



## Department of Children and Families *Spotlight On What's Right*

### A MESSAGE FROM COMMISSIONER HAMILTON



I wish you and your families a wonderful holiday season! As we celebrate the holidays and welcome in the New Year, I hope you all have an opportunity to rest, recharge and remember the meaningful impact you have made on the lives of Connecticut's children and families.

*"Home for the Holidays"* is a theme commonly associated with this time of year. Because of your efforts, thousands of children across Connecticut have remained safely at home with their families. We

are grateful for the diligent collaboration across the entire child welfare system - DCF staff at all levels, sister state agencies, contracted providers, lawyers, Judges, Court personnel, families and other community partners to name a few.

While we all work together to prevent any unnecessary removal of children from their families, there are unfortunately times when that cannot be safely avoided. However, in those instances, a timely

and safe reunification back home is the primary goal. This year, over 350 children have been reunified with their parents bringing the total to approximately 3,100 in the past 5 years. Youth of all ages are now waking up in the comfort of their own homes, in familiar neighborhoods, and surrounded by family. They are truly *"Home for the Holidays."* We will continue to prioritize safely preventing removals and supporting timely reunification in the year ahead.



For Gordon Baird, this holiday season is unlike any other. For the first time in more than a decade, he will wake up Christmas morning with his daughter, Alliyah, under the same roof - not for a visit, but for good. Read more in his month's "Spotlight" about his family in *"Home for the Holidays: A Father, a Daughter, and a Long-Awaited Reunification."* Gordon and his family were also featured in the Hartford Courant: [Reuniting with his daughter a priceless gift at Christmas for a CT dad](#)

*"I have become the father I said I wanted to be,"* is how Tai Thergood describes his parenting journey. He celebrates the holidays - now with his three children - in ways that he previously could not imagine. Tai was featured in 2022 when his children had just been reunified in ["The Third Time's the Charm."](#) His story was then displayed nationally: [NBC Today Show](#). How is the family now? What message does Tai have for Dads involved with DCF? What awards have he won this year? Read more in this month's "Spotlight."



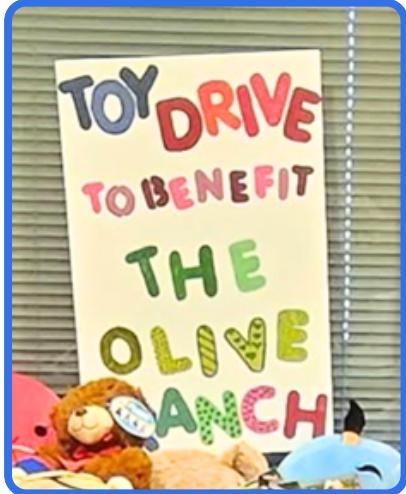
For those children who cannot safely remain at home, Kinship care remains the priority placement. We are proud that approximately 48% of children who initially enter care are now placed with Kin with approximately 50% of children overall placed with individuals with whom they have a familial relationship. We are grateful to our partners at the CT Mirror for covering Connecticut's Kinship practices: [Inside CT's push to increase 'kinship care' placements for children](#)



DCF's critical and complex work was also highlighted when NBC's Amber Diaz interviewed Chief Administrator of External Affairs Ken Mysogland for her podcast: [Say More with NBC Connecticut: A conversation with DCF](#). Thank you, NBC media partners!

For the past five years, families involved with DCF have been supported by The Olive Branch. This year-round shop, referred to as "DCF's version of the North Pole," offers a variety of new toys, gifts, school supplies, and handmade items that are donated by members of the community. The mission of The Olive Branch is to help DCF families by offering free items that may alleviate a burden or stressor in their lives. Watch the media coverage here: [NBC 30 Families shop for Christmas gifts at the Olive Branch, DCF's free toy store](#) and [Hartford Courant - The DCF Olive Branch](#)





Southington High School Senior Reilly Bard has supported DCF and The Olive Branch for years by organizing toy drives. We are so appreciative of her efforts! Learn more about her here: [WTNH - Southington High School and DCF Host Toy Drive](#)

Thank you as well to Senator MD Rahman for his generous donation to support The Olive Branch and to Aleksandra Bruce Farooque for partnering with

DCF as part of his Eagle Scout project. Our work would not be successful without Maven Dauber, a young woman with lived experience, and her wife, Penny, whose generosity and commitment during the holiday season touched our hearts in lasting ways. Look for a listing of all donors in additional correspondence.



