

Culture Meets Strategy: Establishing a Culture of Inclusivity for Dads

Worker Receives the "Clark Kent Positive Impact Award" from Incarcerated Father



Fathers bring unique perspectives and strengths to parenting that significantly contribute to their children's development.

Research consistently shows that children with involved fathers exhibit better academic performance, improved social skills, and lower incidences of behavioral problems.

Having a caring father in a child's life reduces the likelihood of future interventions or involvement with the Child Welfare system and leads to a range of better outcomes for the whole family.

When it comes to the field of Child Welfare and well-being, fostering a culture of inclusivity for fathers, raising awareness about the importance of their engagement, and recognizing the mutual benefits of maintaining father-child relationships are critical steps towards building strong, thriving families and communities. For those reasons, CT DCF, in all aspects of its work, champions the role of fathers as equal and capable caregivers by involving them in case-planning and including them in the decision-making process.

Lisa Zuccaro, CT DCF's Manchester Office Director, explained how fatherhood engagement is approached at the Regional Office level. "Our fatherhood work has really evolved over time. We have conversations, trainings, and get staff to talk about their values around fatherhood," she said.



"At this point, it's more of an expectation, it's part of the work. It's not 'did you engage the father?', it's more 'where's the father, what's his point of view?'. Fathers are just as much a part of a child's life and the team as the mom is. It's just the expectation because fathers need to be in their child's life."

While recent years have seen a shift towards recognizing the importance of fathers and the benefits of engaging them in the child welfare process, that was not always the case. In the past, many Child Welfare jurisdictions, including Connecticut, tended to treat mothers as the primary point of contact, the gatekeepers or the "first call" so to speak, resulting in a lack of engagement with fathers.

This was even true when a father was involved in his child's life or could potentially offer significant support.

Anthony Gay, CT DCF's Director of Fatherhood Services, said, "Over the last several years, we've really focused on working with our staff to ensure they include both parents - especially when the parents aren't together. Now, when a case comes to our attention, caseworkers are expected to bring fathers into all of our cases."

Gay said the Department gets better outcomes when there is full family engagement and mom, and dad, can put aside their issues in the best interests of their child.

"When fathers are actively involved in the case practice, we have higher rates of reunification, higher rates of permanency and lower rates of repeat neglect and maltreatment. All the factors that would bring a child to DCF's attention tend to reduce when dad is actively involved."

While a cultural shift had been happening within CT DCF, it was a prior Children and Family Service Review (CFSR) report, issued around 2021, that Gay said put into motion a strategic action plan to ensure all staff are making concerted efforts to engage fathers and paternal families moving forward.

That is because the federal audit assessed how effectively state Child Welfare jurisdictions were providing quality services to children and families. Not unique to Connecticut, the report made a specific recommendation to enhance the engagement of fathers within the state's Child Welfare system.

Core to ensuring that fatherhood is integrated into all aspects of case practice, are the department's Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Teams (FELT) which were established in each area office. At the local level, FELTs are tasked with identifying and alleviating barriers to engaging and including fathers in decision-making and care.

CT DCF also created an Office of Fatherhood Services to serve as the central hub for coordinating and guiding all fatherhood-related initiatives. Under Gay's leadership, the office provides guidance, resources, and support to the FELTs to ensure the Department's broader goals around fatherhood engagement are aligned and supported across all levels of the organization.

Moreover, CT DCF developed policies that explicitly included fathers in all aspects of case planning and decision-making. This meant ensuring that fathers were invited to meetings, given the opportunity to voice their opinions, and involved in setting goals for their children.

Taken together, these actions fostered a culture of inclusivity for DCF-connected fathers that is not only enhancing father-child relationships but leading to more effective family support policy



*A beach day for DCF Director of Fatherhood Services **Anthony Gay** and his family.*

and practice. This cultural shift required a fundamental merger of approach, strategy and perspective that has taken hold in the Department's Regional Offices.

Fatherhood Engagement in Practice

Jeff Gold, Program Supervisor in CT DCF's Manchester Office, described what the focus on fatherhood engagement looks like at the grassroots level for staff who interact daily with fathers and their families.

