

A Message from Commissioner Designate Jodi Hill-Lilly



"Let's go!" Countless times in my 35-year career I used this expression. On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, it took on a whole new meaning as I began my first day as Commissioner designate.

It is with great pride that I stand before you and **commit to listening, learning, and partnering** with the almost 3,000 DCF employees, sister state agencies, community partners and especially parents and youth with lived expertise in our critical work.

In the near future, a video message which includes an overview of my Administration will be provided.

We will always have work to do but I can say with confidence that over the past five years, **Connecticut DCF has been moving in the right direction**. My ultimate goal is to continue the great work we have started while we look to enhance the following:

- Safety practice and service provision with our 0-5 population
- Local partnerships
- Framework for Behavioral Health
- Supports to our staff across all Divisions



A few weeks ago, I took my first step in the confirmation process. Please see the [CT Mirror](#) article covering that hearing as well as the [CT-N video](#). I have also included my entire speech for you in this month's "**Spotlight on What's Right**" newsletter so you can get to know me even better, my beliefs, family and influences on my life's journey.

February is **Black History Month** with the **2024** theme, "**African Americans and the Arts**," celebrating the African American influence in the fields of music, performing arts, literature, language, fashion, and cultural expression along with many other ways.



Thank you to the staff and young men at Solnit North for their fantastic Black History Month celebration under the direction of Superintendent **Mike Rulnick** and with the organization of **Petisa Norwood**.



Black history is all our history, and I empowered the young men to consider themselves the future of our country and to become a change maker.

"We are in radical change in this world," stated **Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams**. "Pour into everyone, a true love for each other."



Read in this month's "Spotlight" the story of **Demani Brown** and her family entitled, "**All the days will get better.**" She speaks of her upbringing, losing her son to foster care and the "big, huge celebration" on that beautiful day her entire family was together once again.

Loneliness is unique to each individual. **Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz and Governor Ned Lamont** announced a social connection campaign this month to combat loneliness and social isolation in our state. Supports can be located by contacting 211 or [www.connectingtocarect.org](http://www.connectingtocarect.org).

Keep watch over each other and just because our friend or loved one presents as "having it together" does not mean they aren't in need of social connection.

The mental health crisis is on the rise. **Dr. Frank Gregory and Dr. Linda Dixon** joined the **Lt. Governor and Senator Chris Murphy** as well as state and community leaders to participate in a roundtable discussion focused on the importance of social connection amongst Connecticut's young people.



The **DCF Juvenile Justice Educational Unit (JJEU)** supports better educational and life outcomes for high school aged youth in detention or residing in one of the state's 15 juvenile justice facilities. Read more about their mission, commitment of the staff and outcomes in this month's newsletter. See their outstanding presentation at the [Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee](#) where they also provided striking data on the improvements seen in academic performance due to their efforts!

Last week, **Program Director Ann Adams** served on a panel of Youth Fire setting national experts at the **National Community Risk Response Symposium** in Tennessee. Fire service partners were trained on partnering with Behavioral Health and Child Welfare to support youth.

Our Legislative session is fully engaged. Thank you to **Chief Administrator of Government Relations and Policy Vinny Russo, Legislative Director Mike Carone, Chief Fiscal Officer Melanie Sparks and Assistant Legal Director Kate Dwyer** for conducting key legislative research, development of testimony and for the long hours they are putting in at the state Capitol. Read "**DCF 2024 Legislative Priorities**" which provides an overview of DCF's legislative package this year.



Our statewide **Youth Advisory Board (YAB)** members are strong, insightful, and advocate for improving our system. They recently hosted their quarterly meeting with the Commissioner and Executive Team in New Britain. Thank you, **Sana Cotton and Calvin Mackey from Unashamed Inc.**, for inspiring our Transitional Aged Youth to participate in the development of a mobile app for those with lived expertise!