A shout out one

more time to the November Employees of the Month! Who has been nominated for the December Award? Read to see who is described as "Never afraid to get her hands dirty," an "Amazing person and an amazing Social Worker" and a "dream."

Congratulations to Foster Care Division Program Supervisor Danny Reyes who was named as one of six national "2025 Elevate and Celebrate" honorees for his leadership in strengthening family bonds and reimagining foster care by the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative. We are proud of you, Danny!



Speaking of the Foster Care Division, they organized & hosted Holiday parties across the state. The joy on the children's faces, hearing the stories of admiration and love from foster & adoptive parents, and seeing our staff connecting to the children and families was priceless! Of course, we held a few babies and listened to long lists of holiday wishes. Santa and Mrs. Claus even came....but the Grinch was sick and stayed home! Job well done!

Bridgeport Office Director Chrichton Stewart took part in a ribbon cutting event at The Child and Family Guidance Center. DCF's support has resulted in the organization's transformation of the first floor of their outpatient clinic. This is true partnership in action!

Connecticut Children's Medical Center has completed the largest expansion in the organization's history leading to an innovative, child-centered space designed to deliver expert and compassionate care in a healing and welcoming environment. I was honored to attend the ribbon cutting for their state-of-the-art clinical tower.



Lastly, we are logging the miles on the State vehicle traveling to the Area Office Town Hall meetings. Thank you to the staff in Hartford, Norwalk, Bridgeport, Torrington, New Haven and Milford for the genuine and authentic conversations! In the near future, we will be heading to the remaining offices and our facilities, providing an update on the resolution to some of the issues raised and discussing plans moving forward. See you soon if we have not already!

In next month's "Spotlight" look for the "Best of 2025" and a listing of our most prevalent accomplishments.

Please accept my heartfelt appreciation for everything you do and remember to take care of yourselves, be safe and stay warm!

# "HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS: A FATHER, A DAUGHTER, AND A LONG-AWAITED REUNIFICATION"



*This year, Gordon and his daughter Alliyah will spend their first Christmas together with Gordon as primary caregiver.*

Gordon is careful about what parts of his past he shares publicly. He acknowledges those challenges once pulled him away from his family, but he prefers to focus on the present and the work it took to get here. That work included overcoming financial barriers, navigating court processes, and proving he could provide a stable homelife for Alliyah.

"I had to get a two-bedroom apartment. I had to do a lot of that on my own," he explained. "I make just enough that I don't qualify for assistance, but it's still hard. I worked 20-hour days, 24-hour days. It was exhausting, but it was worth it."

Throughout the process, Gordon traveled long distances for court dates, commuted between cities for work, and persisted even when progress felt slow. Rebuilding a relationship with Alliyah while preparing to parent her full time was both challenging and deeply rewarding.

"It's amazing," he said of their life together now. "We've always had a good connection, I just haven't been able to be around for her like this. She wanted this, and I wanted this. It really does feel like Christmas."

This year, the holidays will be simple: cooking together, opening presents at home, and enjoying everyday moments that once felt out of reach. Next year, Gordon hopes to start a tradition with his daughter, one that he remembers fondly from his childhood - going to pick out and cut down a Christmas tree together.

For Gordon Baird, this holiday season is unlike any other. For the first time in more than a decade, he will wake up Christmas morning with his daughter, Alliyah, under the same roof - not for a visit, but for good. On November 25, Gordon officially reunified with his fourteen-year-old daughter and became her primary caregiver, closing a long and difficult chapter and opening a new one filled with hope, responsibility, and togetherness.

"It was amazing," Gordon said, describing the moment he learned reunification was happening. "I wasn't able to be with her in the past... her mom had full custody for a good portion, and it was impossible. So, to finally be here, it means everything."

For Alliyah, reunification was not just a change in address; it was the fulfillment of a long-held hope. According to her DCF social worker, Kelly, Alliyah had wanted to live with her father for as long as she could remember. When the time finally came for that to happen, Kelly said Alliyah was elated.

"For everything she's been through, she is a true example of resilience," Kelly said.

Despite years of instability, Alliyah has excelled academically, earning high honor roll recognition and even a scholarship award toward college.

