

A Message from Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly



We have had a busy month with much to celebrate and acknowledge! May is **Foster Care Appreciation Month** with the theme of "**Engaging Youth. Building Supports. Strengthening Opportunities.**" As children remaining safely at home is our primary goal, we recognize the valuable role our foster parents play in supporting children and their families to achieve permanency.

"CT Fosters" is the brand of the **Foster Care Division** signifying that we bring resources together – and like all great community leaders - we find, organize, empower, and prepare resources that are already out there to unify families.

Thank you to the **Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF)** for another successful annual conference! It was so great to meet our **AMAZING** foster and adoptive parents!

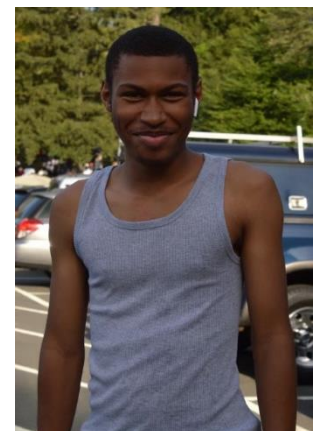
A must read in this month's "**Spotlight**" is the story of **TJ Mikalski** and his family's journey to adopt and foster adolescents! "**You never stop thinking about wanting to belong to a family,**" he stated. TJ is also a community partner with **The Village for Families and Children**. Watch **WFSB's "Great Day@9a"** show as TJ discusses the critical needs of teenagers, dispels some myths about them identifies the positive outcomes when a teen is placed into the right family at the right time. See the clip here: [WFSB](#)



"They give us life," is the story of how **Jim Strein and Terry Brettman** became foster parents and the impact the children they have cared for had on their lives. Who would have thought of becoming foster parents while retired? They did! Read more in this month's newsletter as to why they are described as **"fierce advocates."**

All of us balance the demands of daily life in an ever evolving and complex world. May is also **Mental Health Awareness Month** with this year's theme "**Where to Start: Mental Health in a Changing World.**" Seeking support is a sign of strength and all of us should be empowered to reach out for assistance as needed.

In this month's "**Spotlight,**" hear from **Neil**, now a young adult leader, and a new member of the **Statewide Advisory Council (SAC)**. Neil uses his experiences in the behavioral health system to advocate for and empower young people as he continues to **lift the negative stigma** associated with seeking support.



Deer Oaks is the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for Connecticut State Employees. They offer an array of supports for not just employees - but for the entire family. Deer Oaks EAP Services can be contacted at **1-888-993-7650** or Email: eap@deeroaks.com and their website is: www.deeroakseap.com

CT DCF values diversity as we also celebrate **Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Month**. "**Advancing Leaders Through Innovation**," is this year's theme which honors the visionaries and trailblazers who have shaped history and continue to influence our collective future through innovation, resilience, and a pioneering spirit.

Happy Mother's Day to our Mothers, Mother figures and all those who play a Maternal role in the life of a child. You are part of the "Village" to ensure our children are successful, thrive and have the best opportunities in life!

Speaking of mothers who are also DCF employees, **Maritza Acosta** and **Jackie Ford** received awards this past month.

Maritza was honored by the **Connecticut Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (CALAS)** with the **Outstanding Community Advocate Award!**



The "**Shero**" award was given to **Jackie Ford** for her continued advocacy and dedication to the children and families across Connecticut via her work at The **Olive Branch Shop**. She also received a generous donation for this work from **the Connecticut State Association of Emblem Clubs**.

Congratulations once again to the **April Employees of the month** who came to Central Office and received their signed certificates! A job well done!

DCF staff represented our Agency across Connecticut this month!

Behavioral Health Program Director Christa Rider appeared on **WTIC 1080 AM** radio with Brian Shactman to discuss child sex trafficking.



Kris Robles, Ines Eaton and Alison Karimi from the **Clinical and Community Consultation and Support Division** discussed supports for Connecticut's families at the **National Prevention Week** event at the Connecticut Science Center.



Chief of External Affairs Ken Mysogland provided opening remarks at the **Children's Community Programs** Therapeutic Foster Care banquet featuring **Alec Ingold**, starting fullback for **the Miami Dolphins** as the keynote speaker.

Our **CT-KIND system** was recently highlighted in **StateTech** which is a national trade journal focused on technology in state government: [State and Local Agencies Improve Child Services Intake and Outreach Communications | StateTech Magazine](#)



Congratulations to all of our youth and employees who graduated! I was honored to provide the keynote address at the **University of Connecticut School of Social Work Commencement Ceremony!**

Chief Administrator of Governmental Affairs and Policy Vinny Russo and **Legislative Program Director Mike Carone**, can finally get some sleep as the 2024 legislative session ended! Watch for a write-up of new legislation impacting DCF.

