

A Message from Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly



The month of September has several important themes which connect to our work. Read this month's **"Spotlight on What's Right"** newsletter to learn about them and the great work of our staff across Connecticut and the country!

September is **Kinship Care Awareness Month** - drawing attention to the importance of having children placed with **individuals and families they know** - to lessen the trauma associated with being separated from their parents. Nationally, Connecticut remains a leader with successfully having children placed with **relatives, friends, teachers, neighbors** and others with whom they have a **"familial"** relationship until permanency is established.

Read in this month's **"Spotlight"** about **Victoria**, a kinship provider who agreed to care for **5 of her nieces and nephews!** She speaks about the importance of keeping siblings together, family bonds and making it all work as **"commitment, love, patience and a whole lotta formula and pampers"** come into play.



Suicide Awareness is also a critical theme throughout September. With **Governor Lamont**, I took part in a roundtable discussion with my colleagues from **sister state Agencies and private providers**. We discussed the prevalence of suicide in our communities, **lifting the stigma** of asking for support and placing emphasis on the programs Connecticut has to offer including www.WeAreCT.org

Hispanic/Latine Heritage Month is also celebrated from 9/15/24-10/15/24. This year's theme is **"Pioneers of Change: Shaping the future together through Innovation, Resilience, and Unity."** This month-long celebration offers an opportunity to recognize the backgrounds, traditions, and accomplishments of individuals from various Hispanic cultures including those from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Central and South America and the diaspora.



Congratulations to **Meriden Office Director Maritza Acosta** who was named the **"Madrina"** for the Waterbury Puerto Rican Day Parade.



"**Madrina**" translates to "**Godmother**" and refers to a prominent woman chosen to be an honorary figurehead for the parade representing the community, and its values, often, a **Puerto Rican public figure** with significant contributions to the culture and community.

September is also **National Recovery Month**. It is believed over 21 million Americans are in recovery from a substance use disorder. One support Connecticut has to offer is the **24/7 Substance Use Services Access Line at 1-800-563-4086**. Operated by **Wheeler and funded by Connecticut's Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS)**, staff utilize a recovery-oriented approach to ask screening questions, and provide callers with education, support, hope and tangible assistance, including transportation, for those individuals having difficulty living with substance use issues.



National Child Welfare Workforce Development Month is also a theme of September. The **Mentoring program, Leadership Academy for Social Work Supervisors (LASS), Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM), and the Executive Fellowship Program (EFP)**, are supports our Agency offers to empower staff - personally and professionally - to become future leaders.



The **Wilderness School** recently had a graduation for youth and their families who participated in activities and expeditions this year! Job well done! Complete with **games, team building and a lot of food**, participants shared stories and reconnected.

At the event, I was able to speak with a number of youths who expressed how **transformational** the experience at the Wilderness School has been for them and their **eagerness to return next year**. One young person stated they discovered their **"love for gardening"** while on the trail and another believed **"that I found my true self"** in their interactions with staff and the challenges they were able to overcome. **Powerful words!**

"You belong among wildflowers," - lyrics sung by Tom Petty - are tattooed on the right hand of **Erin Laffond**. She is completing her third Spring to Fall season at the Wilderness School. Read about her **unique journey**, to serve these youth, her connections to wildflowers and her simple message to the youth - **"I'm just asking you to breathe and be you."**





Shout out one more time to the **August Employees of the Month!** Who has been nominated to receive the **September Award?** Read on.....

Our staff have been representing DCF around Connecticut and the country!

Thank you to our partners at **Adelbrook** for presenting DCF with the **Adelbrook Community Partner Award!** At a beautiful luncheon, **Dr. Nicole Taylor** accepted the award on behalf of the Agency.



Dr. Frank Gregory and Dr. Stephanie Bozak represented the Department at the **State Department of Education Back to School Meeting** at the Connecticut Convention Center. In attendance were **Directors of Special Education** who received information about Emergency Mobile Crisis Intervention Services, Suicide Prevention and many others.



CT DCF was represented well in Washington, DC as **Rodney Moore and Elizabeth Hazelwood** presented as part of the **Minority Professional Leadership Development Program** through **AdoptUSKids!**

Well done and you made us proud!



At an **Overdose Awareness Day** event through the **Litchfield County Opiate Task Force**, **Alison Karimi and Kris Robles** represented the Department and provided information on key resources our Agency has to offer.



Senator Richard Blumenthal has been a strong advocate to protect children and youth from online predators. This month, a press conference announcing his new Federal legislation took place with **Dr. Nicole Taylor** presenting data and other facts regarding the prevalence of **Child Sex**

Trafficking in Connecticut.



As our month was coming to an end, I spoke with 38 youth leaders during a **West Hartford Youth Recovery Event**. The audience heard about prevention, recovery, and empowering and valuing the youth voice and involvement in this work. ***"We can't be about them without them,"*** was one of my key messages.



A huge shout out to **Solnit Hospital** on recently receiving **Joint Commission Accreditation** which followed the **Solnit North and South PRTFs** receiving accreditation this past May!

Showtime! A couple of weeks ago, my **first video** was provided to all staff - get ready for one each month. Please watch the video here: [Commissioner's September 2024 Video](#)



Our work is humbling especially when we lose a member of our DCF family. With great sadness, we inform you of the loss of **Sheila Garlington, a DCF Employee in the Waterbury Office**. Her warm and compassionate spirit towards the children on her caseload made it easy for them to develop a respectful relationship with her as most affectionately referred to her as **"Grandma."**

National Child Welfare Worker Appreciation Week is also celebrated this month. Our work is complex and challenges us emotionally and physically as we serve some of the most vulnerable and oppressed populations in our communities. The stressors today's children and families experience are becoming more intense and require more of us.

Thanks to each and every one of you for your tireless efforts.