"She's always been focused on her goals," Kelly added. "And being with her dad, where she wants to be, means more to her than anything else."



Kelly has worked with Alliyah for nearly two years and met Gordon in April 2024. She describes this case as one of the most meaningful of her career.

Shaped by past experiences and a sense that the system had failed him before, Gordon initially approached the process of working with DCF with understandable skepticism. Over time, however, he began to trust the process and the people supporting him, including Kelly.

"We really worked on building that trust," Kelly said. "He let his guard down and was willing to be vulnerable about what he needed. Once that happened, everything started to move forward."



A key piece of assistance was DCF's supportive housing program, which provided not just a housing voucher, but intensive, wraparound services. Gordon met weekly with a housing worker who helped him plan for long-term stability - securing furniture, managing bills, and exploring job options that better fit Alliyah's schedule.

Of the supports Gordon received, Kelly explained, "They don't do it for you. They point you in the right direction so you can succeed on your own."

Even challenges, such as Gordon's apartment being located near an area tied to his past, became sources of motivation rather than setbacks.

"When I asked if that would be a trigger, Gordon told us 'no' it was a reminder of how far he's come," Kelly said.

For Gordon, becoming a full-time parent has brought profound personal growth. "I have to be more responsible," he shared. "I'm saving more money. I'm looking at things differently. We're learning together."

When asked what advice he would give other parents working toward reunification, Gordon did not hesitate, "Just know it's possible. Do whatever you need to do. These are our children. That's the motivation."

The meaning of "Home for the Holidays" runs especially deep for him. For many years, Gordon spent the holidays incarcerated and separated from his daughter.

"This is the first Christmas I'm going to have with my child. I can't even explain how it feels."



Kelly sees this reunification as a powerful reminder of what is possible when families are supported by DCF, and when the Department treats fathers as equal and capable caregivers.

Approaching the work through this lens, Kelly said, "Gave Alliyah what she's wanted her whole life - hope, family, and togetherness."

As Gordon and Alliyah look ahead to Christmas morning, and many holidays beyond, they do so from a place that for years they have both longed for: home.

# "I HAVE BECOME THE FATHER I SAID I WANTED TO BE"



"I have become the father I said I wanted to be," is how Tai Thergood describes a journey shaped by resilience, accountability, and an unwavering commitment to his children—despite navigating systemic barriers that have historically limited fathers' roles, particularly Black fathers, in child welfare spaces. Today, Tai celebrates holidays and everyday moments with his children in ways he once could not imagine.

Tai's story originally appeared in the Spotlight on What's Right newsletter in 2022, shortly after his children were reunified with him, in a piece titled, "[The Third Time's the Charm.](#)" In that feature, Tai spoke candidly about painful experiences within a system reflective of implicit bias surrounding fatherhood engagement and assumptions about fathers' capacity to parent. His story is one of perseverance, intentional growth, and a refusal to give up on his desire to raise his children—despite them being placed in foster care on three separate occasions over the course of more than a decade.



## Life After Reunification

Since that time, Tai and his children have become recognizable faces in their community after their story was featured nationally as an example of the evolving nature of child welfare in the United States, including on the NBC Today Show segment, [NBC Today Show: This state's foster care population has dropped by a third since 2019. What happened?](#) Often, they are approached with a familiar question: "Didn't we see you on tv?"



Life, however, has not been without challenges. Tai describes the years following reunification as an "uphill battle," marked by adjustment, healing, and learning how to lead a family after prolonged separation. Like many parents navigating reunification, Tai initially overcompensated by providing material things as a way of making up for lost time. With reflection and growth, he came to understand that what his children needed most was presence, consistency, and emotional safety.

With intention and leadership, Tai proactively engaged his family in both individual and family therapy. He describes the process as transformative—opening communication, addressing unresolved trauma “We had a real game plan,” he said. Together, they intentionally recreated healthy family systems and strengthened relationships.

## Health, Loss, and Balance

Over the past several years, Tai has endured significant personal loss, including the passing of family members and a brother. “It’s okay to cry. It’s okay to be sad. Just don’t stay there,” he often tells others.

During this time, Tai also faced serious health challenges related to untreated diabetes, which resulted in nearly a month-long hospitalization and the loss of his job. This period became a turning point. Since then, Tai has lost over 150 pounds from his highest weight and intentionally reduced his work schedule from 75+ hours a week to a more sustainable 40-hour balance. “Now I have a good understanding of what I should be doing as a father,” he shared.



