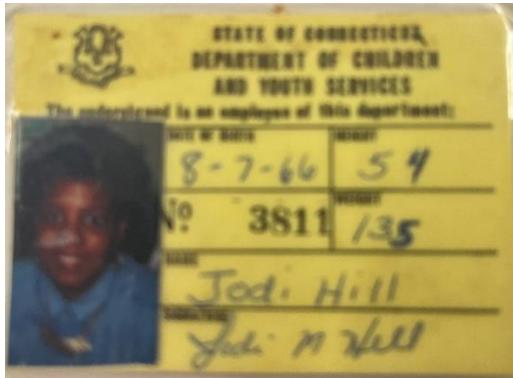


## Thank You from Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly



For the past 37 years, I have been honored to serve the children and families of Connecticut.

Never in my dreams would I have imagined my social work journey would have led me from a small desk in New Haven to becoming Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families.

countless friendships, memories, successes we have shared and the feelings knowing that WE ALL MADE A DIFFERENCE!

When Governor Lamont appointed me to be the Commissioner in January 2024, I was honored and committed to each one of you that I would support you and through the best and most trying times. This is who we are at DCF - family.



As I now begin the next chapter in my life, I will forever hold CT DCF close to my heart!



THANK You for all you have done especially over the last 18 months. We have accomplished so much in such a short time!

Early in my administration, Commissioner priorities were established leading to the development of our safety practice and service provision for the 0-5 population and transitional aged youth, the deepening of local partnerships, enhancing the framework for behavioral health and providing support for staff across divisions.

Perhaps my favorite memory will be the monthly "Employee of the Month" celebrations.

Reading not only why you are being honored but hearing who you are as people will forever stay with me.





To keep the family voice in the forefront of our efforts, Samaris Rose was hired as the first of its kind Parent with Lived Expertise Consultant position.

Due to the diligent efforts of so many, and after suffering the tragic loss of Eric Nixon, we successfully launched CT-KIND on time! This is a huge shift, and implementation will be a process, but We GOT IT DONE! Have some patience and it will get better!

Behavioral health supports to children were better aligned under the Behavioral Health and Wellness Division.

The Director of Child Safety Practice and Performance position was created and filled by Kelly McVey to place a greater focus on safety across all our decisions including the development of coaching sessions with supervisors and enhancing the use of the ABCD paradigm.



Two new Deputy Commissioners were appointed, Tina Jefferson and Stacey Gerber, and we completed a more comprehensive reorganization to put ourselves in the best position possible to meet the evolving needs of our children, families and staff.

Many laughs and shoutouts were heard during the Commissioner monthly videos that provided staff with an update on Agency operations and key developments across the state.

Prevention was named as the 6<sup>th</sup> Strategic Outcome as we continued to work to not only prevent families from going deeper into existing systems, but to prevent them from even being referred to DCF.

The DCF Employee Pinning Ceremony was created by Karina Klemm, Yvette O'Brien and Melanie Mercado to honor those DCF employees we have lost. It was incredible to see our DCF family wearing blue, the outward expressions of gratitude towards the family who lost a loved one and how we all came together to support each other during these difficult times.



In collaboration with State Department of Education (SDE), Connecticut Education Association (CEA), Legislators, and community partners, changes were made to Connecticut's Mandated Reporter laws allowing for mandated reporters to conduct a "preliminary inquiry" to determine if reasonable cause exists for a report to be made, and immunity to such persons that, in "good faith," do not make a report.

Permanency was established for over 1,700 children including over 800 children being reunified, 500 Transfers of Guardianship and 400 Adoptions.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation selected Connecticut to be a member of the SOUL Family Framework Partnership Cohort aimed at improving permanency outcomes for older youth in foster care. SOUL Family stands for Support, Opportunity, Unity, and Legal Relationships.



The Mandated Reporter training was enhanced to include the "Seeking Support is a Sign of Strength" Roadmap video for community partners.

We partnered with the Governor's office to create the first Suicide Prevention Round Table.

A Working Group was launched with the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), alongside the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) that

focused on improving outcomes for caregivers with substance use disorders and young children and eliminating ingestion injuries.

Legislation was supported that enhanced the role of DCF Statewide Advisory Council (SAC) and clarified what can be shared publicly regarding DCF's involvement with a family.

Monthly collaborative meetings took place with Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division (CSSD) to discuss critical cases, shared training opportunities, emerging themes and improving overall communication.

The "Ready to Foster" campaign was developed to recruit new foster and adoptive parents. [Ready to Foster](#). We even had Governor Lamont take part in two public service announcement for foster care and Hartford Mayor Arunan Arulampalam and his family made one as well!





"This is DCF" training was developed to inform new hires, community members and others of a comprehensive view of the vast mandates and activities of the Department well beyond simply the protective services mandate.

A social media app was created in partnership with young adults and a provider partner that keeps young adults linked with caregivers and loved ones and connects them with essential resources.

Connecticut continues to be an opportunity state where equitable supports for all children and families is at the forefront of our efforts.



The Community and Court Liaison positions were reestablished in every Region to improve collaboration with the Court Support Services Division (CSSD) to support youth dually involved with DCF and the Juvenile Justice system.

Ongoing collaboration has taken place with the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) and the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) to address the emerging needs of children and youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Intellectual Developmental Disabilities (IDD).

Nationally, I continued to Co-Chair the National Partnership for Child Safety (NPCS) learning collaborative with a mission to improve child safety and prevent child maltreatment fatalities.



To reinforce that safety decisions are not solely made by a single individual as they are only one part of a complex system, I co-authored a national article entitled, ["The Blame -and - Shame Cycle in Child Welfare Needs to End"](#) that was published nationally.

