the many different arenas where he does his work. But no matter where or who he is meeting with, his commitment and



support of the students and families he is serving is always at the center. In many ways, Adriano's ability to connect with students and families in the Juvenile Justice System has laid the foundation for how this reentry and reintegration work is done best. We are fortunate to have Adriano in our unit, as are the many students he meets with in facilities, schools and communities across the state. Like his beloved UCONN Huskies, Adriano is truly a champion in his field (or court).

Jenny Vesco - Central Office Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

As a Program Lead in the Family Support Programs Unit, Jenny Vesco oversees the Department's post intake services, preservation and permanency programs which serve a large number of our families. Jenny works diligently with Regional staff, Central Office staff, and providers to ensure families get the best intervention to address their needs. Jenny has been leading the work on expanding the Quality Parenting Centers statewide, developing program practice guides, and developing and analyzing performance outcome measures to ensure services are provided to standards. Most recently, Jenny has been focusing on a large project involving preservation and reunification services. She has been setting high benchmarks for the pre-procurement work, including: developing and analyzing surveys for DCF and persons with lived experience, meeting with youth to get their feedback, analyzing programmatic and LINK data, releasing a Request for

Information, co-leading workgroup discussions, and developing strategies to implement a service approach that will not just benefit our families but will also improve our permanency timeliness and will increase supports to our Social Work staff. Jenny is dedicated, experienced, and a great team member. Not only do we appreciate everything she does for our families, but we admire her as a person.

Check out what others say about Jenny!

"Jenny is an awesome partner to work with on any project. She brings with her a wealth of knowledge about contract expectations while maintaining a central focus on the complex needs of the children and families being served by DCF. Her kindness and openness foster a collaborative environment, and her dedication and expertise ensure successful and impactful outcomes." By Susan Cunningham, Program Director from the Office of Contract Management.

"Jenny is one of the most incredible people in Central Office. She is available whenever called and could repeat the same information over and over with the same kindness. I am always comfortable when seeking help with data or agency matters. During COVID, having our monthly meetings with Jenny was very encouraging. She would give us the information we needed and provide us with hope as workers were going out in the community. I never miss my weekly meeting with Jenny because I know I would get an honest and fair response with good direction. All these are the reasons that I would most definitely nominate Jenny." By Hyacintha Bernard, Director RTFT from Child and Family Guidance of Bridgeport. Jenny co-authored a chapter for CWLA Press Book with Patricia Carlson (UConn), Dr. Elisabeth Cannata (Wheeler Clinic) and Dru Breslav (Wheeler Clinic). The chapter Child welfare involved families and economic insecurity (related to the CFS program) for the upcoming CWLA Press book Child Neglect, Inequity and Poverty: Practice Innovations, Concrete Resources, and Justice has been formally accepted!

The logo for SPEECHLESS, with the word in blue and black capital letters.

Christa Rider - Area Office Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

This group nomination comes with a deep appreciation for Christa's advocacy, compassion and clinical competence. As the Clinical PD for Region 1 - she has an exceptional understanding of the challenges faced by our youth in foster care. Her clinical approach to working from an anti-racist lens has not only made us better as advocate - but it has also resulted in more robust and just assessments. Her dedication also extends to the Human Trafficking work. She has volunteered to represent DCF with various media outlets and with community providers. Her kindness and humor give us the confidence that things will be okay.

"Christa's exceptional in her approach and level of professionalism with internal staff, community partners, and families. Her overall wealth of knowledge brings a unique dynamic and perspective to problem solving and strategy building. Christa's work ethic is second to

none. Her genuine character and support towards the human services field is remarkable and deserves recognition." (OD Stewart)

"Christa strives to build bridges between the Regional Resource Group and CPS. She sees the potential in all children despite their circumstances. Her commitment and knowledge expand beyond the department. She is a woman of determination and distinction. Christa challenges us to strive for excellence by always supporting us. She reminds us that we may be vulnerable at times, but we will emerge strong. Her unwavering dedication pushes us all to do better. Christa deserves to be honored with the employee of the month." (OD Chapman-Smith).