## Fatherhood Today

Tai is the father of four children: Taizir (19), Tajh (16), Taraji (13), and Tori-Lee (6). He is a single father to his three oldest children and shares joint custody of his youngest.

Taizir currently attends Job Corps in Massachusetts, where he is focused on learning the trade that aligns with his goals and long-term aspirations. Tajh and Taraji are thriving academically and personally, improving their grades into the 3.2–3.5 range while continuing to grow in responsibility and confidence.

Tai maintains high expectations in the home, often reminding them, “The way you keep your house is a reflection of what’s going on inside you.”



## Leadership, Advocacy, and Community Impact

Today, Tai is a respected leader within his community and across systems that once questioned his role as a father. He works closely with the Region 1 Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (F.E.L.T.) and the Fatherhood Steering Committee alongside Anthony Gay. Tai also serves as Chairman of the Connecticut Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) Initiative, contributing to statewide

efforts to improve access, equity, and family-centered care.

Tai continues his professional relationship with Sal Hanaif, founder of Impact Dads 101, crediting the program with helping him develop practical tools that supported reunification and long-term family stability. Together, they have presented at major fatherhood-focused events, including the Power of Presence Fatherhood Conference and the 25th Annual New England Fatherhood Conference, where Tai consistently delivers a message rooted in patience, perseverance, and intentional involvement. "Be patient, have perseverance, and be present," he tells fathers, while emphasizing that the system is not something to avoid but something to actively engage.

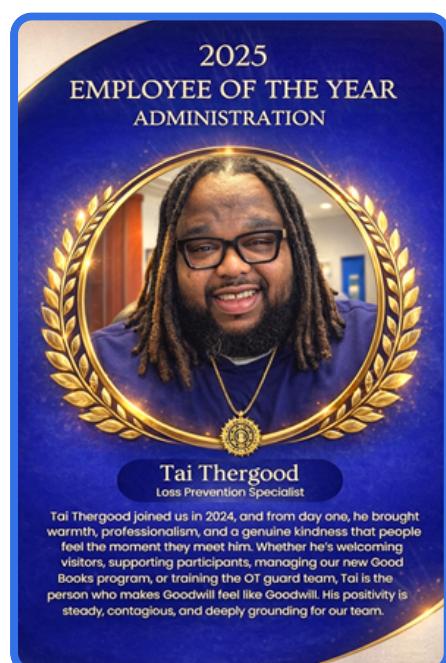
## The Good Dad Program

As a motivational speaker, Tai often finds other fathers drawn to him – sharing their stories, seeking guidance, and looking for hope. This inspired him to found The Good Dad Program, an initiative dedicated to strengthening fathers, reshaping narratives, and building community through accountability and presence.



Through The Good Dad Program, Tai connected with "AP," a father determined to improve his relationship with his daughter. Tai provided mentorship and support as AP strengthened his consistency, communication, and presence as a parent. Today, AP is a CDL truck driver, maintains a significantly improved relationship with his daughter, and is a major and active part of The Good Dad Program community.

"Being present is the gift we get to give," is a message woven throughout Tai's work.



## Professional Recognition & Entrepreneurship

Tai was recently recognized as **Employee of the Year** for his work as a **Loss Prevention Specialist**, an honor reflecting his integrity, leadership, and professional excellence. In addition to his community and advocacy work, Tai is also an entrepreneur and the founder of **The Good Security Services**, a business rooted in accountability, protection, and service.



Tai Thergood's story reflects not only personal transformation, but also the evolving recognition of fathers as essential partners in family wellbeing and community strength. As he often reminds his children, "You're going to get the dad you need." His work continues—at home, in the community, and within the systems he now helps shape.