As part of the Human Resources interview process a Realistic Job Preview Video was launched.

Implemented Naloxone training for all Agency staff and now have Naloxone in each office and facility to be administered in case of emergency.

We met regularly with the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to discuss the Agency's Safety Practice and Quality Improvement efforts.



Administered a statewide Safe & Sound Cultural Assessment Survey measuring workplace connectedness, mindful organizing, psychology safety, and racial justice.

Conducted the first Wellness Leadership Forum that created an opportunity to gain tips on taking care of ourselves with a renewed focus on our leadership's well-being to develop wellness strategies to support our staff at all levels.

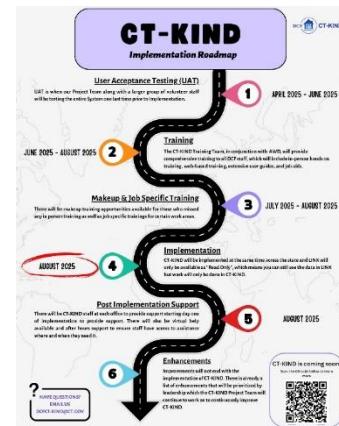
Established the DCF Fatherhood Steering Committee, which includes fathers with former involvement with DCF, foster and adoptive fathers and community fathers, to advocate for the inclusion of fathers and father figures in child, youth, and family policies by leveraging their lived experiences to shape effective programs, policies and practices within DCF.

Partnered with Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) to promote work with "Connecting Schools to Care," "Suicide Prevention Awareness" and other training.

Began an online, on-demand interactive training for educators entitled, "DCF Introduction to Child Trafficking in Connecticut for Schools."

Engaged with Legislators throughout the year with invitations to key Department activities, providing them DCF materials and improved timeliness of response to constituent questions.

Remained in frequent contact with leadership from state employee Labor Unions to answer questions and clarify operational procedures for their members throughout the Department.



Coordinated the Leadership Academy for Social Work Supervisors (LASS), Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM), the Executive Fellowship Program (EFP), and the nationally recognized Mentoring program to develop staff both personally and professionally.

Held the first of its kind "UConn School of Social Work and Department of Children and Families Research Forum Symposium."



Speaking of UCONN, I delivered the 2024 Commencement speech for the School of Social Work and yes, I sang at the end!

These are just several of our accomplishments!

With mixed emotions my time at DCF is now ending with new beginnings as the Director of the Child Well-Being Program at the National philanthropic Doris Duke Foundation (DDF).

In this exciting role, I will lead the program that aims to promote children's healthy development and protect them from abuse and

neglect. DDF works to build a more creative, equitable, and sustainable future across three areas: Arts & Culture, Nature, and Health & Well-being. In addition to identifying new grantmaking opportunities, I will manage one of DDF's signature grantmaking programs Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation, or "OPT-In for Families."



**DORIS DUKE  
FOUNDATION**

As I step into this national role, I do so with hope and urgency, knowing our most vulnerable need us now more than ever. My roots and my heart will always be in the great State of Connecticut.

I wish each one of you, and your families, the best moving forward!

Thank you!



## 'You Matter': Going the Extra Mile for Youth in Care



*Ongoing Services Social Worker, Chris Jackle, at the Employee of the Month ceremony in July.*

As students across the state gear up for a new school year, it's not just youth who deserve recognition—it is also the adults who walk beside them, pushing, encouraging, and showing up when it matters most. Ongoing Services Social Worker Chris Jackle, an Employee of the Month in July, was not just cheering from afar for the youth and young adults on his caseload. He made it a priority to attend nearly every graduation in person, even on his own time.

"Being there is everything," Chris says. "A lot of our kids never had someone in the audience at their elementary school concert, or cheering them on at a track meet. Just being present says, 'You matter.'"

Chris is not new to the work. With over 20 years in the agency, he has held nearly every social work role imaginable—from investigations to adolescent services. For him, being a social worker is about relationships, teamwork, and presence. Chris credits his team in the Hartford office for sharing the load and helping youth succeed—especially when handling the complex web of overlapping needs that adolescents often present.

"We all know each other's cases," he says. "If I can't be there, someone else from the team will be. That's the beauty of our unit. It's not just a name on a screen—it's a kid. It's a life."

"I've seen it through all the lenses," he says. "It helps navigate the world of DCF, especially when it gets to adolescent services, because you really understand what these young men and women have gone through."

That perspective has helped shape Chris into the worker he is today—present, invested, and relentlessly committed to outcomes. This past year alone, Chris celebrated five youth reaching graduation milestones: four received their high school diplomas, and one earned a Bachelor's Degree in Forensic Science/Criminal Justice.

One especially powerful example comes from a young woman, "R", who had fourteen different placements over the course of the school year. School was a struggle; she often acted out and felt completely defeated. But Chris refused to let her slip through the cracks.



He attended countless PPTs and school meetings, spent quality time with her, and advocated for recovered credits so she could transition from junior to senior year—and graduate on time. Today, the youth is preparing to attend CT State Community College, with hopes to pursue a nursing degree.



Another young adult, "M", came to Chris with little support and a heavy past. After migrating from Jamaica and being abandoned by her mother, M faced mental health struggles and educational challenges. To add to all of that, her father is serving a life sentence. She was a special education student with few people to lean on—but Chris became her constant.

"She had nobody, and I became her person," he says. "Every visit, I brought her favorite Jamaican food because that was the comfort of home for her. It seems like a small thing, but it meant the world to her."