Thank you once again for all you do for Connecticut's children and families!

"You never stop thinking about wanting to belong to a family."



Colleagues at DCF partner-provider The Village for Families and Children (The Village) say their associate Vice President of Permanency, Thomas "TJ" Michalski, is the real deal - he "walks the walk" so to speak. Not only in his day-to-day work of placing the children they serve in safe, stable and permanent homes, but also in his personal life. That is because, in addition to doing this work for over three decades, TJ is father to an adopted son and three biological children as well as being a current and former foster parent.

Join Them Where They're At

TJ's specialty? Over the years, he has learned to build rapport with youth he works with and fosters by opening up a line of real communication and allowing them the grace to try, fail and succeed.

"I find that as a foster parent, if we show interest in them and join them where there at, and what their interests and talents are, then they're more apt to listen to us, our guidance, things that we're teaching them, TJ stated.

That is something TJ affords all of his children because regardless of age children need to know they have a safety net - a supportive adult or adults in their life - to branch out and find themselves.

"With my kids, they always knew they had a safety net. Our kids can't try things if they don't feel like they have a safety net."



Every age has its own challenges, however, older children are able to communicate their needs much better than a younger child. TJ said good communication between a foster parent and teenaged foster child can lead to the development of a unique relationship that cannot always be achieved with a younger child. In turn, that stronger bond makes it much easier to help the youth with their transition to adulthood.

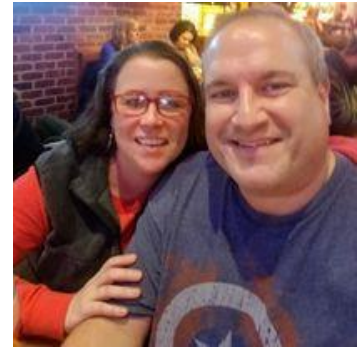
Teenagers In Need of Safe, Loving Homes

TJ said the need for safe, loving foster homes for youth has always been great but most especially for youth ages 13-17.

Why are older children - adolescents aged 13 to 17 - often overlooked in the permanency placement process? It could be that many prospective foster and adoptive parents opt for

placements of younger children because of the preconceived notions of the "baggage" teenage years may bring to a home. TJ said, at any given moment, The Village has 15-20 kids in need of families and they are typically teenagers.

The data backs that up. Of the nearly 2,300 Connecticut adoptions that have taken place since 2019, slightly less than 250 have been adoptions of teenagers aged 13-17. That is true nationwide. According to the U.S. Children's Bureau, more than one in five children waiting for adoption are aged 13-17.



"Teenage years scare people but for me, when I look back at my teenage years and those of my children, they're also some very wonderful years. Participating in sports and after school activities, teaching them life skills, and just how to function is rewarding in itself and it's fun to do." TJ added.

One major difference between fostering teens versus toddlers or infants is that foster parents do not have to pull all-nighters or change diapers. It is a whole different stage of parenting that is instrumental as teens are maturing into young adults.



Through foster care and adoption, national and state child wellbeing jurisdictions have focused their efforts on stability and permanency for teens before they "age out" of care and custody.

In this photo, TJ shares that call to action in an interview with WFSB.

"There's lots of reasons behind [children being placed into the care and custody of DCF]. But the one thing all kids need is a family to take them in and understand them. And not get overreactive to behaviors or things that go up because that's true for every one of kids - certainly every one of my kids - and helping them through those challenges," he stated.

What would TJ say to prospective foster parents about why they should open their minds and homes to teens? TJ uses the example of his own teenaged foster child.

"If I was able to open minds then I'd be a lot more successful," TJ jokes. "But what I would say is that foster care brings with it so many opportunities. We currently have a foster child who's a teenager- he's seventeen. He has so many talents and interests. He's really into photography and so great at it. He's really

musical and taught himself piano and cello."

Perhaps a child who was placed in foster care because of substance misuse or intimate partner violence may mirror some of those behaviors. However, TJ and other adoptive and foster parents interviewed on this in the past have said that, with love, understanding and no judgments, they found the opposite to be true.

Overall, the feedback is that the experience is rewarding for all parties. Similar to younger youth in care and custody, teens are just big kids in need of a loving forever home - a safe place to be.

You Never Stop Thinking About Wanting to Belong to a Family



The U.S. Children's Bureau states that, while adoption and foster care are legal procedures, both are moreover a "social and emotional process."

At a practical level, TJ agrees. He said he often gives foster parents he works with the following advice.

"I think that teenagers get a bad rap. So many foster children [already feel like they] live on 'thin ice.' I tell foster parents all the time that the minute they say to their foster child that you cannot live here if you do XYZ then foster children, especially adolescents, know that life in this home is tenuous and contingent on something even if they do not know what that something is."