I appreciate you!



A Familiar Face, A Familiar Place



Kinship provider Victoria and her son.

Most adults could not imagine becoming an instant parent to six children but that is exactly what happened to Victoria when she received a call from DCF informing her that her five nieces and nephews, ranging in age from one to sixteen years old, were in need of a kinship placement. Before getting that call, it was just her and her nine-year-old son in the house.

While she admits she went through a range of emotions holding that phone, she ultimately said she did not hesitate to open her home to her young relatives.

"It's just me and my son. When I got the call I was a little shocked. I went through a lot of emotions."

It was sudden. She asked when they were thinking about bringing the children to her house.

"They said TODAY. And I was like okay I have to go and get ready for five kids to come into my home so I'll see you later," Victoria laughed.

Research supports the idea that kinship care—where children are placed with relatives or close family friends—often leads to better outcomes compared to traditional foster care placements with non-relatives.

"They basically asked, 'would you be willing to take your five nieces and nephews...some of them...all of them...whatever you're able to do?' I said yes, I'll take all of them because we're not splitting them up."



The cousins out and about.

Better outcomes are achieved through kinship due to factors such as increased stability, fewer disruptions in their education and social lives, minimizing trauma because of those existing relationships, and an increase in likelihood that children will achieve permanency.

Victoria had a relationship with the two older children. She did not know the three littles - a two-year-old and a set of one-year-old twins.

"I felt like that was going to be the harder adjustment with the little ones. The older ones knew me already and knew what to expect."



"The Littles" playing in the yard.

Victoria explained why she did not hesitate when she got that call and why she was adamant that the children not be split up amongst other non-kinship foster homes.

"In life, all you really have through everything are your siblings. It was important that they stayed together and see that, no matter what challenges come along, we're together and we're going to do it as a family. No ifs, ands or buts."

When they first came to her home, Victoria said that the older kids would put each other down and she made it her mission to reshape their understanding of sibling relationships by improving the way the boys - her son and his two older cousins - communicated and

supported each other. By shifting their usual patterns of interaction, she wanted to build a more positive and beneficial environment for everyone.

"They would take their anger out on each other. They would fight a lot."

It got to a point where Victoria had to tell them, "We don't do that. You guys are supposed to build each other up and support each other."

Victoria said, because of that, she was going to work with them to change the narrative. That was one of the hardest parts of adjusting to the new dynamic in the home.

"The older boys came in set in their ways. It was a huge challenge trying to shift their mindset on how to be versus how they're used to being."

Another major adjustment? Victoria said, although she had experience caring for her own son as an infant, it was different for the younger children because of their age and unfamiliarity with her as their caretaker.

"With the littles, the hardest adjustment was getting to know them. They're used to their mom and they were like who's this new person?"

Victoria said she had to lean on the older boys to help with the bonding between her and the littles. Victoria's biological son also rose to the challenge.



Victoria's older nephews pose together for a photo.

"[My son] had a relationship with the older boys. Having them come into our home, he was okay with it. He's easy-going and always there willing to help. I had to teach him how to set boundaries because he's just so quick to be helpful and empathetic, so I had to teach him to put himself first when necessary."



"The Littles" getting used to their aunt and their new surroundings.

Victoria admits that was hard too. Her son was an only child, and he too got an instant set of siblings overnight. But her son is very independent and took it upon himself to teach his cousins how to do things around the house like prepare a quick bite to eat or do their own laundry.

"They were like you're younger than us you don't know. I had to intervene a couple times and say 'he knows what he's doing so let him show you.'"

Victoria said that friction went back to their learned behavior of putting each other down rather than building each other up. She took the time to instill in the older boys that 'hey, we're here to help each other.'

She wants them to take that with them whether they remain under her roof or are reunified with their mother.

"My hope is that they see there is another way to do life. There's no need to be so negative. I want them to realize that, no matter what you're doing, you can always find the good in it. I want them to continue on the path I'm trying to set for them to be successful."

Given the initial growing pains, developing her relationship with the littles and seeing the turnaround in the older boys, Victoria said it has been chaotic but fun.

"Having the littles at my feet while I'm cooking and the boys are upstairs playing, it's chaotic but it's fun. It's chaos, but it's organized chaos, so it's fun," she said.

Despite the organized chaos and some of the bumps along the road, Victoria would encourage other potential kinship providers to "do it."

"There are ups and downs. And those downs, they hit really hard but at the end of the day just do it. The easy part of all this is just loving them and knowing you played a vital role when they needed you the most. That outweighs all the bad days."



Victoria with her son at the Renaissance Fair.

And potential kinship care providers will not be alone. Victoria had the support of Rosemary Perez-Soto, a DCF Foster Care Division social worker, along the way including transporting the children to school, daycare, sports and other activities.

Of what is required of a kinship provider like Victoria, Rosemary said it is pretty simple.

"It takes [Victoria's] commitment, love, patience and a whole lotta formula and pampers!! Vicky from Day 1 was all about what needs to happen for all 5 nieces and nephews to stay in her care."

Rosemary said she has seen the children thrive in their aunt's care.

"She never imagined herself being a relative caregiver to her nieces and nephew [however] she has provided a very loving and structured environment. She ensures they are available to visit with their parents. During my monthly visits I have observed how attentive she is to each child, especially the 'The Littles.'"

Welcoming her nieces and nephews into her home, watching them grow and become a closer family unit is what brings Victoria the most joy.

"It's the relationships and how they've grown more. I was just their aunt before. How they look up to me now, they have a different perspective of me than just coming over our house on a Saturday to hang out. They see they can count on me. That's been great, having our relationship bloom in different ways."

"For the littles, it's getting comfortable with me, getting to know me, and watching them grow and learn and develop. And creating that relationship with them where they know who I am. That's something that will continue on when they go back to their mom. Whether or not that happens, at least I know I played such a big part in their life that one day they'll know."