That kind of attentiveness, Chris says, is non-negotiable. He explained, "If you don't take the time to really learn who these kids are, you're just another social worker to them. That's a disservice. These are human beings. You have to show up. You have to care."

As a father of three boys under ten and a youth sports coach outside of work, Chris brings that same team mentality into his practice. "I just put the ball on the tee," he says. "They're the ones who hit it out of the park."

Looking ahead to the new school year, Chris' hope is simple, yet profound:

"I want my kids to push themselves. Not to be complacent. If they fall, they learn. If they fail, they grow. My role is to make sure they know we're here if they need us. That's how they succeed."

Here's to another school year of showing up, lifting up, and helping our youth reach what's possible.

## Transforming Lives with Vision, and Heart/Consistency, at Unified School District #2 Virtual Academy



As another school year begins, Unified School District #2 educator Michael MacDonald, a July Employee of the Month, is transforming lives. As the Team Leader for the Virtual Academy Unit, he is doing so one credit, one connection, and one student at a time.

The district's Virtual Academy is a vital credit recovery program that supports secondary youth in care who are over-age or under-credited. The Virtual Academy provides flexible online courses that complement students' full-time school programs, helping them recover credits, gain academic skills and graduate without disrupting their regular school day.

*Michael posing with his Employee of the Month certificate alongside Comr. Hill-Lilly.*

"We try to offer additional levels of support and academic mobility within the constraints of the school day," Michael says.

"The goal is to create flexible learning plans [...] some students work during school hours, others after school or at home. We adapt to each student's situation."

To date, the Virtual Academy has celebrated over 200 student graduates, a milestone that speaks volumes about the effectiveness of the program and the dedication of educators like Michael. He takes a personalized approach to education which revolves heavily around strong communication and building relationships from day-one.

"I text students two to three times a week, visit them in their placements, celebrate their progress. Building relationships early on helps them stay engaged and return to school in a better place."

During the 2023–2024 school year, DCF's Juvenile Justice Education Unit was integrated into USD #2. Michael became a linchpin in building bridges. He emphasized that successful collaboration leads to better student outcomes.

In his day-to-day, he works closely with public school educators, support staff, and community partners to ensure a smooth and supportive academic transition for students returning to their home districts. Taken together, this system of support ensures students involved with the juvenile justice system receive the same level of academic rigor and emotional support as their peers.

Michael explained that one of the program's greatest strengths, in fact, is this partnership model, or teamwork approach, which allows them to tailor an academic experience that meets a student's unique needs.

Michael said he starts working with students in detention centers and follows them through all their placements until they return to their full-time school district or alternative program.

This continuity ensures students receive consistent academic support during often turbulent transitions.



Michael's secret? He meets students where they are, helping establish structure, encouraging personal accountability, and fostering a sense of ownership in their educational journey.

*“I provide a constant point person for students across placements and districts. Many families we serve are transient, but no matter where their stop is, I provide a consistent person focused on their education to help keep students on track despite life’s upheavals.”*

These efforts around consistency and engagement have paid off: in just two years, student participation in the Virtual Academy among Juvenile Justice youth increased to 70 percent.

Given Michael's own certification in special education, social studies, and school administration, he can connect with students on multiple levels, sparking interest even in subjects they might not have loved before.



His supervisor, USD #2 Superintendent Matt Folan said, “Michael doesn't just teach content—he empowers kids to believe in their ability to succeed. That belief is often the spark that turns academic challenges into success stories.”

Michael recounts several success stories, including students who managed to keep up academically despite hospitalizations or disciplinary challenges.

However, Michael added that, “Every student we help earn credit and graduate is a success story. For students who buy in and work with me—texting, logging on, doing the work—success follows.”

Whether meeting students in their placements, refining instructional strategies with his peers, or ensuring that each student has a path to academic recovery, Folan said Michael brings a level of consistency, care, and professionalism that sets a high standard across USD#2.

“Michael’s work ethic and ability to build meaningful relationships have created a ripple effect—one that improves not only individual student outcomes, but also strengthens the entire Virtual Academy.”



*Brien McMahon school counselor, Elaine Gratrix, poses with "B" who graduated with help from Michael and the flexibility afforded by the Virtual Academy.*

Elaine Gratrix, a school counselor for Norwalk Public Schools, agrees. She recounts the experience one recent student, "B", had graduating with the help of the Virtual Academy.

"The Virtual Academy was a godsend for her! It literally made graduation possible. B came into her Senior year needing more credits than we could fit into her school schedule, so we knew she would need to have a perfect year and then attend Summer School in order to graduate."

"I was worried that she might not be able to maintain her focus for this long a stretch. Then, when B's family became displaced in December, her chances of graduating took a nosedive. Due to a lack of transportation, she was out of school for long periods

of time. Our classes don't have an online option, so she struggled to keep up," Gratrix explained.

"However, during her extended absences, B was very productive online and earned a number of credits. If it weren't for Virtual Academy, she definitely would not have been able to graduate this summer and likely not returned to high school this year."

Through it all, Gratrix said Michael was always very understanding, supportive, and encouraging. He made himself available to B and promptly provided assistance with her progress. Being able to see that steady, consistent progression helped to keep B's morale up and stay motivated until she graduated.

As the 2025–2026 school year gets underway, Michael’s work serves as a reminder of what is possible when educators are empowered to lead, collaborate, and innovate. The success of the Virtual Academy speaks volumes—not just in numbers, but in lives changed.

## DCF Youth Attending Colleges and Programs Across the Country!



For the academic year 2025-2026, Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) will be continuing their journey in post-secondary education.