Thank you to our partners at **WFSB "Great Day at 9a"** for featuring **Director of Fatherhood Services Anthony Gay** this month to discuss the important role father play in the life of their children! See Anthony's interview here: [WFSB Great Day](#)

Stay safe and take care of yourself and your families!



A Glimpse into Commissioner Designate Jodi Hill-Lilly  
(Confirmation Hearing Speech)



Good afternoon, Chairmen Duff and Concepcion, Vice-Chairmen Looney and Godfrey, Ranking Members Kelly and Yaccarino and distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. I'm grateful for the trust the Governor has placed in me to lead DCF and I'm thankful for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I first want to congratulate and thank my friend AND former Commissioner -Vannessa Dorantes. I've never met a more dedicated and compassionate leader. I've had the privilege of working side by side with her, as her Deputy, along with our incredible Executive Team for the past 5 years. I can say with confidence THAT, while we will always have more work to do, Connecticut DCF is moving in the right direction.

I'd also like to thank my family for being here today -my patient, supportive and loving husband and daughters, two of whom are here today. Thank you to my extended family, friends, and colleagues whom I call my "tribe" behind me and online. I love you all dearly for your support.

My goal today is to not only discuss my vision and professional experience as a 35-year employee and leader at DCF, but to also authentically articulate who I am.

I was born and raised in Windsor CT to Howard and Genevieve Hill, and I have four very loving and protective brothers. My parents, both of whom were only high school educated but worked hard and had high expectations. Although we lived in what was a middle-class town at the time, like many black Americans, we endured poverty, discrimination, and overall tough times. Those humbling times are what shaped the lens through I see many of the children and families we at DCF serve. Simply put, there but by the "Grace OF God go I". So, my primary mission in life is to give back.



And although my parents are no longer with me, I carry them in my heart knowing they would be so proud of me today.

Since my nomination, I have heard countless times----that the DCF Commissioner is the hardest job in state government. Many empathetically went on to say, "no matter what you do... you can't win." The truth is, when something tragic happens to our children, nobody wins.

DCF along with Child welfare agencies across the nation, are grappling with the complexity of this work. We keep children safe and support their families who face the extraordinary challenges life often brings. We are learning how best to reduce child maltreatment by providing preventative measures to interrupt behaviors leading to abuse and neglect.

While one child death is gut wrenching and beyond traumatic to all of us, many don't know that CT has one of the lowest child fatality rates in the country. We stand proud of our work.



DCF, under my leadership, if confirmed, will continue doing the absolute best to hold ourselves accountable for any egregious missteps AND we will celebrate many victories and accomplishments that never make the news, but give us our sense of purpose. I will always support and help the people who help the people...PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE WORKFORCE CRISIS.

As a leader, I will continue to develop DCF as a learning institution and build upon situations that teach us the deep intricacies of the work. I will listen; I will learn; I will partner; and I will act.

My ultimate goal is to continue the great work started and go deeper. We will remain responsive to the emerging needs (particularly post pandemic) of those we serve. Going forward I will continue to collaborate with the advocates and the legislators, providers, and sister agencies and, our foster and kin caregivers and our children and families.

We must have meaningful relationships with our communities because that's where our children and families live.

I will be paying particular attention to in-home services, specifically on the safety of children 0-5 years of age and our adolescents — both of which are very vulnerable cohorts.

I will seek to further develop the infrastructure for our children's behavioral health mandate and respond to this significant mental health and opioid crisis by creating a holistic and integrated approach to our role within the medical and behavioral health service delivery continuum of care.



In closing, I'll share an important interaction I had years ago .... I was 21 years old, and I remember excitedly telling my music professor Dr. Gardner, that I wanted to work for DCF. His reaction was both shocking and disappointing. He hung his head and said.... "Please, for the love of God Jodi, don't do it! You are much too positive to work for that agency and I'm afraid it will steal your joy."

While those words did not deter me from doing the work, I knew I was destined to do, I did listen to my mentor's caution and turned it into a personal challenge never to become bitter.