"You belong among wildflowers."



"You belong among wildflowers," - lyrics sung by Tom Petty - are tattooed on the right hand of Erin Laffond.

Wildflowers... grown together in fields and meadows.... blend individual colors into a beautiful mosaic. A perfect analogy for the experiences of youth at the DCF Wilderness School and the passion of a genuine and authentic team member.

Erin is completing her third Spring to Fall season at the Wilderness School - a prevention, intervention, and transition program for adolescents offering activities ranging from 1-day hikes to 20-day expeditions.

While attending community college in Massachusetts, her Professor for Outdoor Education was familiar with the program and suggested she apply.

"When I graduated, he gave me kind of a confidence boost to apply here and see what happens," Erin stated.

That conversation changed her life and now she is changing the lives of others.

"This has been a consistency the past three years which is great. I love this life," Erin stated.

Erin's devotion to the youth she leads hiking, rock climbing, canoeing and through other experiences is evident.

She wants the best for them.

Their time together symbolizes much more than just carrying heavy backpacks, building campfires, sleeping in a tent or wet boots.

Without the distraction of cell phones, each minute, hour, day and week the staff and youth are together they emphasize team building, peer relations, relying on oneself, personal responsibility and conflict resolution.

"We're asking the students to work on a lot of things," Erin stated.

They grow together. Youth find untapped strengths and create lifelong connections.

At a recent graduation, Erin spoke to the adolescent females she led on a 20-day expedition along with two colleagues. Families, DCF staff and others listened as Erin described the individual growth she observed for each member and her desires for their future.

The wildflower embodies the symbolism of unity. Erin and others saw the unity among youth and staff. Once unfamiliar with one another, they became a supportive team. A beautiful mosaic themselves.



"I really value this time where I can talk about them and have them shine and also reflect on all the parts of them that I've gotten to see, and I want them to feel empowered by all of that," Erin stated.

Erin wanted to create a space so they could hear her words about them.

"I hope for everything for them. I hope they can step away from this and find the world and the life that was familiar and is familiar to them and how to make that have more elements that are healthy and put into practice that maybe they can't quite connect right now to this experience, but they will feel that. They will feel those things, that sense of accomplishment, a sense of challenge, a sense of anything," she recalled while reflecting on her wishes.



Working with today's youth - especially adolescents you have never encountered only to soon leave with them on a 5, 15 or 20-day expedition - requires unique skill and patience.

In preparation, Erin goes on a long run to "get my heavy breaths out so when I am on course it just feels a little bit more grounded."

She wants to create a "holding space" for them. "I really enjoy that. Letting the students come to me. Letting that process happen. I don't want to rush them. I let them talk to me. It's their process and their experience," Erin added.

This is not an easy task given the speed at which today's world moves, the pressures on adolescents and distractions.

What was her most memorable moment at the Wilderness School?

Erin recalls a particularly difficult day with a youth whom she was working with 1:1 as they were separated from the other group members. "I was navigating some different things that were happening with this student," she stated.

As they were just trying to get through a tough moment, they both became physically and emotionally exhausted and sat down on the side of the road.

No one talked at first. Be present, give space is what Erin thought. Give it time.

"It wasn't even really about addressing what was happening it was just addressing that like we're here for each other," Erin stated.

"As much as maybe the student didn't want me in that moment, their actions were saying I don't want to be alone."

They grounded each other.

"To be able to be that person and to be there for them and also to reciprocate that you can also be here for me because I'm scared and I'm sad and being able to talk about that was just very real and something I took away from this course," Erin thought.



"I'm a human being and this student is also another human being, and we are existing in this moment."



"We had a hug. We leaned on each other for a bit and then things started coming up just naturally as they would and just letting that time sit with each other and then coming together was super helpful," Erin recalled.

Her actions have not gone unnoticed.

"Erin has a deep commitment to supporting students in their journey toward their own sense of belonging and wellness. She has a quietude of presence as she holds space and patience for the youth in her care. Erin's calm demeanor gives youth the time and pause they need to both regulate themselves and move forward toward their own goals. Her strength is in her ability to speak just the right number of words at the exactly right time for youth to feel seen, held and challenged," stated Erin's seasonal colleague

and course director, Kris Salisbury.

"Quiet and soft spoken" were words once attached to Erin. Later in life, it was later reframed for her that these traits were not something she needed to work on or address.

Erin discovered being observant and quiet is a strength. That it is okay to be physically present even if you don't have words to say.

"I'm going to show up here and I may not have a lot to say but like my body simply being here is a lot. I would love to teach that just through modeling that because it is modeling for myself and telling myself every day that I am here, and I am showing up and that's an amazing thing. And to not be told that I have to change that, or that I have to be louder or that I have to find words to express what I've feeling."

Her message for the youth? "I'm just asking you to breathe and be you."

She wants the families of the youth served to know the Wilderness School is a community. "I hope they can feel the trust, they can feel the loyalty, they can feel the support that just lives here among all of these people that they have to return to and to send their youth to."

"I would want them to know there's a lot of care coming from here."

"Erin works with a depth of intent and skills that have been practiced and meditated upon. When working and interacting with Erin, it is easy to feel that 'still waters run deep'. She is easy to trust and collaborate with because she works with honesty and integrity. Wilderness School benefits greatly from the way she embodies our value of honoring each person and their unique strengths and experiences," stated Wilderness School Director Aaron Wiebe.

What is Erin's motivation? Her "why" she does this work?



"There's a lot of different people in our lives when we grow up and sometimes you know, they don't turn out the way we want them to and so we find that relationship and love with other things in our life and the way that we cope with that," Erin responded.