# DECEMBER EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH



## CONNECTICUT Children & Families

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

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

#### **Vickie Peters - Transitional Supports and Services**

In 2023, Vickie transitioned to DCF's Central Office as a Children's Services Consultant in the Transitional Supports and Services Division. In this role, she has committed to the successful development of DCF's LGBTQ+ work and has built multiple outcome data portals to measure the performance of the team's contract work. Vickie takes strong initiative and leadership in her work, follows through on tasks quickly, and approaches her responsibilities with a high level of seriousness and conscientiousness. She can be relied upon to meet deadlines and manage responsibilities with care and efficiency. Vickie is a team player who consistently supports colleagues and contributes thoughtfully to group efforts. Throughout her career, Vickie has demonstrated a strong and consistent commitment to improving outcomes for youth and families served by DCF. Vickie began her career with DCF in 2008 as a Treatment Social Worker and later an Intake Social Worker in the Waterbury Office. In 2014, she was promoted to Supervisor in the Danbury Office, where she trained and mentored new staff in both Treatment and Investigative practice while overseeing a split unit. In 2016, Vickie returned to the Waterbury Office as the Region 5 Foster Care Supervisor in Matching, providing leadership and support to teams across multiple offices and strengthening partnerships with community providers.



#### **Stacy Guest - PRTF (South)**

Solnit South PRTF's December Employee of the Month is Children Services Unit Supervisor Stacy Guest. Stacy has been a state employee for more than 20 years and takes great pride in supporting at-risk youth. She is a true team player and someone you can always count on to get the job done. When there is a project that needs attention, Stacy does not wait to be asked—she steps in immediately and offers support to both the program and her staff. As a leader, Stacy is always willing to look inward and engage in self-reflection to grow and improve. During times when other Supervisors were

out on vacation or assisting with interviews at the central office, Stacy stepped up without hesitation to ensure the PRTF units continued to run smoothly. Her reliability and commitment helped maintain consistency and stability for both staff and youth. Stacy is also deeply invested in engaging the youth we serve, many of whom have experienced significant trauma and have often lost hope. She works intentionally to expose youth to new experiences and opportunities that help them build confidence, discover their strengths, and begin to envision a more positive future for themselves.

### **Pamela Davis-Burgess - PRTF (North)**

Solnit North's December Employee of the Month is Pamela Davis-Burgess, Medical Record Specialist II. Pam has consistently demonstrated exceptional dedication, professionalism, and attention to detail in her role as a Medical Record Specialist II. Her contributions have had a profound impact on both the efficiency of our Department and the quality of service we provide to our youth and the Solnit North team. She has consistently maintained the highest standards in managing medical records. Pam's meticulous approach to data entry and ensuring that all records are up-to-date, accurate, and complete has significantly reduced errors and improved the overall workflow of the Department. She has streamlined the process of retrieving and organizing patient records, making it faster and more efficient for staff. Her proactive approach to anticipating needs and staying ahead of deadlines has contributed to a smoother, more organized workflow. She has shown a keen interest in staying updated with the latest regulations, technology, and best practices in medical record management.

She has actively participated in training sessions and has even suggested improvements that have led to more efficient practice in the department. Pam consistently goes above and beyond in her role as a Medical Record Specialist II. Her dedication, expertise, and positive



attitude have made a lasting impact on our team and Department. Solnit North is proud to have her as part of our team.

### **Kim Watson - Fiscal**

Kim Watson currently serves as Fiscal Administrative Supervisor in the Business Office. Kim leads a team of five mentors and two newly promoted FAS team members. Kim started with DCF working in the Regional Offices and gained a vast knowledge of DCF Business Practices. She was one of the first Regional Business Office Staff to relocate to Central office and paved the way for a centralized purchasing and payment department. Kim has really honed her leadership skills during the past year, when she and her team worked without a Fiscal Administrative Manager. Kim not only used her vast experience to solve problems but managed to create innovative solutions. We have always been amazed at the remarkable way the business office works together - regardless of the challenges -whether entering 102 Youth Service Bureau Payments in 3 days: ensuring that vendor payments were made quickly and correctly; and working with Solnit North and Solnit South when they were without a Fiscal Administrative Supervisor. With more than 24 years of experience in DCF, Kim is a proven leader and an asset to DCF Fiscal.