TJ likens it to a marriage that is on the fence. The minute you question your commitment to the relationship you know that the relationship is not on solid ground. The same applies to when an adult uses their foster child's status in their family as a threat. That child, especially if they are old enough to read between the lines, receives that message and knows their status in the home is "tenuous and contingent." They begin to question their foster family's commitment to them.

Again, TJ said in ways it is similar to parenting a toddler.

"They try things and may mess up, but the important thing is you cannot be too judgmental. The same thing applies to teens. Show me a kid who hasn't ever had behavioral issues."

While TJ is still getting to know his current foster son Anthony, a teenager, he said he and his wife reiterate to Anthony that he is welcome in their home, and they want him to be part of the family. In his profession and in his own home, he has seen youth transform just because a supportive adult in their life has provided a little bit of grace and understanding, a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on. It has made all the difference in their lives.



Any additional advice from one foster parent to another?

TJ said that if a foster parent is just treating a placement in their home as a "job" then they are focused on the wrong thing. No matter what, "when you commit you commit."

"It doesn't matter the age, kids need to feel they're loved and that they're wanted. That's the human condition. We all need that."

The youth TJ and his wife have fostered tended to be older youth. In fact, his former foster son, now his adopted son, had been in his life since he was nine years old and into his early twenties after he had aged out. TJ and his wife made it official when he was 25 years old after the young man asked TJ why he had never adopted him.

That reminded TJ that, "You never stop thinking about wanting to belong to a family."

TJ says his adoptive son is family and they remain in close contact just as TJ and his wife do with their adult biological children.

"My adoptive son took our last later in life and has been part of the family for all the holidays and everything. We adopted him, he took my last name. We're so proud of him. He's successful, has his own business and wife and kids of his own," he stated.

Remaining In Contact with the Birth Family

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foster son's family over for a meal.

Connecticut practices the values of the Quality Parenting Initiative and encourages licensed caregivers to engage with the child's birth family. TJ said there are more pros than cons to establishing these relationships and he recently had his

"When you accept their family for who they are there's no fighting. It's like a blended family [when you raise and care for children who aren't biologically your own]."

Other foster and adoptive parents have expressed similar sentiments. You should always know your roots, where you came from. Those roots are always going to be part of you and part of your life. Even if it is not "part of who you are" per se for youth emerging from particular traumatic home lives, those familial roots are fundamental to one's development into adulthood.

TJ likens staying connected with a foster youth's biological family to his own experience.

"I'm a social worker for sibling groups. And I have a strong relationship with my own siblings. I come back to the fact that at the end of the day, for better or worse, siblings are the most significant relationships you can count on in your life."

TJ used the example of adult siblings needing to have end of life conversations regarding their aging parents, "Siblings pull together in those situations."

Making a Difference in Someone's Life

Prior to joining The Village, TJ carried out foster care and post-adoption services programs at Casey Family Services. In his current role, he works with youth and their families to give them the skillset to launch into adulthood as thriving, self-sufficient individuals.

In his profile on The Village's website, TJ answers the question of 'what would you most want the clients of The Village to know about you?,' "Regardless of your life circumstances you have value and you can change your life's path! I hope we can play some small role in helping you achieve that goal!"

That is a mantra reflected as TJ "walks the walk" in both his personal and professional life.

Interested in becoming a foster or adoptive parent? Please contact 1-888-KID-HERO and visit [CT Fosters: Foster Care & Adoption Services](#).

"Everybody's story can help somebody in some type of way."



When Neil Ford Jr. looks at himself in the mirror, hopefully he realizes the strength of the person looking back at him.

At 18 years of age, Neil is the youngest member of the Statewide Advisory Council (SAC), a legislatively mandated body which serves to advise, support and provide policy, practice, budgetary and other recommendations to the Department of Children and Families.

Yet, he stands for so much more.

Once in congregate care, Neil is an articulate and outspoken youth about Connecticut's behavioral health system - one in which he has been involved since 9 years of age.

Neil uses his experience to help others and improve systems. "I am not doing this for the money. I am doing this so the voices are heard," he stated.

"Everybody's story can help somebody in some type of way."

Neil recently outreached to Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly of the Department of Children and Families, requesting to meet with her and share his views to improve Connecticut's service delivery.

May is Mental Health Awareness month and for almost 30 minutes, Neil - in his thoughtful and charismatic ways - took full advantage of the opportunity to share his views with the Agency's leader.



Neil described one placement at the Solnit North Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) as "too short" and "hard on the family" to attend therapy sessions because of the distance the program was located from his home. His recommendation was to actually extend the amount of time youth are in congregate care to a minimum of 9 months instead of 6 months.