Bringing the perspective of both a father and a social worker, Gold provides managerial oversight of Region 4's FELT. Gold says being a dad himself informs a lot of his work and motivated him to focus on the unique strengths and contributions of fathers.

He said, at the time when he was promoted to that role, "We didn't really have an active FELT. Having two managers in the region who are both dads and both training managers, we set a culture where we really place a high value on and emphasis on fatherhood engagement."

Gold said in his years with the Department he has seen the culture evolve while doing his part to spur on the work. He credited having the steadfast backing of area and regional leadership to help make that happen.



Birthday Gift on Father's Day:

*While previously unaware he was a father; **John James** became a "partner" to his DCF workers for over a year to gain custody of his daughter. The unification happened just days before Father's Day 2024 the same day as John's birthday.*

"With the support of our office and regional directors, we began to really prioritize engaging fathers in case practice. Fatherhood engagement is embedded into all aspects of our work as well as our [office] culture. We make sure it's embedded into orienting our new staff, trainings that we facilitate, and supervision."

He said efforts have been data-driven and interwoven, recognizing historical challenges around being inclusive of fathers, particularly men of color.

"We have been deliberate. We have in both our regional and area offices FELT and racial justice strategies in place where we monitor and assess the data. These are interwoven because we're aware, historically, that the department struggled not only with engaging fathers but engaging men of color."

Beyond the immediate case handling, CT DCF actively involves fathers in ways it had not done before to

reinforce the message that fathers will always have a seat at the table. CT DCF seeks direct feedback from fathers as men informed by their own lived expertise. That means providing a

platform, whether on an advisory panel or in a more informal setting, to share their challenges and successes as well as feedback that the department uses to hold itself accountable.

During a recent listening forum, Gay met with a group of fathers following their graduation from one of the department's Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES) programs. He had done twenty or so listening forums over the years, but this one was special. While Gay admits there is still much to be done, hearing directly from the men about the support and inclusivity they felt throughout the process demonstrated how far the Department's fatherhood work has come.

"There were some phenomenal stories from these dads about the work these FES programs have done for them, their DCF workers and how they viewed the agency in a more positive light - it was amazing."

The Clark Kent Positive Impact Award

Despite the concerted efforts to address challenges fathers face such as stigma, bias and limited access to information, there is one group of fathers especially who encounter significant barriers within the Child Welfare system - those fathers who are incarcerated. According to Gay, there is a large number of incarcerated fathers not being engaged.

In order to identify and remedy that situation, the Office of Fatherhood Services has begun tracking data on every father who has been arrested since December 2023 (and whose families are involved with DCF) to assess the level of engagement they are receiving. The data will tell the Department if his DCF worker has contacted him, if he has been released and if his worker has contacted him since his release.

Despite being incarcerated, Gay expects these fathers to get the same level of engagement as any other father. Even though a father may be incarcerated, maintaining a strong, positive relationship with their child can still have significant benefits for both the child and the father regardless of his circumstances.

"Often times there's a lack of communication between a child and father who is incarcerated. Once we get past the point of reconnecting them and the father shows consistency then we've seen those children do better emotionally, in school, self-esteem rises, sense of self increases. Pretty much in every domain the child does better when there's positive interactions between that incarcerated father and his child," Gay said.

The story of one child, "Emily," illustrates Gay's point of the profound benefits of maintaining ongoing contact with her father, "Mike," even though he is incarcerated. Emily was in the care and custody of the department and her DCF worker Jasmine Hawes was determined in her



*CT bio dad and foster dad **Israel Reyes** pictured with DCF Dep. Commissioner **Michael Williams** moments before Israel threw out the first pitch at a Hartford Yard Goats game.*

efforts to help the daughter establish and maintain a relationship with her dad despite the physical separation. It started with regular phone calls then in-person visits.

Hawes said Emily was able to see a picture of her father for the first time, at the age of 11, while she was in care. Despite her mixed emotions, she has been able to bond with him over shared hobbies and realize that she is a lot like her dad in ways that she never knew.

Hawes said, "The reality is everyone has their own biases and sometimes it causes us to be a little more passive in the work we do with fathers."

But as a social worker, Hawes said she took the time to make sure fathers felt heard and seen. She said sometimes it just takes patience and persistence.