Erin experienced some of those same issues personally and what she found at the Wilderness School - and through the youth - is that place of comfort and belonging.

"I want these students to know they have familiarity and predictability with the people here," she stated.

"Just being the support that I know I would have wanted, and still want."

"Anything that I can do to just make a little bit of a spark happen, to assist students to believe there is a chance they can have somebody in their life who will give them a particular feeling or feel joy," she further added. "It means the world to me to show the students a little glimpse of that," she added.

"That's all I ever wanted."

In many cultures, the wildflowers are seen as symbols of hope, wishes and new beginnings.

When Erin looks at the word of her tattoo, a message is present to herself that "I exist in a world that was meant for me and getting to a place of simplicity and beauty can be found in myself, as well as the blanket of people and places that exist around me."

For Erin Laffond, belonging among the wildflowers is her calling as she empowers others to form that beautiful mosaic.



Employee of the Month Awards!

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

Gregory Hudson - Careline

It is long overdue that supervisor Gregory Hudson be recognized as an exemplary employee for DCF. Gregory Hudson has served as a Social Work Supervisor with SIU since September 2016. He possesses an extensive knowledge of investigation procedures and policies, which has enabled him to effectively lead his unit in conducting thorough assessments. Mr. Hudson actively collaborates with his team members and organizes case consultations with relevant area office staff, including those in foster care, FFT-Functional Family Therapy, labor relations, legal, and DCF facility consultants, ensuring that all parties involved are adequately informed and supported. Mr. Hudson is known for his dependability, conscientiousness, and professionalism. As a versatile team player, he adeptly handles diverse assignments and ensures that his team members consistently accomplish their work. His strong partnership with SIU members and external professionals is notable; he treats everyone with respect and approaches challenges thoughtfully, always willing to lend a helping hand. Mr. Hudson has covered cases for the Educational Professional Investigations Unit when there has been a need as well as covered home visits and court for his staff. Mr. Hudson has good communication with his staff on all case assignments, his staff are comfortable in sharing with him both personal and professional concerns and has been a strong advocate for their needs always supporting them. Mr. Hudson is known for his commitment, often working late when necessary, and applying critical thinking in case management to ensure safety while upholding professional standards. Additionally, Mr. Hudson plays a crucial role in training new team members about SIU's roles and responsibilities. He readily provides support to the CL SWS team when coverage is needed, earning him the respect and appreciation of all staff.



Jaime Green - Bridgeport Area Office

Jaime is an Intake Social Worker who has been with the Department for over 25 years. Not only does Jaime have a wealth of experience and is a valued member of the Bridgeport Office's Intake team, but she is also always willing to help out others during case related emergencies,

regardless of her own workload. Last month, when a co-worker was dealing with a high-profile tragedy on her caseload, Ms. Green, realizing the stress that type of situation brings to a worker, voluntarily offered to assist her colleague, who was also simultaneously dealing with another high-risk case. Knowing the case, she was inheriting required a great deal of work and legal intervention, this was a compassionate, helpful, and selfless act. Ms. Green's selfless approach to this job is truly appreciated by her peers, DCF leadership and the clients she services.

Rodney Williams - Norwalk Area Office

The Norwalk office humbly submits the following employee, Rodney Williams, as the employee of the month. Mr. Williams has been with the department since 2006, where he has worked primarily in the Region 1 Investigation Unit. Despite the inherent challenges of investigations, Mr. Williams has been, in short, "the king of morale." He understands the needs of the office and the staff, and he has taken the initiative in organizing the summer outing. Mr. Williams is always available to assist his colleagues in both investigation and treatment but is also a huge advocate for the children and families he serves. In short, Mr. Williams is both loved and respected in the office and Fairfield community. Mr. Williams, endearingly referred to by his peers as "Uncle Rodney" or "Team Player Rodney," is often a light in times of negativity, and he often chooses to see the glass half full instead of half empty and works to pass that energy to not only his clients but his peers.



Peter Henry - Waterbury Area Office

The Waterbury Area Office is happy to nominate social worker Mr. Pete Henry as Employee of the Month. Mr. Henry began his work with the Department at CJTS. He joined Region 5 in 2016 as a SEBAC employee when CJTS was closing.

Mr. Henry's professionalism, engagement skills, and compassion for the work we do is evident in his work both internally and externally. No matter how much Mr. Henry has on his schedule for the day, he will always take the time to provide support to the families he serves by playing a game of basketball with a youth struggling on his caseload, giving time out of his weekends to supervise an event a child in placement is having so their parents are able to attend, or participating in a PPT with a parent to provide additional support.

Mr. Henry's work holds true to the Department's mission of children remaining safely at home and working diligently in getting children in care to return home. Mr. Henry partners with internal and external providers and brings everyone to the table to ensure all of those connected to the family are doing their best to service and support the families effectively. Mr. Henry is always willing to provide a helping hand to his peers and a great promoter of uplifting staff morale. No matter how difficult the day or week may have been, you will always be greeted with a smile by Mr. Henry. Mr. Henry is a true asset to this agency and an example to follow.

Elizabeth Wyatt-Freidman - Danbury Area Office

Elizabeth Wyatt-Freidman is Danbury's candidate for employee of the month. Liz exemplifies teamwork, as evidenced by her commitment to coworkers. She serves as a mentor to social workers new to the Department and to social workers new to their investigation role. She is never hesitant to make herself available to coach and/or assist her peers. Liz is an asset to the office and is often sought after for shadowing experience (i.e., take workers into the field, share her knowledge and perspective, etc.). Liz showcases positive energy and a genuine compassion towards the families served by the Department. She is patient and thoughtful regarding family engagement and has demonstrated a strong commitment to help families establish and maintain meaningful supports to ensure stability. She is relentless in her efforts to connect families to needed resources. She is confident, competent, and comfortable working with challenging families, which is evident in her day-to-day routine. She is not afraid to seek help when deemed necessary and will tirelessly explore/research all possible alternatives to problem solve.