They will attend traditional 4-year colleges and universities across the country - as far away as Michigan, North Carolina, Colorado!

Some youths are staying local and are enrolled in community colleges. Vocational, technical and job training programs are the choices for others which lead to careers as Medical Technicians, Mechanics, Electricians, and many other trades.

Congratulations to the Regional and Central Office staff who have supported these youth to reach this point in their lives!

School is in session and the future is yours!

## 4-year Colleges and Universities

Academy of Art University  
Albertus Magnus University  
Bluefield College  
Boston University  
Bridgeport International Academy  
Bridgewater State University  
Central Connecticut State University  
Clark University  
Colorado State University  
Eastern Connecticut State University  
Excelsior University  
Fordham University  
George Washington University  
Goodwin University  
Hofstra University  
Husson University  
Iona University  
Johnson and Wales University  
Keiser University  
Keuka College  
Livingstone College  
Long Island University  
Maine Maritime Academy  
Mitchell College  
Post University



# Colorado State University

Purchase College  
Purdue University  
Rutgers University  
Sacred Heart University  
St. Joseph's University  
Salem State University  
Southern Connecticut State University  
Southern New Hampshire University  
Springfield College  
Student University of Environmental Science and Forestry  
University of Bridgeport  
University of Connecticut  
University of Hartford  
University of Massachusetts - Amherst  
University of Massachusetts - Boston  
University of Maine at Farmington  
University of Michigan  
University of New Haven  
University of Rhode Island  
Western Connecticut State University



### **2- Year and Community Colleges**

Asnuntuck Community College  
Capital Community College  
Front Range Community College  
Gateway Community College  
Housatonic Community College  
Lane Community College  
Luzerne County Community College  
Manchester Community College  
Middlesex Community College  
Naugatuck Community College  
Norwalk Community College  
Quinebaug Community College  
Three Rivers Community College  
Tunxis Community College



### **Vocational, Technical and Job Training Schools**

Connecticut School of Bartending  
Culinary Institute of America  
Florida Institute of Technology  
Lincoln Technical Institute  
Northeast Medical Institute  
Porter and Chester Institute  
Savanna Technical College





### **Employee of the Month Awards!**

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

#### **Areli Perez - Careline**

The Education Professionals Investigation Unit (EPIU) would like to proudly acknowledge Social Worker Areli Perez for Employee of the Month. She is being nominated by Lisa Daymonde. Areli has been with the Department for over 17 years and has always demonstrated an unwavering dedication and compassion for the work she does. For the past five years, she has worked as a Social Worker in EPIU investigating schools, daycares, camps, and bus companies. In this role she builds and maintains positive working relationships with the school districts, Office of Early Childhood, and various community providers we collaborate with. She is knowledgeable in this specialized work and conducts quality investigations. She listens with empathy, and advocates for the children, families, and professionals she works with. Most recently, Areli worked on two separate Exceptional Circumstances involving young children; one which involved the death of a child. Through these challenging and sad circumstances, Areli demonstrated extraordinary compassion, strength, and professionalism in supporting the families and other adults involved. She performed the necessary duties of her job, while offering comfort, dignity, and guidance to those involved. Her grace and compassion speak to the essence of what social work is all about. We are proud of Areli and enthusiastically nominate her for this recognition.



#### **Kathleen Gondola - Waterbury Area Office**

It is an honor and a pleasure to nominated Office Assistant (AO) Kathleen Gondola as Employee of the Month. Kathleen is being nominated by Jeanette Blackwell. Support staff do a lot of their work behind the scenes. Behind every successful OTC, there was an OA that helped put it together. Behind every successful placement with a relative, there was an OA that helped conduct background checks on all the adults to facilitate that placement. It is commonplace to walk into an office after hours and see social workers running around handling an emergency. What you might not always see is the OA tucked away in an office somewhere helping to complete the paperwork in support of the workers and children we serve. They say

teamwork makes the dream work. It is a cliché, but there is truth to it. We want to take this time to honor an important member of that team in Waterbury - Kathleen Gondola. Kathleen is one of those OAs that carries on the tradition of supporting staff without fanfare. Staff have stated that she is always willing to help and always with a smile. She does it out of sense of pride, out of a sense of work ethic, in the spirit of teamwork, but most importantly as a fulfillment of her responsibility as support to the staff and families we serve. Thank you, Kathleen, and all you represent. You are an asset to the Agency and to the Waterbury Office.

### **Ryan Therriault - Danbury Area Office**

It is with great pleasure that Danbury acknowledges Intake/Probate Supervisor Ryan Therriault as Employee of the Month. He is being nominated by Jeanette Blackwell. Since accepting the challenge of managing a split unit comprised of Probate and Intake, Ryan has demonstrated exceptional leadership, adaptability, and a strong commitment to both his team and the clients served by the department. Ryan has skillfully balanced the unique demands of both disciplines, providing structure, consistency, and a clear sense of direction. He has been instrumental in guiding his staff, offering support not only in day-to-day operations but also by supporting social worker duties when needed (i.e., stepping in to cover visits, transportation, etc.), demonstrating a hands-on leadership style is deeply appreciated by his team. Ryan approaches every challenge with a solutions-oriented mindset. His ability to solve problems in real time and offer practical, forward-thinking solutions has made a noticeable impact on team efficiency and morale. Under Ryan's supervision and leadership, staff have expressed growth and increased confidence, allowing them to excel in their roles. Ryan fosters a supportive environment where employees feel encouraged, valued, and empowered to succeed.