Those beliefs were based on his experiences at the Children's Center of Hamden (CCOH). "I feel like that time at the Children's Center was beautiful. I had the time away, I was able to be to myself and reevaluate myself not only by doing family sessions but by being there."



Neil described the time spent at the congregate care facility as "beneficial" getting "intense treatment" from people who "want to see you thrive."

"Being able to voice yourself and being able to get your opinions across is definitely one of the things you focused on," he further stated.

"The love that I got from the majority of the staff members is why things went well at the Children's Center," Neil said. He and an employee named Jose even looked alike leading to Jose calling him "Son" while Neil referred to Jose as "Dad." For Halloween, Neil dressed up just like Jose!

Neil spoke highly of Jose and Niesha. "They were unlike any other staff members. They still showed me the same love that they showed me when I first got there."

He believes CCOH gave him the "Unconditional love I needed in order to feel safe and secure."

Neil is now giving back to the same place where he speaks so highly of the care he received and does outreach at the CCOH on a weekly basis. He has a passion to check in on youth 24/7. "I want those kids to feel like they are being heard and are not there just because they had some issues at home," Neil stated.



The rewards of his work and the impact he has on others are evident in a recent experience with a resident. "Mr. Neil, I'm leaving on Friday, I won't be able to see you," the youth called out to him. "I just wanted to thank you because the past couple of months, they've been easier because you've been coming and I've been able to talk to you and you really understood me."

Neil has met with new Waterbury Mayor Paul Pernerewski to advise on how to intervene with youth who are having a behavioral health crisis. He also gave insights on how to address violence within the city, given Neil recently lost his friend to homicide.

Neil also takes part in mental health advocacy in his free time. Reaching out to Board of Education members and informing parents of the "Dos and don'ts" about youth experiencing a mental health crisis.

Neil's work has not gone unnoticed as he is the subject of two articles written about him in the Waterbury papers.

Neil also gave accolades for the support he received from Social Worker Ryan Shove of the Waterbury Office. "We love Ryan," Neil was quick to point out.

Obtaining a Nursing Degree in Psychiatry is Neil's long term goal starting with earning a certificate as a Registered Behavioral Health Technician. This August, he will begin work towards a General Studies degree at the University of Maryland on-line program as the first step. Neil aspires to work at an in-patient level of care and "Be able to help youth and direct youth" within that setting.



"You are very impressive. Very impressive. You could do anything you can put your mind to," Neil was told by Commissioner Hill-Lilly. "Just don't let your mind limit what you can do. You have the 'it' factor. The 'it' factor. Nobody can explain 'it'. 'It' is a superpower."

"Your experiences happened as a way to "prepare you for what you are going to do for the lives of other kids," she further added.

Neil has a message for youth across Connecticut. He suggests that they have some type of "support person they trust." Growing up, Neil did not have that person and he believes youth need that one individual they can go to when they are having a hard time which may lead to a connection to services.

Neil is equally clear on what he believes young men of color should consider. "I want them to know not to be scared to reach out even if no one believes you," he stated. He continually sought support for himself when younger but no one listened. Neil wanted an "outside" perspective not just "family" perspective on what he was experiencing. "It is okay to trust others outside of your family with your feelings. There are people out there who actually care about your mental health and well being and want to see you thrive and want to see you succeed," he added.

Neil articulates the pressures within families to not seek outside supports. "We care so much to keep it within the family," he stated.

Neil is a community advocate, peer support, motivational speaker and a leader within his community.

He is also a person with "lived expertise" and exactly the voice that can change systems. "Being that sturdy stepping stool that people need in their lives is the most important role we can play with others," he stated.

Thank you Neil Ford Jr.!

You are an inspiration!



Employee of the Month Awards!

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

Kimberley Casey - Transitional Supports and Success

Kim is a Social Worker within Transitional Supports and Success. She is currently the DCF Liaison to DOC at Robinson Correctional, Osborn Correctional and Hartford Community Correctional Center. Kim was the Detention and Manson Youth Liaison for close to 20 years and recently transitioned to work with incarcerated fathers. Kim is a strong advocate for incarcerated parents and youth. Kim plays a key role in workgroups and multi-disciplinary teams to ensure our incarcerated population is being represented and planned for. Kim always goes above and beyond to ensure the incarcerated population are being heard and considered. Kim also assists Area Office Social Workers to obtain what they need from DOC as well as explain the policy and procedures at DOC. She also assists DOC in understanding DCF policies and practices. The Interagency Navigation Unit is lucky to have Kim as a valued member of the team!