Donna Savoia - Torrington Area Office

The Torrington Office is pleased to nominate Donna Savoia as our employee of the month. As a DCF employee for over 20 years, the last 6 years as an investigation's supervisor, Donna has worked tirelessly as an advocate for the children and families of Connecticut.

Methodical in her approach, in an often stressful and demanding environment, she is a voice of reason and calm, assuring families are respected, assessments are complete, and needs are addressed. Always

maintaining both high expectations and a supportive work environment, Donna is well respected by her peers and the intake workgroup as a whole. As a leader, she is cognizant of staff needs and is willing to roll up her sleeves and step into the fray if the situation demands it, always willing to offer guidance, help and support to the office staff. In addition to her supervisory responsibilities, Donna serves as a liaison to the Early Childhood Collaborative, is a member of the area office CQI team, serves as a back-up CRM facilitator, manages the intake log and is a tri-chair of the Torrington Racial Justice Workgroup. Donna is a true professional and an asset to the Torrington office.



Michael Bibens - New Haven Area Office

I would like to nominate New Haven Office Assistant Michael Bibbens for employee of the month. Michael is currently assigned to support an ongoing services workgroup. Prior to that, he was assigned to support the intake workgroup. Michael, however, does his best to always support all of us in the office, no matter what workgroup he is assigned to. He has an outstanding work ethic and always finds a way to assist, even though his plate may be completely full for the day. He never says he is too busy or can't fulfill the request. The answer from him is always yes. From assisting us with completion of 004's, to e-filing, ensuring service is

sent out for legal work, etc., he not only does it but does it with such speed, accuracy, and positive attitude. We are extremely lucky to have him as part of our team and work family. Thank you for all you do Michael!

Deanna Spero - Milford Area Office

Deanna is a skilled social worker who despite having a full caseload, has been able to manage a case involving a severely medically complex young child for over a year. In addition to attending several routine meetings, she has collaborated well with the family members, DCF nursing staff, DCF Foster Care Division and Engineering Department to ensure this child's needs are met and advocating for him to receive the best quality of care. Deanna has been an informal mentor for her peers and maintains a professional attitude.

Gladys Ortiz - Norwich Area Office

Gladys has been employed by the Department since 5/28/04 and has been a strong advocate for Hispanic/Latine families throughout this time. Gladys has spent the majority of her career in the Norwich Intake Function. She actively participates in the education of her coworkers around the Hispanic/Latine cultural, educating both colleagues and families of the nuances with the culture and language and how they correlate to their interaction with DCF personnel and community providers. Gladys is the first person that will respectfully but passionately advocate for the unique needs of the Hispanic/Latine community. Gladys advocates to be assigned cases of Hispanic/Latine children and families given her knowledge and experience despite this sometimes leading to a heavier workload for her. She is keenly aware that it is in the best interest of the children and families to be able to comfortably communicate with their social workers without the need of a translation service. While dedicated to providing effective communication and service implementation, Gladys's dedication never waivers from child safety. She maintains the highest level of integrity and respect with her interactions with her colleagues, providers, children and families. Statements from her colleagues include: "Gladys is a such a passionate social worker. I can only speak for myself when I say she helps me with visits, phone calls, text messages, and emails. She helps explain cultural differences when I may be culturally incompetent. I have heard her over calls, virtual meetings, and informal meetings advocating for her families all while continuously ensuring their safety and well-being. Gladys works long hours, often without compensation. She is the first to help within the intake (function) and usually the first to respond to "is there a Spanish speaking worker available". Gladys is one of the most compassionate, understanding, and helpful social workers in this office. She has been a great example for me". "Recently Gladys helped me during a removal of 7 children of Hispanic/Latine origin. She was familiar with the case and completely unprompted (and greatly appreciated), stepped forward and helped in contacting two out-of-state Spanish speaking fathers. This was a tremendous help for me and because of her effort both fathers were able to attend the 10-day



OTC hearing and present themselves as resources for their children. She is consistently helping staff every chance she gets and always stands out to me as an example when I think of outstanding social work." I was out on a same day intake response, Spanish speaking, physical abuse case. I had a new interpreter out with me, who had never done a DCF case before. She was petrified, and clearly not appropriately sharing what I needed shared. Mother was extremely combative and spoke a rare dialect of Spanish as she was from a very small town in Guatemala. The family had recently moved to the US and were in the process of immigrating. Once I got to the home, (as we started out at the school) the interpreter told me she could no longer stay with me, got in her car, and left. It was close to 7-8pm, I was stuck at this house, attempting to create a safety plan- now with an interpreter over the phone who was STRUGGLING to communicate with mother. My supervisor contacted Gladys, she came out to support me, she was able to calm mother down, and we were able to put the safety plan into place. She stayed with me for another almost 2 hours.... Truly saved the night and the children's ability to remain at home with their mother." I have had the experience of working with Gladys when I was a social worker and for the past 12 years as MH RRG. Gladys is, frankly, one in a million. She comes to a MH consult prepared, knowledgeable, and presents as a strong advocate for the safety and well-being." Gladys is employee of the month every month! This write up is from her Program Sup. Jenn Wilcox.

Aleasis Stainrod - Middletown Area Office

Aleasis (aka Laci) has made a lasting impact on the Middletown AO since joining the team in November 2023. She jumped right into her role as Secretary 1 and clerical support to the Office Director and Program Supervisors and took no time to learn the office, staff and their needs. She takes initiative, provides feedback and listens to her peers and staff as needed. She is always quick to offer her support and goes above and beyond to ensure the office is running smoothly. Laci presents with a pleasant and cheerful disposition but is also, all business. She's reliable, thorough and patient and we are grateful to have her.