### **Carols Yrata - New Haven Area Office**

For more than three decades, Carlos Yrata has been a pillar of the Department of Children and Families and is nominated for Employee of the Month by Shawn Wright and Jenny Johnson. Known affectionately as "your social worker's favorite social worker," Carlos is our Swiss Army knife in times of need and is always ready, always dependable, and always willing to step in where others might hesitate. When a difficult client needs to be engaged or a tense situation calls for calm and skillful resolution, Carlos is the person we trust. His breadth of experience spans every aspect of our work, making him a resource not just for his immediate team, but for the entire office. Colleagues respect him deeply, leadership values his unwavering honesty and empathy, and families feel his genuine commitment to their well-being. Carlos is more than just a social worker, he is an advocate, a mentor, and a beacon of perseverance. Even while facing personal tragedies, he has remained a steady rock for both his family at home and his DCF

family at work. His strength, integrity, and dedication to children and families embody what it truly means to serve in this profession. Carlos is cut from a different cloth, and the fabric of our agency is stronger because of him. It is with great pride and admiration that I nominate Carlos Yrata for Employee of the Month.

### **Kathleen Schultz- Milford Area Office**

It is with great pleasure that Kathleen Schultz is being highlighted for Employee of the Month. She is being nominated by Jenny Johnson. Kathy has been employed with the Department for 29 years. She has been in the Foster Care Division since 2006. Kathy's dedication and commitment to our families is unmatched. Most recently, she volunteered her time to assist with the Weekend For A Lifetime recruitment and licensing event to increase our pool of foster parents. Kathy is always willing to help her peers and goes above and beyond the call of duty. Kathy assisted in developing 004 PowerPoint training and provided this training to Region 2 staff. Kathy's positive attitude, collaborative spirit, and unwavering commitment make her a tremendous asset to the Department. She not only excels in her own role but also actively elevates the morale of our entire team.

### **Sabrina de Oliveira - Norwich Area Office**

Intake Supervisor Sabrina de Oliveira is being nominated for Employee of the Month by Jennifer Wilcox. Sabrina is an asset to the department in many ways. She has long standing and established relationships with the local police departments, has a passion for the work and has found an effective way to ensure that she holds her unit accountable and is able to remain motivating and personable. As her manager, she frequently reaches out to ensure that her thinking is in line with mine. She is never afraid to advocate her position but is also able to be flexible to others' thinking. She is able to take and provide feedback and is always looking for ways to improve and streamline the work. When her unit was asked to describe her leadership, they stated the following ~"When I think of a strong, competent, successful leader, I think of someone who leads by example or 'practices what they preach.' This is Sabrina. She goes through struggles with us and never allows us to feel alone or unsupported. She is kind, helpful, and humble. She constantly makes herself available for us, no matter the time of day, or what else she has going on. She really listens to us, offers help, makes suggestions or even just creates a space for complaints/venting. She creates a positive and supportive environment which in turn encourages us to be and do our best. It's so nice to have a supervisor who I can talk to, and who I can trust to support me and advocate for me. It's also nice to know what you are getting with Sabrina. She makes her expectations clear and holds us accountable. She welcomes questions and shows appreciation for the work we do, even when we may not feel like we are doing our job well. This job is already hard, and to not have supportive leadership, it makes the job nearly impossible. We are so lucky to have her!" ~"Sabrina is someone who I look up to not only as a social worker/supervisor, but as a person too. She is kind and always thinking of others. Having such a



supportive, responsive supervisor, who genuinely cares, makes all the difference in the work that we do each day. She is always right there, working just as hard behind the scenes while we're in the field and giving clear directives while also valuing our assessments. Sabrina is not afraid to make her voice known and fight for what's right, not only for clients but for her workers too. She makes me feel heard and appreciated, and I am even more proud of the work that I do with her behind me." ~"Sabrina is an outstanding supervisor who not only supports our unit by taking on additional work when needed but also takes the time to educate and guide us in our roles. As a social worker, I feel comfortable reaching out to her at any time for advice or assistance, knowing she will be there when needed. Sabrina is a bright, dedicated leader who genuinely cares about her team and is committed to strengthening our knowledge and growth. Even in challenging situations, she always finds a way to resolve issues with grace and determination. I sincerely appreciate her hard work, dedication, and compassion, which makes me proud to say she is my supervisor. Sabrina is somehow able to be all the above while also being a mother to 4 young children and an amazing baker!"

### **Jamie Isaacs and Katie Silano - Middletown Area Office**

Jamie Isaacs and Katie Silano have been nominated for August's Employees of the Month for the Middletown Area Office by Shawn Wright/Ayesha Gaines. Jamie has been with DCF for 19 years, starting her career in Middletown

then moving to New Haven and Milford where she was promoted to Supervisor 11 years ago. Jamie has been an Intake Supervisor in Middletown for 9 years and has truly been an important and valued

member of our leadership team. Jamie is not only a highly skilled and dedicated supervisor, but she is the most enthusiastic and positive member of our intake team. Jamie understands the value of supportive supervision and is a strong advocate for her staff. Jamie is a total team player; she will do anything to help. She digs deep to figure things out for all of us. Her high energy level and positive attitude is a bright spot for our team and for our entire office. In addition to her supervisory duties, Jamie is a very active member of Middletown's Wellness Team. She dedicates her time and energy despite the daily challenges of the work and Jamie's contributions have led to fun and successful activities for all staff. Our most recent event at the beach was a huge success largely due to Jamie's hard work and creative ideas. Jamie can always be counted on to show up and show out at our events. Thank you, Jamie, for all you do for us and for the children and families of Connecticut!

