

A Message from Commissioner Hill-Lilly



March is National Social Work Month with the 2024 theme - "**Empowering Social Workers!**"

We have one of the toughest jobs in state government as fentanyl, mental health issues, violence, and other emerging societal issues impact child safety.

Helping the people who help the people is one of my priorities and in recognition of those employees who have demonstrated outstanding performance, we have commenced the **Employee of the Month** award. Each Division leader will nominate one employee for this award with the winners being acknowledged in our "**Spotlight on What's Right**" newsletter along with receiving a signed certificate. Who was nominated this month..... read on!



**Director of Organizational Development Lenisa Mathew** spoke about the Department's work to support staff and the Employee of the Month award on the **WFSB Great Day at 9a** show this week. Great job Lenisa! Watch her here: [Social Work Month](#)

**International Women's Day** also takes place in March. This year's theme is "**Invest in Women: Accelerate progress.**" Across the globe, women are recognized for their achievements especially those who inspire inclusion throughout their work.



Congratulations to **Social Work Supervisor Jeanette Morrison** who received the **2024 Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award**.

This award is given annually to the DCF employee who demonstrates a strong passion for children and families and works towards the advancement and betterment of those on his or her caseload or within the Black community.



**"A Father's Intuition"** is the story of **Diego** and the day he was finally able to bring his daughter home. Read in this month's "**Spotlight**" why he refers to **Social Worker Kelsey Brewer** as "A great, great, great person," and the messages he has for others involved with DCF.

Did you know our **Legislative Director, Mike Carrone**, used to bench press 495 pounds? In the newsletter, Mike describes for us his journey of being a **former college football player and coach** and how he found his way to DCF. We appreciate Mike's extensive efforts so far during this legislative session!

Thank you to the staff - and especially the youth - at **Mansfield Middle School** for hosting **Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz** as she moderated a discussion on **Social Connections** in schools. Along with **Representatives Boyd and Haddad, Superintendent of Schools Peter Dart, Principal Larry Barlow**, and other leaders, I was honored to speak



and ... meet some fantastic young people! It is clear they have the answers to supporting one another - as long as the adults listen!



Speaking of youth, we are calling on all young artists to join the **Youth Arts Collaborative Mentoring Program** to unlock their creative potential. Likewise, we are encouraging adult artists to volunteer and mentor youth artists! Be a part of a creative community and celebrate the passion of our young people. Please contact **Heather Jones** at [Heather.Jones@ct.gov](mailto:Heather.Jones@ct.gov) to express your interest.

Our Behavioral Health system is evolving. With much gratitude for the collaborative efforts of the leadership of the General Assembly's **Committee on Children**, the **Office of Policy and Management** and our **Contracted Providers**, we are enhancing support for the STAR homes. Why did the name change from **STAR to STTAR** and what else does it signify? Read on.....



During one of the most traumatic and uncertain times in a child's life, our **foster parents** open their homes - and their hearts - to embrace a child in need. Effective 4/1/24, for the March stipend cycle, they will be receiving a **5% increase in the monthly foster care board and care reimbursement**. This is one tangible example of how we can immediately enhance our support.



As part of the **Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) self-assessment**, focus groups are underway with parents and youth who have lived expertise and licensed caregivers. We are grateful for their willingness to share personal experiences, candor, and thoughtful recommendations to **improve the Child Welfare system!** We honor their voice.

We have had a busy month and I look forward to our collective work as we serve Connecticut's children and families!

## "A Father's Intuition"



Diego has a message for other fathers involved with the Department of Children and Families. "She wouldn't be in my life if it wasn't for you guys," is how he feels about the Agency's role in reuniting him with his daughter, Alexis.

"DCF is looked at as a bad thing. You give kids a better chance."

His story may sound all too familiar. Involved in a relationship mired with conflict and stress, Diego's ability to parent Alexis was limited since birth. It was "difficult to fully communicate," Diego stated about his relationship with her mother. "Phone calls turned into arguments."

At times, the exact whereabouts of his baby were unknown.

"The child doesn't have anything to do with the problems," Diego expressed. "As human beings, we would all want the two parents to be a part of her life." Despite his outreach, attempted involvement of maternal relatives and other supports, distance was put between him and his young daughter.

"She was still my child."

The Department has encountered this pattern of mothers being the "gatekeepers" of information to others - and especially the child - about their fathers, his behaviors, and desires to play a part in their life. Some literally control visitation, often to the detriment of the child.