Jessica Gonzalez - Willimantic Area Office

Jessica has been an integral support for the office and more recently for the Program Supervisors. She has been scheduling transferring conferences in alignment with our new Racial Justice Equity Tool for children of color whose family is being transferred to ongoing services. She has created shared logs for the PS team and has been extremely helpful, going above and beyond, managing all the nuances involved. Jessica has also taken the initiative to support staff around the summer outing. She is helping to coordinate the event, and her assistance has been invaluable. We are truly grateful to have such a great partner, who cares about the office and the staff, and tries to make everyone job a little easier!

Heather Czerwinski - Hartford Area Office

Heather Czerwinski consistently shows an exemplary attitude, effort, and work with the families she serves and support. Heather is being nominated due to the collaborative work she has accomplished with the foster care division, specifically with SW Monique Boyd. Heather has taken the time to get to know the children she supports within the role of a permanency worker while strengthening their relationship with the foster families. Heather continues to collaborate with internal and external partners to ensure the children she supports achieve permanency. She has worked to ensure children remain connected to their birth families regardless of the permanency outcome. Her legal work has been exceptional and shows the hard work she has put in on each case. During a CFSR review, her collaboration with SW, Boyd, was noted to have been done so well, that their work ultimately impacted a positive outcome. They worked to maintain consistent communication while supporting a youth and foster father who was struggling with one another along with going through some personal issues. They were able to support both the youth and foster father to stabilize the placement while the Department continued to move toward effectuating the permanency plan of adoption. Their collaboration was an integral part of stabilizing the placement while helping the youth and foster father strengthen their relationship. The most positive outcome occurred--Permanency! They both played a big role in ensuring that their collaboration moved the case forward.

Courtney Garvey - Manchester Area Office

Courtney has worked with the Department for the past 10 years and is currently out posted. Courtney will be recognized and honored by the Lawyers for Children America



in their upcoming 30th anniversary celebration in November 2024 in Hartford, CT. This is the first year that the Lawyers for Children America will be honoring 2 DCF staff, with Courtney being one. Attorneys for the Lawyers and Children America noted working on several cases with Courtney, one of which included many late nights searching for missing children which were eventually located safely in Philadelphia, PA all while managing numerous other demanding cases and achieving permanency for many others." The Lawyers for Children America noted, "As a remarkable staff member and social worker at DCF, you have made it possible for LFCA volunteer attorneys to provide exceptional representation and to achieve well above average outcomes for young people in Connecticut's child welfare system.

Ashley Cotto - New Britain Area Office

New Britain is very excited to nominate Ongoing SW, Ashley Cotto for the employee of the month award. Ashley has worked tirelessly on a very complex case Ashley was praised by the AAG and a family recently for her wonderful work with the family. Ashley has been working with this family since January 2023, having removed the children, moved toward permanency with a relative, then reunified the children ultimately. The AAG noted " Lots of good progress. SW Cotto has been "really great" per mother" in the court memo. Ashley goes above and beyond

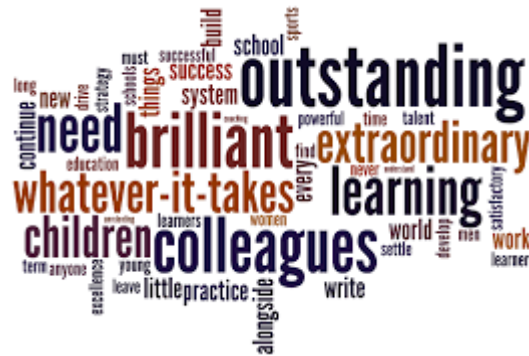
to advocate for her families and in this case was ensuring the youth was enrolled in the proper school upon reunification. Ashley assisted mother at every step and this youth is now placed in the correct setting and doing well, which also helps support the reunification being successful. This case is indicative of the quality work that Ashley provides to all of the families that she serves. Ashley is also a very active member of our Wellness team within the office. She is a valued member and an asset to the office!

Christopher Padilla - Meriden Area Office

The Meriden office is proud to nominate Social Worker Christopher Padilla for the Employee of the Month Award. Christopher exemplifies true teamwork, always eager to assist his fellow social workers while maintaining exceptional care for the families he serves. His positive outlook enables him to effectively engage families, helping them thrive. As an active member of both the Region 6 Fatherhood Engagement Leadership team and the Meriden Wellness team, Christopher consistently contributes ideas and takes initiative to drive progress. Beyond the office, he is deeply involved in his community as an artist and basketball coach. Christopher is a valued asset to the Meriden office, and we greatly appreciate his continuous support and dedication!

Amy Sherzai - Health Management/Behavioral Health and Community Services

Amy is the Clinical Nurse Coordinator for the Medically Complex Training Program. She is responsible for training and certifying all families and caregivers who care for our children with complex medical needs. She works closely with the social workers and nurses in the area offices assisting them with the process. The training is vital to those caregivers who are taking on the responsibility for some of our most vulnerable children. She also makes sure the families in which English is not their primary language, have access to translator and/or translated information. Amy also works with the Training Academy training pre-service social workers. She has worked as an RRG nurse as well as in our congregate care settings, which allows her to have a good perspective of nursing within DCF as well as in the community. For those of you who have been lucky enough to meet and work with Amy, you also know that she is a beacon of light and positivity wherever she goes. She brings such a special energy to any setting and gathering and a sense of humor that can get everyone to smile and laugh and be put at ease. We in the division especially central office are very lucky to be able to work with her. Thank you, Amy!