Katie has been employed with Department of Children and Families for 21 years and has been in a supervisory role for 11 years. She has been provided the opportunity to supervise both family services and intake. She is currently overseeing a training unit. Katie has demonstrated both leadership and enthusiasm in her role. As a training supervisor, she holds one of the most crucial positions in the supervisory field. Katie has ensured that the trainees are receiving proper coaching and supervision. It is evident that she takes her supervision seriously and takes pride in her work to ensure they have all the essential tools and skills to be successful. Katie co-



leads the Middletown Wellness Team alongside with Jamie and they make a great team for wellness activities. She dedicates her time and energy despite the daily challenges of the work and Katie's contributions have led to fun and successful activities for all staff. Our most recent event at the Hammonasset Beach State Park was a huge success largely due to Katie and Jamie's hard work and creative ideas. Katie can always be counted on to show up and show out at our events. Thank you, Katie, for all you do for us and for the children and families of Connecticut! Katie is an asset not only to the Middletown Office but to the Department of Children and Families.

### **Chelsea James - Hartford Area Office**

Social Worker Supervisor Andrea Forbes along with Maritza Velez nominated Social Worker Chelsea James for Employee of the Month. Chelsea exemplifies the heart and soul of social work through her compassion, presence, unwavering reliability, and exceptional professionalism. Even while managing several high-profile cases, Chelsea maintains a calm and steady approach that reassures clients and colleagues alike. Her ability to stay grounded allows her to navigate complex situations with clarity and grace. Chelsea consistently brings innovative solutions to the table, combining critical thought with a deep understanding of the needs of the families. Her creativity is resourceful and transformative. Whether working directly with clients or coordinating with providers, Chelsea is fully present and engaged. Her commitment to collaboration strengthens our network and ensures that every case receives the attention it deserves. Chelsea has proven herself to be dependable, a colleague you can count on, the advocate clients trust, and the professional who leads by example. Congratulations, Chelsea. Your dedication and excellence inspire us all.



### **Maribel Rentas - Willimantic Area Office**

Social Worker Maribel Rentas is being nominated for Employee of the Month by Shawn Wright and Ashley Hill. Maribel has a challenging in-home caseload that has warranted more than the twice monthly visitation standard for several of her cases to ensure the children's safety and well-being in their parent's care. Maribel goes above and beyond working with the children and families on her caseload. Maribel has remained focused on ensuring improved outcomes for children and families. Maribel always documents her narratives timely and of quality, using the ABCD paradigm and the early childhood roadmap like a champ. No matter the challenge or situation, Maribel presents herself in a professional manner, is prepared for any outcome, and thinks a step ahead. You can always count on Maribel to smile and have a positive mindset, and she is able to find strengths in any situation. Her strength and positivity radiate throughout the office and is inspiring to us all. Maribel truly is a team player, always stepping up to help co-workers with transports, home visits, and helps with taking cars for service, while having a full caseload of her own. Maribel demonstrates a strong skill set and recently reached her 15 months with the Department. She is an asset to this agency, as well as a wealth of knowledge.

Her families are extremely lucky to work with her as well at this Agency. Keep up the amazing work Maribel!

### **Amy Klvana - Manchester Area Office**

Social Worker Amy Klvana was nominated for Employee of the Month by her peer Melissa Howe and Maritza Velez. Here is what Melissa has to say about her. "Amy has proven that she is the epitome of team player. I was working on a very difficult case in intake with a young infant, a case with many complexities, and learned early on that Amy was going to be the ongoing worker. She jumped in headfirst, without an official assignment, assisting me with supervised visitation and attending some of the many doctors' appointments the baby had scheduled. Amy and I shared the responsibility of the social study, as this came up very quickly due to a contested OTC trial. Amy willingly attended both the OTC hearing and the trial. Her support, assistance, and willingness to help will not be forgotten. I wouldn't have gotten through the past weeks without it. Amy and I have spent many hours discussing this case, and she is determined to do what is best for the safety of this baby. She deserves to be highlighted not only for her team player attitude but also for her great work with families and for the safety of children.

Amy is so appreciated! "



### **Deborah Breedlove - New Britain Area Office**

Office Assistant, Deborah (Debbie) Breedlove was nominated by Social Worker Nick Mislagle and Maritza Velez. Nick stated that "Debbie has always been a huge help for me during my time with the Department. Since leaving the training unit and being on the 6th floor, Debbie has been an amazing support for me and many others within the office. Debbie has continued to assist me and many others with WAF's, questions about WAF's, scanning documents when in a pinch on a teleworking Friday, and with difficult providers seeking their payments and dealing with the back-and-forth emails. I want to shout out Debbie for her continued above and beyond work and support and to say thank you!"

### **Marta Guzman - Meriden Area Office**

Marta Guzman was nominated by her Social Work Supervisor Robert Hicinbothem and Martiza Velez for Employee of the Month. Marta serves as a Case Aide for the Meriden office. As a Case Aide, Ms. Guzman is on the front line with our clients, both children and adults, and her caring, thoughtful nature comes through in every interaction. Ms. Guzman consistently goes above and beyond, bringing calmness, professionalism, and expertise to every situation. She helps to create an environment where families can make the most out of the time they have together. She is accommodating within reason toward families and collaborative with co-workers. She is insightful and compassionate, regularly bringing concerns to workers for challenges her clients are facing. She is consistently willing to sacrifice her own personal time to help ensure clients' needs are met. Ms. Guzman's contributions benefit the department in general, the Meriden

Office specifically, and, most importantly, the families we serve, and it is our honor to present her as the Meriden office's Employee of the Month.

