

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."