"I stressed out a lot and cried by myself," Diego explained. "I hoped that she would not resent me."

Years passed without Diego being allowed to play a role in Alexis' life. No school events, birthday parties, holiday celebrations or walks to the park.

While Diego had other children, and a job which required skill, hard work and to be available to others to fix a particular issue, he couldn't "fix" the one thing he wanted most - to see and care for Alexis.

While we often talk about a mother's intuition, Diego's story could also be described as a father's intuition.

Last Summer, he was struggling. "She weighed heavy on my heart," Diego stated. He felt something was wrong, enlisted the help of a friend who had legal experience to search for Alexis, and called family and acquaintances.

Nothing.



While no one knew where Alexis was, Diego found comfort in his oldest daughter as well as his boss. He cried, confided in both, and took time off work to handle the stress.

A few weeks later, his intuition proved correct.

Alexis came to the Department's attention. She was in need of supports. Alexis needed to be with her father.

Finding Diego was not easy given the limited information provided to the Agency. The diligent efforts of the DCF team resulted in a phone call to paternal relatives and an e-mail to Diego - Alexis needs you!

"It made me feel terrible," Diego stated when describing the first contact with DCF and the discussion about Alexis and her living environment. He began questioning himself. "Could I have just stuck around more? Helped more?"

Things needed to move fast and with the Department's support, a plan was made to have Alexis live with her father. "We need to have her in your custody," he was told.

Finally.

"I told you something was going on," Diego stated.

That special day Diego saw his little girl again will be one he will never forget. While showing restraint not to upset her, they hugged, talked, and began the car ride to her new home.

Alexis has been living with her father and half siblings for several months. The transition has gone positively while Diego understands the impact all of this has had on Alexis. "I just want her to be happy," he explained. "I realize stability like this is not what she is used to."

Diego also embraces the ongoing role Alexis' mother will play in her life and he has every intention of supporting that relationship.

"I realize she loves her mom," Diego stated and that it will take time to "undo" negative perceptions Alexis may harbor towards him given what she was told at such a young age and even how the Agency was weaponized.

What does this father want most of all for his daughter? "I want her to keep that innocence."

The engagement and relationship between social workers and those they serve is paramount to success. Diego expressed much gratitude to Social Worker Kelsey Brewer for her support. "It was a pleasure to have her guide me. She helped a lot," he explained.

"As long as DCF workers are like her, the parents will feel safe to be able to do what they need and have to do," he added. "She is a great, great, great person."

"I've enjoyed being part of this father's journey and watching him grow and flourish as a single parent to not just Alexis, but his other children as well. Diego showed a great understanding and willingness to learn about his daughter's experiences, how they affect her, and how he can best support her going forward," stated Kelsey. "The bond and support that this family had for one another was amazing to see. I can say confidently that this will forever be one of my best experiences as a social worker."

Diego has keen insights into the multiple systems he was involved with to find and support Alexis. What would he tell other parents, especially fathers, about working with DCF?

"Do what you can if you love your kids," he stated. "You guys are only there to help." Diego acknowledges the power state government wields and how intimidation is a factor when engaging with families. "All worries will go away," if you work with the Department he pointed out.

"Unfortunately, you guys will go away too. You have been a great help."

Congratulations Diego on this incredible story and we all wish you and your family the best!



## From the Gridiron to the Legislative Arena: Meet DCF's New Legislative Program Director



DCF's new Legislative Program Director, Mike Carone, is a sports fanatic. He grew up following the Hartford Whalers, New York Giants and UConn Huskies. Mike rarely misses the chance to catch a Huskies' game in person. His friends will tell you he also has an uncanny ability to rattle off stats, rosters, you name it, for just about any sport.

That love of sports led to a successful scholastic football career that started with Pop Warner, then Newington High School, and eventually Plymouth State University where he started at linebacker and majored in Criminal Justice and minored in Political Science.

While some players have trouble balancing their studies with the demands of a collegiate football program, Mike was a member of both the national Criminal Justice and Political Science honor societies. His senior year, he was also one of the less than one percent of college football players to be recognized by the National Football Foundation's Honor Society.

Mike went on to earn a master's degree in public policy from Trinity College. While at Trinity, he also served as a graduate assistant positions' coach for the school's storied football program. As a coach, Mike bestowed on his players, including a few current and former public sector colleagues, lessons on resilience, humility, and teamwork.