Jason Pope - PRTF (South)

Jason has been named Employee of the Month for May 2024 due to his exceptional commitment to fostering a safe and positive environment at the Solnit South campus. As a dedicated team player, Jason consistently goes above and beyond to ensure the well-being and safety of all the youth under his care. His unwavering positive attitude and daily greetings to colleagues and youth significantly contribute to a nurturing and uplifting campus atmosphere. This infectious positivity enhances the overall culture and encourages others to adopt a similar outlook, making Solnit South PRTF a more supportive and secure place for everyone. Jason's exemplary dedication and cheerful demeanor make him a standout employee, deserving of this recognition.

Felecia Williams - PRTF (North)

Felecia consistently goes above and beyond in her role, always giving 100% effort in everything she does. Her dedication to assisting staff on all three shifts ensures smooth transitions and optimal operational efficiency in the cottage. Additionally, her commitment to providing encouragement and kindness fosters a positive and supportive environment for the youth and staff. Felecia exemplifies the core values of Solnit North through her outstanding work ethic, teamwork, and compassion towards others. Her exceptional performance and demeanor make her an outstanding role model and deserving candidate for Employee of the Month recognition.



Melanie Clark and Taliferrio Gallaher - Solnit South Hospital

Melanie Clark and Taliferrio Gallaher are the dynamic duo CSUS team at Solnit South Hospital. Both are being nominated as they are the yin to each other's yang, complementing each other's skill sets in such a harmonious and effective way. Melanie Clark, CSUS and long-time DCF employee, is a role model, teacher, and leader. She utilizes her creativity, focus on detail, organization, and keen sense of humor, to not only support all the CSW teams, but also promotes the best clinical care for all Solnit youth. Taliferrio Gallaher, CSUS for the Sachus unit, exhibits the calm, cool, collected skill sets to calm any chaos. Taliferrio's ability to de-escalate situations and youth with compassion is truly an art. A role model to his unit and Solnit youth, his supportive leadership, is ever-present for youth and fellow employees. Working together, they have covered many critical needs, remain solution focused, and are the perfect definition of what collaboration can do.

Erin Mahony - Contracts Management

Erin is a Program Supervisor in the Contracts Regional Support Unit. She has tirelessly worked with her team to successfully transition DCF's day care referrals and payments from DCF to Care4Kids. Through this process, she has demonstrated her unique ability to collaborate with both internal and external stakeholders while leading her staff through a challenging transition and innovatively navigating the challenges of this large-scale project. Thank you, Erin!



Marc Williams - Academy for Workforce Development

Mr. Williams is an outstanding trainer and has had a positive impact on the Academy for Workforce Development's team. In addition to his training responsibilities and overseeing all the DRS training curriculums, Mr. Williams has developed a strong training partnership with the CT State Police and CT Drug Control Division. Mr. William's desire to assist the workforce become safer while in the community has positively impacted the Department. Due to his partnerships,

the Academy has been able to offer the following trainings: EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING: HOW TO GATHER ACCURATE INFORMATION SAFELY, WORKER SAFETY USE OF AUTHORITY AND DE-ESCALATION TRAINING FOR ON-GOING STAFF, CT DRUG CONTROL: LICIT AND ILLICIT SUBSTANCE TRAINING & SOCIAL MEDIA AWARENESS FOR STAFF. In addition to these trainings, Mr. Williams is also working with the CT State Police to bring DCF staff to the CT GANG AWARENESS AND INFORMATIONAL TRAINING in the fall. Finally, Mr. Williams always volunteers to do additional tasks in the office and assists those who need help, offering his expertise to multiple staff. Despite having a lot of work, Mr. Williams is constantly asking how others are doing and finding out how he can help out others.

Marcia Robinson - Education/Unified School District #2

Marcia has been leading the agency's no-nexus unit for the several years. She has been a tremendous leader in this work in ensuring that every child receives free and appropriate education services. Marcia excelled in gaining knowledge of the Connecticut Special Education Data System (CT-SEDS) to ensure that all Individual Education Plans (IEP) for students are compliant and meeting students' academic and social needs. She has been instrumental in providing professional development and training for staff to reflect on their practice, analyze student data and outcomes, and identify areas for growth and improvement for their individual professional learning. Marcia makes a substantial contribution to the operation, growth, and development of Unified School District #2---thank you Marcia!!!



Mark Feller - Office of Legal Affairs

Attorney Mark Feller has made significant contributions to the legal division through his unwavering dedication, professionalism, and expertise. Attorney Feller, who is the sole in-house attorney for Region 1, has consistently demonstrated a commitment to excellence in every facet of his work despite the challenges of covering an entire region. His colleagues hold him in high regard, recognizing his thoroughness and integrity. Additionally, Attorney Feller zealously advocates for the Department during administration hearings, ensuring that the Department receives high quality legal representation while also taking into consideration the sensitive nature of our work and how the outcomes of these proceedings impact the families we serve. Thank you Mark for all of your hard work!