I sit here, 35 years later at a confirmation hearing to be the next Commissioner of DCF with joy in my heart and a never-ending love for the people I serve and those with whom I work. I am grateful for your consideration of my nomination and I'm happy to answer any questions from the committee.

"All the days will get better."



As an adolescent, Demani Brown found herself on Juvenile Probation, wearing an ankle bracelet after a series of altercations with family members. "I did not care," is how she recalled this period in her life.

"I thought at 16, I was grown and knew everything."

Placement into foster care soon followed as did her pattern of behavior. A runaway, she was the subject of Silver Alerts issued by Law Enforcement. The Court lost patience and Demani was ordered into Detention. "For the two months I was there, I was losing my mind," she stated.

In Detention, Demani found out she was pregnant. "Scared," is what she remembers thinking. "Everyone gave up on me. I had to prove everyone wrong."

Enter Social Worker Valerie Tanner from the Department of Children and Families. "Who are you?" Demani remembers asking during their initial meeting. Valerie would engage with her and build that trust so often difficult to establish with adolescents. "I like your nails," Valerie told Demani. "A person like you shouldn't be in a place like this."

The relationship grew between the two strangers. "She saw something in me no one else did," is how Demani described their relationship. "She was there for me."

Demani flourished. She was an excellent student, a cheerleader and ran track. Those around her did not know she was pregnant. Despite medical complications resulting in a month-long hospitalization, and missing a total of 88 days from school, she graduated from High School at 17 years of age while living in a foster home and caring for her newborn son, Masai.

At 18 years old, Demani had her own apartment while raising her son. She received supports from DCF as a Transitional Aged Youth (TAY), and life seemed to be pointed in the right direction.

The intergenerational pattern of violence continued when she and Masai's father "got into an altercation," resulting in a report of child maltreatment. Her life changed.

"Masai needs to come into care," the DCF staff told her. "When I lost custody of my son, I lost my mind," Demani stated. "I went downhill for like 6 months. Nothing was the same anymore."



The journey towards reunification with her son was long.

"I stopped celebrating the holidays," she stated.

Demani never gave up despite the pain she was in and saw in her little boy. "Masai knew a lot, too much."

"I am alive and well. Why can't my son live with me?" she questioned.

In February 2022, Demani gave birth to her daughter, Loriana. She was medically complex and required two major surgeries. DCF closely supported and monitored Demani's progress and saw the attention and compassion she had as a mother. "DCF loved the way I cared for her," Demani stated.

Julie Dixon became Demani's Social Worker. They too formed a bond leading to great success! "It has been a delight to literally watch Demani grow up into the young woman she is today," Julie stated.

A plan was put into place to have Masai reunify with his mother and little sister. A special relationship was formed between Demani and Karen Swanson from r' kids Family Center in New Haven, a non-profit organization contracted by DCF to assist with an assessment and eventual plan for reunification.

They facilitated Demani's visits with Masai and offered suggestions and examples of the parenting style best for him. "They helped me transition into the mom I needed to be for Masai," Demani stated.

"If it wasn't for r' kids, Masai may not be with me."



At one point, Masai asked her, "Mommy, am I coming to your house?" "It is our house," she told him.

"I couldn't believe it," is what Demani thought when she was told reunification would occur.

A celebration - a "big, huge celebration" gaining over 500 likes on Facebook - occurred when Masai came home - and the family was finally together again.

"A feeling I thought I would never experience," is how Demani described that day.

"Demani has shown resiliency in the face of many challenges. She is funny and personable. "Demani's transformation from a rebellious young lady to the mom she is today, is impressive! She is an involved mom who seems to delight in her role as a parent. I am really proud of her," Julie added.

Demani's case with DCF is officially closed. For the first time in almost 8 years, she is free from DCF involvement either as a child or parent.

What would she say to others involved with the Department?