"Christa Rider is a dynamic leader. Her dedication to the children and families we serve is unmatched. Christa has developed a strong relationship with her colleagues across the region. She is compassionate, very knowledgeable and Christa is a deep thinker. Christa understands how systems impact the service delivery to our most vulnerable children. Despite systemic barriers, Christa advocates for children with vigor and passion. I have consulted with Christa on many complicated cases. She is always eager to assist, and her lens brings clarity to challenging and complicated case situations. Christa's assessments and insights help to strengthen our work with families. The CPS staff are grateful for the level of support Christa and her RRG team provide. Christa is the epitome of leading by example. We appreciate your steadfastness--thank you, Christa!" (AC Blackwell)



Elizabeth Stokes - CT KIND

Elizabeth "Liz" Stokes is being nominated for DCF Employee of the Month as she has gone above and beyond in her work on the CT-KIND Project. As a Program Supervisor, she has spearheaded Training and Organizational Change Management (OCM) efforts for the entire state and has collaborated across the many divisions at DCF to ensure DCF has the needed engagement of our Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to make the new system a success! Liz has established a strong network across the agency and with community partners and has been instrumental in developing processes to engage staff in the design and development of CT-KIND, as well as the System User Testing (SUT) trainings and sessions. Due to her diligence, the recent SUT sessions had many volunteers and enthusiastic SME participants, which has been crucial in getting the expertise needed to inform the CT-KIND system and in meeting the timelines set forth on the project. Liz is a prime example of a team player and is a natural leader. She has grown professionally over the past few years, serving as an Emerging Leader at the National ISM Conference in 2022, and as a coach and mentor for the Emerging Leader's Program for 2023 and 2024. Liz takes initiative and has come up with many suggestions and ideas geared to making the new system valuable to the end users. She is dedicated, an asset to the CT-KIND Project and DCF, and is always looking to improve the work done at DCF to better serve the children and families of CT.

Peter Ruot - Education/Unified School District #2

I am thrilled to nominate Peter Ruot for Teacher of the Month. Peter exemplifies dedication and versatility in his role at our school, wearing many hats with exceptional skill and enthusiasm. As our house IT expert, Peter is always there to resolve technical issues, ensuring that both teachers and students have the support they need for a smooth learning experience. His ability to troubleshoot and find solutions quickly has been invaluable, making him an indispensable asset to our school community. In addition to his IT duties, Peter generously volunteers his time to teach karate to our students once a week. His commitment to fostering discipline, respect, and physical fitness in our students extends beyond the classroom and into the dojo, making a significant positive impact on their lives.



Kathy Costello - Office of Legal Affairs

Congratulations to Kathy Costello for her incredible dedication and long-standing service with the DCF Legal Division! Kathy's over 30 years of commitment and enthusiasm are truly commendable. Her role as the sole Paralegal dedicated to Litigation Matters showcases her exceptional skills and dedication. From expertly organizing discovery to conducting in-depth investigations and managing complex tasks with the Attorney General's Office, Kathy consistently demonstrates her remarkable expertise. Her contributions extend beyond her daily responsibilities, including her vital role in emergency placement internal reviews and her unwavering support for her colleagues. Kathy's dependability, independence, and positive attitude make her an invaluable asset to the Division. Thank you, Kathy, for your outstanding work and the positive impact you've made throughout your career. Here's to celebrating your achievements and the many more to come!

Maine Maritime Academy
 Massachusetts College of Arts and Design
 Mercy College
 Mitchell College
 New York University
 Nova Southeastern University, Inc.
 Paier College of Art
 Post University
 Purchase College
 Purdue University
 Rutgers University
 Sacred Heart University
 St. Joseph's University
 Santa Monica College
 Simmons University
 Southern Connecticut State University
 Southern New Hampshire University
 Springfield College
 St John's University
 University of Bridgeport
 University of Connecticut
 University of Delaware
 University of Hartford
 University of Maine at Farmington
 University of Massachusetts - Amherst
 University of Massachusetts - Boston
 University of New Haven
 University of Rhode Island
 West Texas A&M University
 Western Connecticut State University



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY



LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO



2- Year and Community Colleges

Asnuntuck Community College
 Capital Community College
 Gateway Community College
 Housatonic Community College
 Manchester Community College
 Middlesex Community College
 Naugatuck Community College
 New Hampshire Training Institute Community College
 Norwalk Community College
 Quinebaug Community College
 Three Rivers Community College



MANCHESTER
COMMUNITY
COLLEGE

Tunxis Community College

Vocational, Technical and Job Training Schools

American Institute of Business
Culinary Institute of America
Florida Institute of Technology
Gorgeous by Glam
Lincoln Technical Institute
Porter and Chester Institute