"Sometimes it may feel like the odds are stacked against them because of the choices they've made. All it takes is one person to have empathy and believe they can be successful."



Mike was, in fact, able to build a deeper connection with his child. Although this father was not able to be there physically, his goal was to allow his child to know that he was there for her emotionally.

Hawes said Mike was consistent and that regular communication through letters, phone calls, and supervised visits eventually allowed Emily to feel more deeply connected to her father.

Carmen Karecki, Social Work Supervisor in the Manchester office, remembers watching that relationship evolve and grow over time because of that consistency. It was not easy at first. "Some of the calls initially were for 20 minutes filled with silence and 'how are you?', 'fine how are you?'"

"But it was very emotional as the worker, as the supervisor and as the department got to see over time, even if the child was not going to live with father, what a great opportunity for her to feel wanted and loved," Karecki said.

"To have a father who, even from a distance, made some effort to be present in her life. Being able to grow up with the presence of her father even though she was in the care and custody of the department. That was very powerful."

For Mike, these interactions have been equally transformative. Feeling like an active participant in her upbringing has strengthened their relationship and, in doing so, has given Mike a constructive focus and reinforced his commitment to positive change. So much so that Mike penned a letter in appreciation to Hawes naming her the recipient of the "Clark Kent Positive Impact Award".

Subject: Clark Kent
Mood: Thankful and Blessed
Color: Red and Blue
Song: Li'l Mo feat Fabulous-SuperWoman

Ms. Jasmine Hawes,

3-24-24

~~What up? How is everything going? I hope all is well, if not, I hope my words brightens your
ay. Especially since you spend so much of your time doing that for everyone else. That's why my subject is titled
Clark Kent. You really be out here saving the world and changing lives. This is the best thing I can do for you work~~

*An excerpt from Mike's letter to his DCF
social worker Jasmine Hawes. Clark
Kent is Superman's alter-ego and Mike
wanted to "award" Jasmine for being out
there "saving the world."*

Referring to the connection he now has with his daughter, thanks to Hawes' persistence, Mike wrote, "I can only imagine how many lives you have had a positive impact on. I just want to say thank you from all of us! Now...without further ado I would like to present to you...The Clark Kent Positive Impact Award! Dun-Da-Da-Dooohhh!"

In regard to Mike and Emily's case, Camilla St. Andrew, Program Supervisor, said, "This is the work that you want to see happen. This is the work that should be happening and does happen. This child did not have a relationship with her father for multiple, multiple years. It wasn't until our department became involved that we really took on the role of bridging that relationship between the father and his daughter."

Hawes said, "The contact with his child gave him hope, motivation, and peace knowing that she was safe. It was very clear that the contact with his child helped him rehabilitate as he asked a lot of questions, he engaged in substance misuse and parenting classes in his facility and made a plan for his discharge."

What Hawes is referring to is "Recovery Capital" which are the resources and strengths that individuals and communities can draw upon to support and sustain recovery from addiction or other major life challenges. It's a concept used in addiction recovery and related fields to describe the various forms of capital that contribute to a person's ability to maintain recovery and lead a fulfilling life.

"Being able to be emotionally connected with his daughter, it's an incentive for him to do well and come out of prison and be his best self," Karecki said.

"I feel very confident in myself to do what needs to be done as a man and as her father. I have so many things in my favor, and I know what's at stake," Mike said in his letter.

He continued, "[Emily] is first before everything...I'm obligated to her. There is no room for error. We have both lost so much already. I don't want to fathom the thought of letting her down or what that might do to her. I love her so much."

While Hawes has moved on to another professional opportunity, she did have some advice for her DCF colleagues and others in the Child Welfare field. Hawes said fatherhood engagement can be difficult. Not only is it giving a father a second or sometimes a third chance, but you are helping that child develop their sense of identity, self-esteem, and sense of security.



"I believe the work I've done with fatherhood engagement is on an individual level. I've empowered many of my fathers to use their voice and learn how to advocate for themselves. Many of them just don't know how or where to begin."

Even when it feels like things are not progressing, she said just know you are making a difference that is greater than what we see on the surface.

"Each of them have their own personal goal as to how they want their relationship to be with their child and I just build from there. Your hard work will pay off."