*Mike during his playing days at Plymouth State University.*

Whether in pads or holding a whistle, Mike said those on-field experiences gave him skills that he has applied throughout his life and career. He said football taught him how to be a cog in the wheel working with others towards a common goal - everyone doing their part.

Mike listed some of the skills you would expect an athlete and coach to pick up along the way - hard work, discipline, perseverance, etc. However, in doing so, he cited one skill that stood out - strategy.

How exactly does 'strategy' benefit Mike in his current role?

"Whether as a player or a coach, you're always strategizing, thinking about how to use your strengths to develop a plan and overcome obstacles. The legislative session can be filled with obstacles," said Vin Russo who serves as DCF's Chief of Policy and Government Relations.

In 2012, Mike started his state service at DSS as a Connecticut Careers Trainee and then as an Eligibility Services Worker. Two years later, he became the agency's legislative liaison representing DSS at the Connecticut General Assembly. For five sessions, Mike worked on legislation related to Medicaid/HUSKY Health, SNAP, TANF, Child Support and other DSS administered programs.

Russo, who hired Mike, explains why he thought he was right for this position, "For as many years as I've known him, from his days at DSS, I know Mike to be a capable strategist when it came to the legislative process, the rules and the players."

"The legislative process is an enigma for many people. It's complicated and difficult to get a command of. You can't be taught that. You have to just experience it and I knew Mike had the experience."

For Mike, above sports comes *family*. And dedication to public service runs in the Carone family. His cousin James, a 17-year DCF employee, is currently a supervisor in the Willimantic office. Mike's mom Ann recently retired from CT DSS after four decades of state service.

In his role as DCF's legislative Director, Mike brings not only his professional expertise, but a humility, compassion and collaborative approach deeply influenced by and reflective of his mother's teachings. Mike's longtime friend and fellow state employee, Kevin Bronson, spoke about that legacy and Ann's continued impact on his life.

"Mike brings a solid foundation to this role - it's a foundation that was built on maternal wisdom. On the football field, as in life, Mike was taught by his mother to lead with quiet strength and to always acknowledge the collective effort over individual acclaim," said Bronson.

"You can even see Ann's guidance in Mike's pursuits at Trinity as he balanced graduate-level academics with coaching, imparting his mother's teachings to the next generation of athletes."

Family is also the reason Mike returned to Connecticut in 2023 after spending five years in Washington, DC lobbying for a national trade association. He wanted to be close to home, able to care for his mother and spend time with his already large, and still growing, extended family (he is an uncle to two young nephews with more on the way!). In fact, Mike's friends joke that you cannot go anywhere in the state without running into a Carone cousin.



*Mike and his mother Ann at the wedding of his sister Marrison and brother-in-law Gerard.*

Because Mike and his extended family seem to know just about everyone everywhere, his friends have affectionately nicknamed him 'Mayor Mike.' A befitting moniker since a key aspect of this position is one's ability to maintain and develop interpersonal relationships. And Mike has those longstanding personal and professional relationships at the state Capitol where he conducts his day-to-day work.

Mike said of his passion for public service, "What it comes down to is that I like helping people and being part of positive change in the lives of others. That's why I really value the work we're doing at DCF. While I'm still learning, the support I've received thus far from colleagues has allowed me to jump feet first into the work."

And those football skills? "Anybody who has worked at a state agency knows that it's a group effort. Your unit, your bureau, your agency, that's your team and your colleagues are your teammates through thick and thin. I can feel that collective culture here at DCF. We're all part of something bigger than ourselves as individuals."



***March Employee of the Month Awards!***

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

Barbara Crouch	Fiscal Services
John Callas	Office of Community Relations
Luz Lozano	Transitional Supports and Success
Jennifer Rondini	Academy for Workforce Development
Elizabeth Marek	Education/Unified School District #2
Tara Lewis	Child Welfare/Careline
Mike Carone	Government Relations and Policy
Maureen Hunter	Office of Legal Affairs
Sheelagh Kelly	Juvenile Justice Education Unit
Carissa Lebrun	Administrative Case Review
Nicole McKelvey-Walsh	Clinical and Community Consultation
Melody Davis	Health and Wellness Division
Alison Karimi	Behavioral Health

## The STTAR Enhancement Plan



Department of Children and Families-contracted Short Term Assessment and Respite (STAR) homes are a critical part of the larger children's behavioral health system. Recently, the homes have experienced significant challenges in trying to meet the needs of youth in their care because the complex needs of some youth exceed what STAR programs were originally intended and equipped to address.