"Despite what is going on right now, don't give up," she stated. "Put yourself in DCF's shoes. How would you like to be approached? Change your approach to them and you will receive results."

At one point, Demani was resentful of the Agency's involvement. "I made the decisions that I made. Swallow your pride," she would tell others.

"All the days will get better."



## DCF's New Pupil Services Specialists Supporting Incarcerated Youth on Their Way to a 'Second Chance' Through Education



Ask most people what the Department of Children and Families (DCF) does, and you will likely get a response centered on child welfare, well-being, and protective services. Yet, you might be surprised to learn that DCF also has extensive experience in the oversight of education in various settings. For instance, Unified School District #2, under the DCF umbrella, is involved with planning that emphasizes preventative practices and behavioral health services available through schools.

More recently, through the mechanism of its Juvenile Justice Educational Unit (JJEU), DCF deployed a team of 14 Pupil Services Specialists (PSS) who support better educational and life outcomes for high school aged youth in detention or living in one of the state's 15 juvenile justice facilities. For this population, the path to a second chance begins behind bars and, with the guidance of their PSS, a return to their community and classroom and in pursuit of higher education or a profession that is right for them.

Established by state law in 2021, the JJEU officially launched one year ago and, in that short time, has already made a difference in the lives of numerous young people. Headed by Educational Administrator for Juvenile Justice Services Dr. Glen Worthy, the members of the team come to the job with extensive backgrounds in education and juvenile justice and diversion.

Dr. Worthy himself brought three decades of experience as an educator, including as principal of James Hillhouse High School where some of his students had been or were placed into justice facilities. He knew that with a good support system, including adults invested in their success, this population of "over age and under accredited" students could change their mindset and gain confidence in their abilities to overcome the odds - and they did.



Post-detention, the unit provides reentry supports that connect the returning student and their family to the receiving school district and/ or outplacement programs. This includes reentry meetings which are restorative in nature and ensure the student has a positive reintroduction to their school.

Like the tact Dr. Worthy employed at Hillhouse, a student's assigned PSS will identify the youth's support "village" within that learning community, so they have the best opportunity to succeed.

"Success is everyone's responsibility," said Dr. Worthy.





*Top: Sheelagh Kelly (left) Jailene Derisse (middle), Adriano Calabrese (right)  
Bottom: Alana Sejdic (left), Cynthia Middleton (middle), Beatrice Alicea (right)  
Not pictured: Jessica Pizzoferrato and Chelsea Powell*

PSS Adriano Calabrese, who comes to the job with over 20 years in Juvenile Justice, agrees with that sentiment. Adriano said it takes a true team effort between a PSS, a school district, and others to help the youth return to school and graduate. Along the way, that usually requires managing any logistical loose ends and navigating through bureaucratic "red tape".

"This unit supports students in Juvenile Justice facilities to help their educational transition once they return to their communities. We do that by working collaboratively with educators and service providers to best serve the student and make sure that transition is successful," he said.

The youth served by the PSS team are generally a transient population, so it is not uncommon for the day-to-day of a PSS includes finding missing credits when transcripts are not updated for one reason or another. Using a timeline, the PSS fills in the missing pieces to make sure they get the credits.

In the process of changing school districts, this may seem like a minor step for a student who has had a lifelong support network. However, for a youth who has spent time in a detention facility, having an adult who knows how to chase down credits can make all the difference when it comes to graduating sooner and not repeating steps.

"Students don't always know to say that they completed these credits. This is work that they accomplished and should get credit for it," said Alana Sejdic, a PSS assigned to Manson Youth Institution.



Alana explained the job as such: "I came to the position as a special education teacher but many of the people on the team have backgrounds as school social workers. I meet with the students while they're in Manson attending school in one way or another and do an intake process, build rapport and figure out the goals they want to pursue when they get released."

Although most of the youth are attending school in one way or another, some are hesitant to return to a traditional educational setting, discouraged by the position they find themselves when incarcerated. Alana said she encourages them and tries to convince them to continue their education. She recalls one youth playfully getting annoyed with her for her persistence in trying to convince him to return to the classroom.