Gustavo Guevara - Bureau of External Affairs

Gustavo Guevara simply wants to help others. For decades, he has worked in the Office of the Ombudsman now referred to as the Office of Community Relations. Every day, and all day, Gus is a positive spirit around the office. He is the first to raise his hand to help others, ask about our

families and share a funny story. For those children and families that he serves, Gus is responsive, a calm voice during a time of crisis and he works quickly to enhance the image of the Department by resolving problems, answering questions and connecting those in need to the best person to address an issue. Most importantly, Gus leaves those who are in contact with him feeling better, supported, heard and in a better place.

Scott Basile - Transitional Supports and Success

Scott's biggest attribute is his ability to relate to others. He connects with our Wilderness School students, staff and community naturally and comfortably. People feel more at ease in his presence. This characteristic becomes a gift to students and staff looking for support and guidance. His consistency and reliability help ground and anchor the Wilderness School team. Scott can balance a no-nonsense directness with conversations that evaluate nuance. Additionally, Scott appropriately brings a light-hearted sense of humor and playfulness that adds to the buoyancy of our workplace culture. Scott's dedication most recently helped carry the work of the Wilderness School through retirement transitions and the current Wilderness School Team. We are grateful for his reliability and camaraderie.

James Terriaca - PRTF (South)

James, a clinician on the South PRTF Lakota unit, is truly deserving of the Employee of the Month award. He consistently goes above and beyond to ensure the youth in his care receive exceptional support. James steps up whenever needed and always maintains a collaborative, team-oriented attitude. His flexibility and dependability shine through, and his approachable, calm demeanor makes him a reliable presence for both colleagues and families. His work with families stands out, as he advocates for the youth with dedication and creativity, ensuring treatment plans are tailored to meet the unique needs of each child. Always greeting challenges with a smile, James's unwavering positivity is felt by everyone he works with.



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Jacqueline Aguilar - PRTF (North)

There are so many reasons Ms. Aguilar is deserving of this award. Here are just a few, as stated by her coworkers: She is a team player who has a good relationship with staff from all disciplines. She is professional. She is a strong advocate for the youth at Solnit North. She cares! She takes initiative on her shift and helps where needed, such as filling out paperwork in the absence of a Lead CSW. She has a gift when it comes to building professional relationships with the youth that she works with. She submits many activity requests for the youth, and in doing so, has made some great memories for our youth as they not only learned how to fish for the first time, but they have also reeled in their first ever fish! She has leadership qualities!

Amy Gorman - Solnit South Hospital

Amy Gorman an Advanced Clinical Social Worker at Solnit Hospital has been a tremendous asset to the Sachem clinical team. She has demonstrated the ability to align with, join and collaborate with families in a way that validates them while ensuring they are actively involved in their youth's treatment. She is not only emotionally present and supportive to the youth on her caseload (as well as any youth and/or staff she encounters) but fulfills an important clinical role, functioning as a clinical leader and positive example of trauma-informed client care. She has well demonstrated the ability to remain calm and consistently supportive to youth during crisis situations. Amy is dedicated and offers unwavering advocacy for the youth on her caseload. Furthermore, she has collaborated with other team members to develop and implement individualized plans for youth to target specific and challenging behaviors. Amy completes detailed and thorough documentation in all required aspects. She has excellent collaboration both internally (with Solnit team members) and external partners. She is a member of the events committee, working to make sure youth in Solnit care have special opportunities and moments to spend with important people in their lives. She is always willing to give of herself to support her youth, the unit staff (her colleagues), and the hospital facility needs, going above and beyond in supporting the milieu as needed (picking up shifts, staying late, coming in on the weekends). Amy is a strong member of the Sachem Unit clinical team and the Solnit Hospital clinical department. She comes to work daily with a positive and friendly attitude. We are better off because of her presence, compassion, knowledge, skillset, patience, and commitment, to and for this work. Thank you, Amy, for sharing your gifts with Solnit Hospital.

top of the class

Brenda Fournier - Fiscal

Brenda currently works as a Fiscal Administrative Officer and has been with the Claiming team for about 10 years. Brenda Fournier has been an exceptional asset to the team, who consistently goes above and beyond in support of DCF's mission. Brenda brings a high level of expertise in federal claiming, with an undeniable ability to lead others in the understanding of this very complex federal claiming process. In addition to being an expert in her role, Brenda is a champion in agency wide changes. Most recently, Brenda has supported all CT-KIND meetings with providing her recommendations and lending her professional point of views. The Revenue Enhancement Division is extremely thankful to Brenda and appreciates all her handwork.

Lydia Santiago - Juvenile Justice Education Unit

I would like to nominate Lydia Santiago, Administrative Assistant for Juvenile Justice Education Unit (JJEU) for Employee of the Month. Despite being new to the team, Lydia has made an incredible impact from day one. From the moment she joined, JJEU quickly adapted to our workflow and immediately took charge of streamlining processes, improving communication, and providing essential support to the team. Her proactive attitude and organizational skills have not only lightened the workload but also elevated the efficiency of our office. Lydia has

actively engaged in multiple facets of the team's work to provide valuable support across various processes. One key task she's taken on is creating a comprehensive contact list for the school districts across Connecticut, identifying nearly 200 districts that were not already on file. This demonstrates her thorough attention to detail and organizational skills in gathering critical information. Additionally, she is working to deepen her expertise in the STAR assessment, an important tool for evaluating student performance. Her goal is to become proficient enough to support residential facilities with data needs, showcasing her commitment to broadening her skill set and offering meaningful contributions where needed. Beyond her technical contributions, Lydia has also built strong relationships with the entire unit in a short amount of time, fostering a collaborative and positive working environment. Her ability to complete any task quickly and efficiently reflects not only her competence but also her proactive and adaptable approach to work. Whether tackling complex tasks like building databases or supporting assessments, Lydia continues to be an indispensable asset to the team. Lydia's positive energy and professionalism have set a high standard for the entire office, and she has become an indispensable member of our team in a short time. For these reasons, I believe Lydia is an excellent candidate for Employee of the Month and deserves recognition for the immediate and positive impact she has made.