Andrea Sellers - Child Welfare/Foster Care Division

It is with great admiration that we select Social Worker, Andrea Sellers for employee of the month. Andrea is an exemplary employee, dependable, cooperative, and hardworking. She is a Social Worker assigned to the Educational Professional Investigations Unit (EPIU). This unit holds the responsibility of investigating allegations of abuse and neglect, when the alleged

perpetrator(s) is acting in a professional capacity as an employee of a school, daycare, camp, and transportation companies licensed or contracted by a board of education or Office of Early Childhood. It's evident that Andrea's commitment to her role goes above and beyond, as demonstrated by her thorough knowledge of investigation procedures and her willingness to tackle challenges head-on. Completing her master's degree while juggling work responsibilities showcases Andrea's exceptional work ethic and determination. Her ability to balance her professional duties with personal and academic pursuits is impressive and serves as an inspiration to her colleagues. Andrea's cooperative spirit, willingness to voice her opinion constructively and her 100% effort in all tasks makes her a valuable asset to the team. Her achievement of obtaining her MSW in May is a testament to her dedication to continuous learning and professional development. Once again, congratulations to Andrea on this well-deserved recognition.

Tania Mayen - Region 1 & 5

Tania is a Social Worker who has been with the department for under 2 years. In her short time at the DCF she has demonstrated empathy and compassion towards all her cases, particularly in one instance where a sibling group (brother and sister) experienced the devastating loss of their brother, leaving their world shattered.

Tania continues to be a stabilizing source for the children and works hard to ensure they are supported. In the office Tania is always filled with positive energy. Tania's passion for Social Work and commitment to doing what's right shines through in her work. She embodies the qualities of a great Social Worker; determined, proactive and resilient. Her unwavering commitment to being a voice for her children is inspiring. We call her 'The Quiet Storm'!



Lisa Cassista - Region 2 & 3

Lisa has been a Social Worker with the Department for 15 years with the past 5 years serving as an adolescent Social Worker. She brings a positive attitude to the job every day and always supports and advocates for the adolescent population she serves. Like her adolescent unit co-workers, Lisa is a team player always offering to assist a co-worker when needed. She ensures that the needs are met for the youth/young adults on her caseload, no matter what time of day, all while raising a family of her own. There is one particular case where Lisa really showed all her attributes. She has a 19-year-old developmentally disabled young adult who was stuck in the inpatient unit at Middlesex Hospital for 7 months (9/23-4/24) after her group home declined to have her return after an ER visit. This set off a collaborative effort between DCF, DDS, Probate Court, and Middlesex Hospital that included twice per week TEAMS meetings, hours of follow up efforts locating a new placement, and 3-4 visits per month by Lisa to see the young adult in the hospital (including weekends). This was all while Lisa still met the needs of the 14 other youth/young adults on her caseload. Lisa is not only an asset to the Department but to the State of CT.

Jasmine Hawes - Region 4 & 6

Jasmine received a letter from an incarcerated Father who is currently in federal prison out of state. The work that Jasmine did with this father to help facilitate contact and build a relationship between him and his daughter was exceptional. The father was incredibly grateful for all that Jasmine did and wrote a letter highlighting his gratitude. In his letter he gave her the "Clark Kent Positive Impact Award." His letter reads, in part, "I hope all is well, if not, hope my words brighten your day. Especially since you spend so much time doing that for everyone else, that's why my subject is titled Clark Kent. You really be out there saving the world and changing lives. You are truly dedicated to your work and there has never been a time when I have called your phone, and you weren't helping someone besides yourself. You are amazing. You're a blessing to not just mine, but Ariana's life as well." The tremendous fatherhood engagement work highlighted by this father and the relationship that Jasmine built is a testament to passion and commitment to the children and families she serves every day.

A large, stylized graphic of the word "STUPENDOUS!" in a bold, orange, bubbly font with a black outline and a slight shadow effect.

Aimee Fong - Health Management and Oversight Division

This employee is a Nurse Consultant in Region 5 and supervises 3 Nurses in that region. As a Supervisor, Aimee is supportive, knowledgeable, and always looking out for the best interests of her Nurses so that they can be successful and confident in their work as consultants to the Social Work team. As a Nurse leader, Aimee has been an active member of the Nursing Standards and Practice committee always drawing on her years of experience as a Nurse both within and outside of DCF to create standards of care that ensure optimum oversight of the children in our care. As a colleague, Aimee is always willing to provide supervisory coverage for other regions and has been a fantastic mentor to both new Nurses and other Nurse Supervisors. And lastly, Aimee goes the extra mile when it comes to coordinating services and advocating for the families, caregivers, children, and youth that she is working with making sure they are all receiving the care they require at the highest level possible. It is truly a privilege to nominate Aimee for employee of the month.