"But I kept going back anyway," Alana chuckles. "Eventually we got him enrolled back in school, so I was glad that I stuck with it."

Fellow PSS Sheelagh Kelly has had similar experiences, but she has noticed that parents, youth, and school districts appreciate that the assigned PSS comes to the table as an advocate for the student. Sheelagh said it is not uncommon for it to take some time for the youth to warm up to their PSS but, once released, she said her students are the ones calling her every day - even the youth who were initially tentative about her involvement.



"Once they get to know you and you build that rapport. Once they see you're on their team advocating for their future, and not just education, they come around and say 'wow, this person's here for me'," Sheelagh stated.

She remembers one youth in particular who had returned to their community only to be placed in an alternative setting. The student, however, really wanted to get the full high school experience.

Working with the family and school district, Sheelagh helped get the student re-enrolled. The student is now on their way to fulfilling their dream of attending prom and walking across the graduation stage by the end of the year.

Asked if she thinks the PSS team is making a difference Sheelagh said, "There's an ombudsman that interviewed the students [at Hartford Juvenile Detention Center] about what services are working or what they find valuable - they mentioned their work with the PSS and my name specifically."

"Sometimes it's hard because you ask, 'am I really making a difference?' That stuck out for me because not only do I see the value in them, but they see the value in me too."

In addition to helping the youth earn a diploma, the members of the PSS unit do everything from providing a shoulder to lean on to connecting them to vocational pathways and finding other options to get them back on track.

Like any social services professional with a deep passion for the work, the PSS team go above and beyond to "show up" for their clients when they are in crisis. Simon, a 19-year-old youth from the New Haven area, described his PSS Alana Sejdic as "just a great human being" who has been extremely helpful in all aspects of his life.



Simon met Alana while incarcerated in one of the state's juvenile justice facilities. Due to pending charges against him, he was not allowed return to his former high school. That did not stop Alana and Simon from strategizing on the next steps for Simon's future.

"When I was in there, she helped me sign up for Job Corps and get class credit. Since I've been home, she's helped me find a job and look at trade schools before enrolling in adult education. She helped me get clothes for my little brother and my friends."

The PSS team said typical young people they come into contact with are just not used to experiencing success with adults in similar roles whether in a facility or in a classroom. Simon was asked the difference between his interactions with Alana and the other adults he has come into contact within the juvenile justice system.

Without hesitation he said, "I feel like I can go to Alana for anything."

"Alana is more focused on my future. She wasn't focused on the now but was like 'what are we going to do moving forward?'"

Terri Palmer, mother of teenager Adam, described seeing her son come out of his shell during his work with PSS Adriano.

"Adam was stand offish at first. He said, 'I don't want to talk to these people.' But he ended up getting it together."



While Adam "doesn't really show emotion", he spent his first Mother's Day away from Terri which she said caused him to break down in tears. By the time Adriano connected with Adam, Terri said her son had matured a lot and was more acceptant to the help.

"Actually, the more Adam got into trouble the better the communication we had. Missing all these life events [during his incarceration] - he lost his grandmother, he lost my father recently, missing holidays - he couldn't be there for that, and it was an eye opener for him."

Asked if she thought Adriano's involvement with Adam helped his process of transitioning back to school and his community and to start thinking about his future, Terri said, "Yes it did."

Terri is just really glad her son is taking advantage of the services that are in place for him.

"It helped him to be more expressive. He's opened his mind to pursuing higher education after high school and even taking college prep courses, essays, interviews, all of that."

The goal of establishing the PSS unit was to help students transition back to school, back to their community and, ultimately, back to some sense of normalcy with a chance to thrive. If performance is the only valid test of a program's effectiveness, then the support provided, the bonds built, and the progress made between the PSSs and their students over the past year are tangible proof of its success.