### **Jacqueline Ford - Bureau of External Affairs**

Community Outreach Coordinator Jacqueline Ford has significantly increased the public image of the Department of Children and Families. Through her nationally recognized development and managing of The Olive Branch to engaging with community partners across the state, an understanding of DCF and the critical support we provide to families - above and beyond the belief that we simply remove children - has been enhanced. Jackie is humble, an incredibly hard worker, and exemplifies both personally and professionally the values, morals and beliefs of a true Social Worker. Jackie has an unwavering creativity to provide for our families and outreaches to key community contacts when a specific need arises. She has contacts who respond to her immediately, allowing her to raise money, accept gifts and increase support at a moment's notice. Jackie's ability to engage with youth, families, foster parents, legislators, private business owners and everyone in between is amazing. She has tender heart and compassion for everyone. Have we also mentioned her fabulous fashion sense and love of animals? When asked, she simply says, "Yes," and when she calls, you better say "Yes" in return as she is a fierce advocate for what she believes is right. We are so grateful that Jackie is both a part of the Bureau of External Affairs and the Agency as we are all in a better place because of her efforts! Thank you Jackie!

### **Ilaya Velazquez - Area Office Clinical and Community Consultation & Supports Division**

Ilaya Velazquez is being nominated for Employee of the Month by Kristen Oliver. Since Ilaya accepted the Manchester Substance Use RRG role two years ago, she has consistently gone above and beyond to support Region 4

with meeting their needs. Ilaya has demonstrated a high level of responsibility to the work, often changing time off to meet the needs of the Region. Throughout her two years with the Department, she has consistently covered consults for other offices. Most often than not, Ilaya is handling more than one office. Even through the busiest of times, Ilaya smiles and says she is managing just fine! What really stands out regarding Ilaya is her willingness to lend support to ensure the job gets done. Recently, Ilaya outreached asking if there was any support needed within the Region in addition to her typical role, as well. After providing coverage for so long to other offices, my response was breathe and take lunch! It's her dedication to the work that makes her stand out as an Employee of the Month. Thank you, Ilaya, for your constant smile, positive attitude, and dedication to this work! You are so appreciated!



### **Vanessa Hudson - Careline**

Vanessa Hudson is being nominated as Employee of the Month by her staff and Lisa Daymonde. Vanessa was promoted to Program Supervisor at Careline in February 2022. Her leadership: dedication and commitment to the Careline staff has been constant throughout her Careline career. From Brenda Concepcion, "Vanessa is always willing to help and assist me with any issues or problems, even when I call her by mistake on Fridays. (LOL) She is always pleasant and informative. Vanessa has been very accommodating and supportive with my transition to first shift and my issues navigating CT

Kind and UKG pro. Even when I was having issues with the First Shift Coverage; she assured me that "I got this", which gave me the confidence that I needed at the time. I feel that her leadership and constant support is a great asset to all the staff; not only to the people she supervises; but all the staff at the Careline feel comfortable seeking her assistance. I have witnessed her interactions with staff from the region, and she is always polite and knowledgeable and does her best to assist and resolve the issue, with a good attitude." Anita Groballi stated, "I nominate Vanessa Hudson for Employee of the Month. I don't even know where to start because so much comes to mind when I think of how amazing Vanessa is and trying to just sum it up is not easy. She is always incredibly supportive, calm, proactive, helpful, and a great role model and mentor. In addition, her vast knowledge and experience make her a tremendous asset not only at Careline, but at the Department. I still remember when I first came to Careline and I would call her in the middle of the night when she was on call, my first words would be 'so sorry to wake you, but...' and she would say, 'Don't be sorry I'm here for you!' We are beyond fortunate to have Vanessa on this team." Kate Levy stated, "Vanessa is a constant source of support and always available to help troubleshoot any problem or question we encounter. She is nonjudgmental and approachable which allows for open communication. Vanessa has calmly and clearly supported her staff through the implementation of CT Kind which has created a lot of frustration and uncertainty among

Careline staff. Overall, Vanessa is a manager anyone would be happy to work for." Jessica Noel stated that "nominating Vanessa for employee of the month is an easy decision! Even though we work opposite shifts, Vanessa has a

way of making the busiest night feel lighter with her warmth and approachability. Those who know her would agree that Vanessa has a way of making everyone around her feel supported, heard, and valued." Vanessa Hudson can be described in countless ways, but a few that immediately stand out are collaborator, motivator, innovator, and critical thinker. She is an indispensable member of our Careline team whose impact extends far beyond her immediate role. Vanessa consistently supports not only our Careline staff, but the Agency as a whole and the community we serve. She is frequently sought out for questions and information, and lately she has become the go-to resource for CT-Kind inquiries. Vanessa is always ready to support, assist, and contribute wherever she is needed. Vanessa's dedication and leadership enrich our organization every day, and we are truly fortunate to have her as part of our team.