Ann Adams - Bureau of External Affairs

Ann Adams simply wants to help others - all of those who come her way. For 24 years, she has served children and families across Connecticut in various capacities. As Director of the Office of Community Relations, she is the calming, soothing voice at the other end of the phone when a family member, foster parent, community partner or youth calls to express a concern. Due to her efforts, problems are quickly resolved leading to both families - and DCF staff - engaging and collaborating, which leads to the best outcome possible for children. Ann comes to work each day with a never-ending positive spirit and desire to make the workspace, her community, and the world a better place. She has succeeded in all of those endeavors. Ann will soon be

retiring as she is in her last month of work at the Agency. It is hard to describe her legacy and what she has meant to all of us. She is so deserving of this award. Congratulations to one of the best advocates, champions for what is right, and the best people we know!

Bethany Zorba - Behavioral Health Community Services

Bethany has been an integral part of the Children's Mental Health Unit. Bethany has been crucial in the implementation of the Urgent Crisis Centers, a brand-new service type here in CT aimed at diverting youth from the Emergency Dept when they have a behavioral health need. As part of the implementation process, Bethany has been collaborating with our contracted agencies and partners while ensuring that we are also concurrently collecting and evaluating the necessary information to be able to assess this new service. In addition to managing several contracted programs, Bethany has also independently managed the CONNECT grant which DCF was awarded. Through the CONNECT grant, Bethany has worked with community partners to ensure that our CT system of care is accessible to children and their families and is currently working to connect schools to this system of care. She is also a team player and has provided support and guidance to her colleagues, offering her expertise and is willing to help others when needed.



Blanca Roman - Government Relations and Policy

Blanca has done a fantastic job working with other divisions (especially Child Welfare and TSS) to update several policies critical to DCF's mission. She regularly attends meetings with subject matter experts to understand the rationale for policy changes and works collaboratively to ensure policy language is easy to understand and succinct. Her work has been exceptional, even during a particularly difficult time for her. She has persevered and delivered for the Department.

Cynthia Middleton - Juvenile Justice Education Unit

Champions can often be found working in the most challenging settings and helping those who are in the greatest need. This statement applies to the work of Ms. Cynthia Middleton, Pupil Service Specialist for the Juvenile Justice Education Unit at DCF. Cynthia exemplifies many of the qualities that speak to the best work of our unit. Her ability to connect with young people, develop positive and productive relationships and create plans to help reintegrate them into their society have already changed lives. Her willingness to go the extra mile in helping to fill in the many gaps is what makes her an exemplary employee. From waiting for hours outside of a courthouse to ensuring one of her clients makes it to their family in Florida, Cynthia works to seek the best outcomes on a daily basis. What sets Cynthia apart from so many is that she always believes that there is a way



to solve an issue or overcome a problem. As one of the Pupil Service Specialists who work with students at Manson Youth Institution, Cynthia's calm and warm presence has been an essential ingredient in building strong partnerships and collaboration with the Department of Corrections. Having Cynthia in our unit benefits not just the students and families we serve, but also those that work alongside her on a daily basis. We thank you Cynthia for your compassion and dedication and you are so deserving of being our Unit's employee of the month!

Fred North - Bureau of Strategic Planning

Fred North is the nominee for employee of the month from the Bureau of Strategic Planning. He is the "go to" for all things data, state and federal reporting and assists staff in navigating the complex world of understanding the outcomes of our work. That is what Fred does but who he is as a person does not go unnoticed. His positive energy, openness to new ideas and the desire to assist others are some of his best traits and characteristics.

The pressures on Fred, especially over the past couple of months, have been elevated. We are so grateful for his expertise, ways of handling the staff, for the countless hours he puts into the work to elevate Connecticut's practice and for his continual positive attitude! Thank you, Fred!

fabulous

Allie Derbacher - Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

Bridgeport Substance Use Specialist Allie Derbacher for Employee of the Month. Allie is a highly valued and respected employee within Region 1. She is known for her responsiveness, knowledge, thoughtful and thorough consultation, and support. She regularly goes out of her way to continue to educate herself to be able to support the office with the ever-evolving substance misuse information and practice. We especially want to recognize her given her exceptional work and dedication regarding a recent complex case. Despite many barriers, she spent countless weeks researching, planning, and advocating for this young man's needs. She was intentional in identifying his strengths and protective factors to build upon, while ensuring his voice was always present. Lastly, Allie's ability to conceptualize and integrate the youth's cultural considerations and inequities that has impacted this young man was exemplary.