The 2024 Legislative session is open! We are grateful for the collaboration with the members of the Connecticut General Assembly and especially the Children's Committee for their support of the Department of Children and Families.

The Department has two bills that we have proposed this year. The following is an explanation and overview:

***SB 127 - An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Department of Children and Families Relating to Background Checks, Certain Subsidies, Urgent Crisis Centers, Departmental Records and Special Police Officers.***

Section 1 updates language in the statutes concerning kin foster licensing and required background checks. This bill already permits DCF to place a child with a relative or fictive kin on an emergency basis when the child's primary caregiver is suddenly unavailable. The Administration of Children and Families passed a new rule this fall that allows kin placements to receive Title IV-E reimbursement from the federal government from the moment of placement with kin, rather than when the kin are licensed **as long as language is embedded in state statute.**

The bill also streamlines the FBI fingerprinting process for family members and fictive kin who have a child placed with them. The proposed change will clarify that such relatives or fictive kin will only have to be fingerprinted once while being licensed by the Department.

The bill would also require only household residents 18 years of age and older to submit to the background check, rather than those who are 16 years of age and older as under current law. This reflects best practice nationally.



Section 2 amends the law to allow for the adoption subsidy for a child, that was in the care and custody of DCF prior to adoption, to "follow" the child when an adoptive parent dies or is unable to care for the child due to incapacitation or serious illness. The subsidy would follow the child to a successor guardian appointed by a court of competent jurisdiction, ensuring that the child will continue to receive support and reducing the risk of a return to DCF custody.



Sections 3 and 4 redefine "urgent crisis center" in two insurance statutes that prevent surprise billing for families receiving services at the facilities. The UCCs are currently defined as being licensed by DCF. However, one provider operates their urgent crisis center through their emergency department under its Department of Public Health (DPH) hospital license. Under the new language in the bill, these centers may be licensed by state agencies other than DCF but will still operate under DCF oversight. In order to qualify for Medicaid payments, an urgent crisis center must be certified by DCF.

Section 5 amends our confidentiality statutes to allow the Department of Public Health (DPH), who now licenses the Albert J. Solnit Children's Center, access to records necessary to carry out its regulatory responsibilities.



Section 6 amends DCF's Juvenile Justice Educational Unit statute to explicitly state that for those children in detention or incarcerated, DCF is a state educational authority under the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and as such has access to educational records for the children in detention or incarcerated.

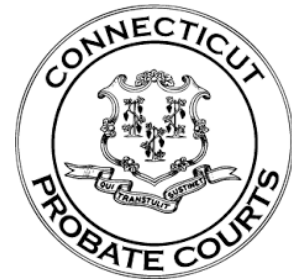


Sections 7 and 8 will provide statutory authority for DCF to employ our existing police officers. These police officers perform critical functions for DCF, including conducting background checks, focus on threat assessments, physical plant safety analysis and liaison with local and state police. The bill enables the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection Commissioner (DESPP) to appoint officers to DCF to perform these vital duties for the agency.

Lastly, section 9 updates one of our implementation statutes concerning our service array for children with behavioral health needs. It replaces terms such as "emotionally disturbed" or "substance abusers" with contemporary terminology used in statutes. It also contains grammatical fixes.

**SB 125 - An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Department of Children and Families Relative to Identified Adoptions and Revisions to Certain Terminology.**

DCF partnered with the Probate Court Administration and private adoption agencies to develop sections 1 through 6 of this bill. It updates the language in the identified adoption statutes to conform with the CT Parentage Act and revises the probate statutes regarding payments by prospective adoptive parents to birth parents.



The remainder of the bill concerns the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) which requires states to implement a notification process to DCF when a baby is born who has been prenatally exposed to substances. This bill makes changes to the corresponding state statute by replacing references to "plans of safe care" with "family care plans." It also amends the language of the statute to involve all parents in the family care plans and be consistent with the CT Parentage Act by making the language gender neutral.