### **Eric Clemons - PRTF (North)**

Eric Clemons, a Children's Services Worker (CSW) at Solnit North, consistently demonstrates exceptional support for a visually impaired youth residing in Maple Cottage. He is being nominated by Mike Rulnick and Summer Denby for Employee of the Month. His unwavering commitment to meeting the youth's individual needs is marked by patience, dedication, and genuine compassion. A creative problem-solver, Eric adapts quickly and effectively to challenges, always seeking innovative ways to promote independence and inclusion. His consistent, hands-on support and collaborative approach have had a meaningful and lasting impact, ensuring the youth thrives both programmatically and personally. Eric fosters an empowering environment where the youth feel valued, supported, and capable. His actions also positively influence staff, contributing to a culture of teamwork and empathy. His supportive, patient, and inclusive manner exemplifies the highest standards of care and advocacy.

### **Matthew Hartley - Fiscal Division**

Accountant Matthew Hartley is nominated for Employee of the Month by Christine Hoffman. Matthew Hartley has been a member of the Child Welfare Accounting team since the Fall of 2022. During his time here, he has created several procedures that have assisted other team members in learning new aspects of their jobs while also ensuring the work they do will pass Audit requirements. Each year our Agency is required to provide 1099s for providers who complete taxable services. In January 2023, there were no written procedures, and Matt started his learning process of what is required for reporting and defining a process. In the Fall of 2023, a new manager was hired for CWA and worked as Matt's assistant to go through the 1099 process. Matt further developed written guidelines on the process as they worked. The required documents were completed and distributed to DCF's providers on time. This past January when the reporting period came around, Matt handled and continued to refine the whole process on his own. This amounted to over 10,000 records being reviewed and completed in 7 business days. Through his continual refinements, he was able to document providers who were missing their taxpayer id's early in the process. These were contacted and he had a 95% success rate in completed documents in that group. In August 2024, Matt noticed an issue with our reporting of July expenditures. He collaborated with the Budget Unit and IT staff to identify a list of transactions that had been reported incorrectly. He also contributed to a team effort to work with our bank to address the issue and determine how it could be fixed. In summary, the monthly bank file showing check dispositions had been overwritten, resulting in an empty file to be uploaded into Link. As our checks have a one-year expiration date, Link reviewed the checks in August 2024 and mistakenly marked checks that should have been



cashed as expired. This led to the reversal of their value and an understatement of our expenses, affecting \$7 million in transactions. Matt has served as a Subject Matter Expert for the 1099 and bank reconciliation process for CT-KIND. This has not been an entirely smooth process, but Matt has been an Agency champion in making sure that our reporting remains accurate and on target.

### **Kenneth Bratina - Solnit South Hospital**

Henry D. Hippolyte would like to nominate Lead Children's Services Worker Kenneth Bratina as Employee of the Month. As we are all aware, Kenneth is an outstanding colleague to all and incredible mentor to the youth. Kenneth consistently shows such dedication to the quality of care that is provided to Passaic youth and is always looking to learn and grow to best support our youth. He is consistent, kind, and empathetic in his approach. Colleagues from multiple disciplines have described Kenneth as follows: "He is one of the first people to show up when things get difficult. Even on difficult days, KB's charisma, humor, and willingness to help is unmatched." "He puts others first." "He cares about his team." "Great sense of humor." "He keeps me safe." "Always willing to do everything." "He never complains." "Leads by example." "Calm, solid presence." "Helps people out." "Protective." "Hardworking." "Great leader." "Trooper." "Superman." A few youths described Kenneth as "Funny with the Dad jokes". "He's like superman" and "Nice."



### **Nella Whitmore - Office of Legal Affairs**

This month, the Legal Division is pleased to highlight Nella Whitmore, the Staff Attorney for Milford and Meriden, as Employee of the Month. She is being nominated by Kate Dwyer. Nella has been with the Department since 2004, and she consistently provides sound legal support and guidance to both of her busy offices. Nella's legal analysis is thorough and well-reasoned, utilizing the ABCD paradigm and knowledge of child protection law to guide her decision making. Nella zealously represents the Department at administrative hearings and brings the same level of energy to the Academy of Workforce Development when assisting with legal preservice training. Nella is truly a team player who never hesitates to assist her peers, and she consistently approaches her work with enthusiasm. She has strong collaborative relationships with our AAG partners and is a valued member of the Milford and Meriden teams and the Legal Division! Keep up the great work, Nella!

### **Suzanne Hollister - Health Management and Oversight Division**

Suzanne Hollister is a Supervising Nurse Consultant in Central Office. Being nominated by Kimberly Kanaitis. Suzanne provides exceptional leadership over two critical programs within the Central Office: Medically Complex Certification program and Care Coordination Unit. These programs provide support to families, caregivers and the Area Offices staff in the coordination of care for children with complex medical needs. Suzanne's unwavering dedication, innovative

mindset, and collaborative spirit has been instrumental in the successful placing of children into safe settings with much needed support. Her ease in working with nurses, social workers and Area Office leadership contributes to the needed communication and collaboration of both internal and external partners with these complicated cases. Her consistent positive attitude and commitment to a team-based approach elevates the quality of care and problem-solving within the cases she consults on. She goes above and beyond in coordinating services and advocating for families, caregivers, children, and youth. Her efforts reflect not only professional expertise but a deep sense of empathy and integrity. Suzanne eagerly embraces new challenges and routinely goes above and beyond her formal responsibilities—contributing meaningfully to a variety of projects outside her assigned role. Her influence resonates across the division, setting a high standard of excellence, adaptability, and teamwork. It is a true privilege to nominate Suzanne for Employee of the Month—her exceptional contributions to the Health Management and Oversight Division deserve recognition and celebration.