“The kids give us life.”



For nearly four decades, Jim and Terry shared a bond that transcended friendship, seamlessly transitioning from dance floor partners to life partners. Leading and performing Victorian and Ragtime dance for many years while each pursued other relationships.

Their journey took an unexpected turn when divorce separated them from their spouses. Undeterred, they embraced a new chapter as a married couple and licensed foster parents.

With a blended family of four grown children and grandchildren, Jim and Terry stepped back into parenthood. With open hearts and a shared resolve to make a difference in the lives of children in need, they have provided respite care and foster care to children from birth to three years old for the past three years. They have provided care for more than twenty children, some for as short as two days and others for up to five months.

Now both retired, Jim recalls years of long work hours and regrets missing many of his daughters' milestones. Terry, who spent many years as a nanny, explained that caring for children gives her life a greater purpose, adding, “I think I would die if I didn’t have children to care for.”

Licensed during COVID-19, Jim and Terry started to care for foster children because they wanted to do good and give back. They wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. The couple spends their days together at playgrounds and beaches, participating in story time at the local library and taking long walks while raising foster children in a safe and loving environment. “This journey has never been easy, but very few things in our lives that have made our lives better have been easy.” Jim stated.



Jim and Terry believe advocating for children is crucial to their roles. They exchange a knowing glance as they recall their experiences as outspoken advocates for a child in their care. They had been fostering a child on the autism spectrum and drawing from their experience with a grandchild who also has autism. They researched effective parenting practices and activities for non-verbal children. Their efforts significantly improved the child's verbal and social communication skills, and the foster child and their grandson became close friends.



They were truly making a positive impact. However, they faced disappointment and frustration when the department proposed moving the child with professional therapists experienced in autism care. Concerned that this change might hinder the child's progress, Jim and Terry objected. Their advocacy efforts paid off, and they were allowed to keep the child in their care until he could be reunited with a relative.

“They are fierce advocates for the children they care for,” explained Samantha Heltke, Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAP) Liaison, adding, “They are active in support groups, DCF and CAFAP events and, are part of the Quality Parenting Initiative Steering Committee in Region 2. They truly exemplify what partnership looks like and if I could replicate them for our children and families, I would!”

Visibly emotional, Terry expressed feeling selfish sometimes when the children leave, yet fostering at 79 years old is undeniably selfless. While many retired couples are traveling and focusing on self-care, Jim and Terry are members of the Quality Parenting Initiative Team, understanding the importance of birth-family engagement and establishing relationships with them.

Jim eagerly searched for a “life book” that he made for one of their foster children. It was a small keepsake book with pictures that captured many beautiful memories. Jim planned to share it with the boy's father.



With an emphasis on the couple's commitment to providing detailed, consistent, and thoughtful care for the foster children, they are enhancing the support system surrounding each child they care for. “The most important thing about the family is their attention to detail. For every child they have fostered, they have written updates about the child's progress and sent pictures to the Ongoing Social Workers to capture special moments,” explained Kim Sperry, Foster Care Division Support Worker.

Jim and Terry are also foster parent recruiters, eagerly sharing literature with community members interested in learning more about what fostering entails. This couple had such love in their eyes as they gazed at their foster baby, who sat quietly on Jim's lap for most of the visit. “This is a life value; we are giving back,” Jim said, while Terry tenderly remarked, “It's going to be hard to let him go. We just love him so much, but his grandmother will be reunifying with him soon.” she said.

The couple also have maintained relationships that benefited other children's stability and emotional security. They forged a good connection with a child's legal risk foster parents and helped with a smooth transition to his new home. "To this day, they continue to maintain contact with one of their foster children and his legal risk foster parents," explained Julie Dixon, CPS Social Worker.



"The kids give us life," Terry said with a laugh. "I remember once, at the diner on our way to church, a young man who had seen us come in with different kids over the years came over to chat. He couldn't fathom how we managed everything and grumbled about his aches and pains. As he walked away, I whispered to Jim, 'I hope I never act that old.'" They both laughed, their eyes shining with the affection and joy their foster kids bring into their lives.

Jim and Terry's retirement years are filled with giving and receiving love. Supported by their blended family and church congregation, they are on a mission to ensure that every child placed in their home gets the best possible start in life. Their days are a beautiful blend of laughter, care, and heartfelt moments dedicated to making a lasting difference in the lives of the children they foster.

"At this point in our lives, we cannot commit to raising a child long-term," Jim explained, "but we can make a difference in these kids' lives. We just want to help!" he added.

Jim and Terry redefine what it means to be senior citizens, showing that fostering children, shared love, patience, and a good sense of humor are vital ingredients in aging gracefully.