Genevieve Munoz - Area Office Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

CCCSD is proud to nominate Genevieve Muñoz, LCSW, Advanced Clinical Social Worker Region 2, for Employee of the Month. Genevieve has been a state employee for the past 10 years, and throughout that time, her impact is immeasurable. She is known for her professionalism, honesty, and thoughtful and thorough consultation. She works to establish a strong foundational understanding to our practices and policies so that she can best help our staff. She brings a wealth of knowledge and support to the New Haven office. "When presented with challenges, Genevieve finds a solution. When solutions are challenged, Genevieve will find a better, new solution. Her calm demeanor and wealth of experience shines through in every case she touches." (PS Gerard Downes). We especially want to recognize her given her exceptional work and collaboration with community partners regarding a complex case involving a youth with opioid use, withdrawal symptoms, history of PTSD, anxiety, and polysubstance abuse. Despite the barriers and gap in substance use treatment for adolescents, she spent countless hours, weeks, and months advocating for this youth and his complex and intensive behavioral health needs. Her investment in our staff and the children and families we serve is truly remarkable. It truly is a pleasure working with her and learning from her.



Colleen Drummond - Academy for Workforce Development

Colleen Drummond has been a Child Welfare Trainer at the Academy for Workforce Development for nearly 4 years. She is a caring and genuine social work supervisor who is often sought out by many. She is an active member of numerous committees including Central Office's DAT, AWD Wellness Team, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Statewide Committee, and DCF's Mentoring Program to name a few. Colleen is an engaging, knowledgeable, patient, and talented individual. She is always willing to lend a hand and will always do research to achieve excellence. Colleen trains numerous curriculums within Pre-Service and In Service. One of her specialties is the Mindfulness Training which she has been able to transform into a brief workshop to support staff in the area offices. She recently supported the Willimantic Area Office's outing in early September 2024 where she held the Mindfulness Workshop and received much praise. Staff found her to be relatable, honest, and engaging. Some of the comments included: "this has been the best speaker at a Summer Outing"; "She was great-she talked to us not at us. She gets it" and "this is exactly what we needed". During this workshop, Colleen provided practical tips and resources for staff. Colleen possesses strong skills in communication, problem solving, and formulating ideas. She is extremely creative and resourceful as it pertains to the trainings she conducts, especially, Making the Most of Your Time. Colleen is committed to the work at DCF and delivers the message with grace. Because of all of this, Colleen is well deserving of Employee of the Month.



Tiffany Bacote - Education/Unified School District #2

Tiffany Bacote has served USD2 Schools for nearly 6 years. Throughout this time, she has demonstrated true professionalism. Tiffany is a respected and relied upon staff member who repeatedly goes above and beyond for the students and colleagues she interacts with. Her ability to assist the school community, in the various roles that she has held, has benefitted not only the Riverview School, but the Solnit South campus as well. Tiffany has taught two different subjects, Career Education and Social Studies. She helped establish a curriculum for Career Ed which focused on student's interests that explored various types of careers, through projects such as vision boards, resume building, and financial literacy activities. Due to some unexpected staffing loses, Tiffany moved into the Social Studies teacher role. Her transition to this content area was seamless. The relationships and rapport that Tiffany builds, with students and staff, are a couple of her greatest strengths. Her flexibility and perseverance to succeed continues to make her an asset for the school, facility, and agency. Tiffany has just recently transitioned into a new role as a Pupil Service Specialist. Her leadership skills and engagement with others continue to provide a positive learning and collaborative environment.

Lynn Hebert - Office of Legal Affairs

The Legal Division is honored to highlight the accomplishments of an attorney who is always available and willing to not only accomplish her own tasks, but to assist her colleagues in any way she can. Attorney Lynn Hebert has a long history of going above and beyond during her tenure with the Department. Most recently she has been a beacon to newly hired paralegals within the unit, offering one-on-one as well as group training sessions focusing on redactions, internal reviews and other duties unique to the paralegal position. She coordinates these trainings and adjusts her in-office days to offer as much support as possible and remains available for questions via TEAMS or phone calls. Attorney Hebert also collaborates with external partners as evidenced by her spearheading the project to upgrade the process for digital requests for confidential case records as well as public, freedom of information records. She exemplifies the values of the agency's mission, honoring the needs of clients by ensuring requests for historical records are provided to former clients of the Department, and their families, who are trying to learn more about their personal histories. Attorney Hebert conducts internal reviews for individuals who are attempting to gain employment but are hindered by placement on the Department's Central Registry. Attorney Hebert reviews these cases to ensure placement decisions are justified and are not unfairly impacting prior clients, especially those of color. Attorney Hebert's efforts benefit not only the Department's clients, but also her colleagues as she provides assistance and guidance in a multitude of areas, from insight on historic agency practice, guidance on navigating technology upgrades to developing new effective and efficient processes, including collaborations with CT-KIND. Attorney Hebert continues to excel as a representative of the Legal Division, ensuring staff are supported and clients receive the best service.

Carlos Yrayta - Foster Care Division

The Foster Care Division has the pleasure of honoring, social worker, Carlos Yrayta. Carlos has 25 years of service with the Department. During this time, Carlos has consistently demonstrated exceptional dedication and commitment to our children and families. Carlos goes above and beyond in his responsibilities. He is a valued team player and actively assists his colleagues. He is always willing to step forward and help when his peers need coverage. You will see Carlos at almost every Foster Care Division event. Carlos not only shows up but works up a sweat ensuring that families are having a great time and their needs are met. Carlos brings a positive energy to the workplace and always has a smile on his face. Carlos is an asset to our agency and deserves to be acknowledged everyday.