### **Julie Flemmig - Administration**

Program Director Julie Flemmig has been selected as Employee of the Month in recognition of her exceptional leadership and dedication in guiding the development and rollout of the Department of Children and Families' Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS), known as CT-KIND. She is being nominated by Dr. Joyce Taylor. From the earliest stages of planning to the final phases of implementation, Julie's vision and steady direction ensured that this groundbreaking system was designed to meet the complex needs of both case workers and the families they serve. Her leadership was instrumental in aligning cross-functional teams, managing multiple stakeholders, and overcoming technical and organizational challenges to deliver a system that modernizes how child welfare information is managed in Connecticut. Julie's ability to balance innovation with practicality created a foundation for CT-KIND to become a reliable, user-friendly tool that enhances case practice, strengthens decision-making, and improves outcomes for children and families. Beyond her child welfare expertise and project management expertise, Julie distinguished herself by fostering a culture of collaboration across all divisions of DCF, BITS, CSG, and Deloitte. She handled these internal and external teamworks with great care. Her resilience was truly tested with the passing of Eric Nixon. We were so fortunate to have Chandra Hegde step up, and together they inspired everyone to stay focused on the mission of protecting children and supporting families to get the project across the finish line. CT-KIND's successful rollout is a testament to Julie's leadership, and her contributions will continue to benefit DCF staff, children, and communities for years to come.



### **Shaquille Downing - Juvenile Justice Education Unit**

We are proud to recognize Shaquille Downing for the incredible impact he brings to our team and the youth we serve. Shaquille is a Pupil Service Specialist for the Juvenile Justice Education

Unit and is being nominated by Tina Mitchell. Shaquille always sees the glass as half full which translates well in the unit and with the youth. His optimism and collaborative spirit create a welcoming and compassionate environment where his peers value what he brings to the table and the youth he serves can thrive. His skills as a social worker in a public-school setting have made his transition to a PSS seamless. Shaquille consistently demonstrates a strong understanding of youth development and the importance of meeting youth where they are. He approaches every interaction with empathy, patience, kindness and professionalism. His ability to adapt, listen, and implement feedback shows a true commitment to growth—both personal and collective. His self-driven attitude and commitment to excellence do not go unnoticed. Shaquille takes initiative, stays focused on the goals, and handles challenges with a level-headed approach. These qualities greatly contribute to the way he manages his time and cases. Whether it's tackling something new, offering encouragement, supporting his coworkers, or going the extra mile to make sure every young person feels seen and valued, Shaquille is someone we can all count on. Thank you for being dependable, uplifting, and having a deep care for our mission.

### **Colleen Drummond - DCF Academy Workforce**

Ms. Drummond is a dedicated and highly skilled Child Welfare Trainer at the Academy for Workforce Development with extensive experience and knowledge with DCF. She is being nominated for Employee of the Month by Tracy Davis. Colleen joined the AWD Team in 2020. Known for her expertise and independence, she consistently goes above and beyond to support peers, staff, and the Area Offices she serves as a liaison. A recognized leader in wellness, she regularly facilitates wellness trainings across Area Offices and is a valued resource agency wide. Her work includes creating or updating over 20 training modules, such as Mindfulness, Secondary Traumatic Stress, Cultural Diversity and Inclusion, Leading from Supervisory Perspective and Case Planning. Ms. Drummond frequently supports staff through one-on-one coaching and is known for her technological expertise in platforms like OneNote, Outlook, and OneDrive. Her active participation in committees such as CODAT, Help Me Grow, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Statewide Committee, DCF's Lead Mentoring Program and the Academy's Wellness committee further reflects her commitment to staff development and agency initiatives. Ms. Drummond exemplifies professionalism, innovation, and collaboration, making her highly deserving of this recognition.



### **Zachary Thorne - Continuous Quality Improvement**

The Continuous Quality Improvement division is proud to recognize Program Supervisor Zachary Thorne as Employee of the Month. He is being nominated by Nicole Dionis and Rosemary Wieworka. Zach has been with the agency for 19 years and has been a QI PS since 2020. Prior to joining the CQI team, he was a CR-CFTM Supervisor and was known and appreciated for his ability to facilitate honest conversations with all parties and help the team

come to a consensus in the best interests of children. Since Zach joined the CQI team, he has brought his considerable CPS knowledge and experience and his analytical and data skills to help staff. He always thinks about what would be most helpful for staff, especially the front-line staff, and how data could be used to help them do their work and help families. Zach developed the In-Home Combo Report with this goal in mind- how to provide data for social workers, supervisors, PSs, etc. so that they can quickly and easily see the cases with 0-5 children in the home, higher risk cases, and other important data points. He also developed the DRS Combo Report and the CIP Combo Report which have multiple data points in one report for ease of use by staff. He has also been instrumental in working with Mindshare for the development of a Parent Visitation report which provides data on visits with both mothers and fathers, allowing for provision of focused data on fatherhood visitation and engagement. Zach's work was also critical during the move from LINK to our new CT-KIND system. He developed a "CPS Bridge" file to provide CPS history during the time that LINK was not available, and staff were able to use this file to look up cases and determine if there was CPS history. He also worked directly with Careline and other staff during this time to help with finding the relevant case history. This proved to be invaluable for some critical cases that were reported during the crossover to CT-KIND. Zach's thoughtful approach to data and analysis is so beneficial to the regions he works with and the agency as a whole. We wanted to acknowledge Zach and share how appreciative we are to have Zach as a member of our CQI team. Thank you, Zach, for your continued hard work and advocacy to help staff do this work with children and families!