Collaboration between DCF and its providers, the Office of the Governor, the Office of Policy and Management, and the leadership of the General Assembly's Committee on Children has resulted in a comprehensive plan for addressing the vulnerabilities around how STAR responds to the complex needs of youth in that

level of care.

Now, the Specialized Trauma-Informed Treatment Assessment and Reunification (STTAR) Enhancement Plan significantly improves how youth are served in STTAR home level of care. It will also provide additional treatment options for youth who continue to require care outside their home that STAR homes cannot adequately provide.



The plan costs approximately \$6.2 million and implementation can be achieved within existing DCF resources. The components of the plan include:

- Enhanced Staffing/Supervision/Staff Training and Development
- Reducing Census of Homes
- Enhanced Therapeutic Recreational Programming
- Development of Two Intensive Transitional Treatment Centers
- Timely Access to PRTF for Youth in Crisis



"This plan enables more resources to be dedicated toward providing services that help youths in need and support their behavioral health and development. I am very appreciative of the staff at the Department of Children and Families and those who work with all of our community providers, whose valuable work supports critical care for the youngest members of our communities," **said Governor Ned Lamont.**

"As Connecticut's lead children's behavioral health agency, we are constantly evolving our work to best serve the complex needs of the youth in our care. To that point, we are grateful for the collaboration of the Governor, OPM and the leadership of the Committee on Children and, of course, our providers. It was that true team effort that led us to the new, comprehensive plan- we're announcing today - STTAR Enhanced," **said Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly.**

"The plan to address and rectify the identified issues in the STAR (Short Term, Assessment, Respite) home network will benefit our most vulnerable youth by refocusing on STTAR (Specialized Trauma-informed Treatment, Assessment, and Reunification). I'm grateful to the Department of Children and Families for addressing this significant issue by increasing staffing levels, reducing home census, and providing for an increased therapeutic environment. In a cost-effective and thoughtful manner, these



steps will provide more resources and aid to children in crisis. That support is critical for the success of their growth and development. I'm encouraged by these significant changes," **said Senator Ceci Maher, Co-Chair of the Committee on Children.**

"We are extremely proud to have worked collaboratively with the Department of Children and Families, the Office of the Child Advocate, and others to reimagine a service model that meets the highly specialized needs of this small subset of children. These reforms can go into effect immediately - without the need for legislative action - providing our children the critical care they urgently need. Thank you to DCF, OCA, and the Office of Policy and Management for working with us for the benefit of our children," **said Representative Liz Linehan, Co-Chair of the Committee on Children.**

#### ***Enhanced Staffing/Supervision/Staff Training and Development***

Each program will be enhancing their staffing models and ensuring that there is a supervisory position to provide greater supervision of both staff and youth in the home, particularly during 'second shift' hours enabling clinical staff to more efficiently deliver therapeutic services.

In collaboration with the DCF Academy for Workforce Development, specifically the Provider Training Academy, external provider staff will have access to an increased array of training resources and course offerings.

#### ***Reducing Census of Homes***

Census in each home will be reduced from 6 to 5, creating a more favorable staff-to-youth ratio that allows for additional intensive focus on the youth in care.

#### ***Enhanced Therapeutic Recreational Programming***

Each program will be provided resources to enhance program recreational activities available to youth. Youth will have less idle time and more opportunities to channel their energy into positive activities creating a sense of normalcy that helps heal and prepare them for transition into a more permanent setting and overall development into thriving, productive adults.

#### ***Development of Two Intensive Transitional Treatment Centers***

Priority access to the Intensive Transitional Treatment Centers (ITTC), one facility for boys (8 beds) and one facility for girls (8 beds), will be given to those youth in need of intensive treatment supports and disrupting from (or too acute for) STTAR programs.

Youth who stabilize in these ITTC programs who cannot be provided a home setting in a timely manner will be referred to Therapeutic Group Home (TGH) level of care. Youth who continue to be acute and/or whose needs exceed the ability of what the ITTC can provide will be referred to psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF) level of care.

#### ***Timely Access to PRTF for Youth in Crisis***

When necessary, youth whose acuity and needs exceed STAR program parameters will transition in an expedited manner to higher levels of care and support. Priority access to 3 beds will be maintained at both Solnit South and Solnit North for these youth. This will allow referrals to the program to be processed in an expedited manner.