### **Latoya Lowery - Norwalk Area Office**

We are recommending Social Work Supervisor, Latoya Lowery, for Norwalk's Employee of the Month. Last month, this Social Work Supervisor went above and beyond to support a Social Worker in her Unit, in finding a newborn baby, that mother was not making available to the Department, as the Department's plan was to remove that child. Latoya jumped into action to support her Worker, since before the baby was born. She provided guidance to her Worker to begin exploring resources, drafting the OTC and preparing for the unborn baby. When the Department learned that the baby was born

and discharged without the Department's knowledge, Latoya jumped into action. For multiple weeks, she partnered hand and hand with her Worker and shared all responsibilities in effort to find this baby. No task was too big or too small for her to do. Latoya went in the field to make unannounced home visits to different relatives' homes. She scheduled meetings. She made numerous phone calls to attorneys, providers and family members. She partnered with Stamford, Bridgeport and Meriden Police Departments. Latoya saw when her Worker needed her the most and partnered with her to get the job done. Latoya also has an amazing ability to pull her team together, especially in a crisis. Through her leadership, her Unit always supports each other. The Unit willingly went into "divide and conquer" mode for this case. The baby was found on Thanksgiving Eve. Latoya was in the field that entire day with her Worker. She even placed the baby once she was recovered. When reflecting on her Supervisor's support, Social Worker Janet Macon stated, "She always listened. When things were going rough for me, she kept me motivated. She kept giving me ideas of different ways to engage this difficult mom. I was inspired by her ability to always keep calm in high stress situations. She did a phenomenal job in keeping me and my emotions under control, especially when I doubted myself." As a Supervisor, Latoya is never afraid to get her hands dirty. Her staff are always confident that they can always call her for help, and she will come running, with a plan, a calm attitude and with a joke to try and lighten the mood. I'm proud to recommend Social Work Supervisor Latoya Lowery for Employee of the Month for an exceptional job on this case and in supporting her worker.

### **Nicole Vega - Waterbury Area Office**

It is with great pleasure that we recognize Social Worker Nicole Vega for Employee of the Month. Nicole's dedication to both professional excellence and continued learning truly sets her apart. Nicole is currently attending the University of Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) Master's Program, in which she is on track to complete this spring. Balancing graduate-level coursework while maintaining a high standard of practice, while being a mother to a very active four-year-old demonstrates her strong commitment to the field and to the families she serves. Her recent work on a case

involving fatherhood engagement highlights her thoughtful, family-centered approach and her ability to meaningfully involve fathers in the case planning process. This work reflects best practices and reinforces the importance of inclusive and strengths-based engagement. Additionally, during a recent Child and Family Services (CFSR) review, the reviewer noted her strong casework practice and identified her case as one that should be used as a model for other workers to simulate. This recognition speaks volumes about the quality, consistency, and professionalism she brings to work. Her efforts



exemplify the values of our Agency, and her contributions have a meaningful impact on both her colleagues and the families we serve. We thank you for your continued dedication, leadership, and excellence. Congratulations on being named Employee of the Month—this recognition is well deserved.

### **Brandon Bedard – Torrington Area Office**

The Torrington office has selected Brandon Bedard for Employee of the Month! Brandon has been employed with DCF for a little over two years, but in this short time he has truly shown his ability to connect with and care for the children on his caseload. Brandon is a highly dependable employee who consistently demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility and professionalism in his work. He is a true team player who collaborates effectively with colleagues, offers support when needed, and contributes positively to the overall work environment. His reliability and strong work ethic make him someone others can count on, and his positive attitude ensures he is always pleasant and respectful to work alongside on the job. Brandon transitioned to Adolescence (TAY) unit and since that time he has hit the ground running. He was a natural fit for this position! As often happens with this population, Brandon is handling crises daily, driving kids to school, staying late, and putting out fires. What sets Brandon apart though, is his ability to connect with his kids. Brandon is always responsive. The youth on his caseload trust and depend on him. He forms genuine relationships and is vested in the success of each young adult on his caseload. Brandon also displays incredible patience, support and always has a calm demeanor. He has had some tough cases and situations where teens have been AWOL or not responsive to anyone, yet they will still text him or stay in touch to let him know they are safe. Brandon works closely with families and adolescents, helping them reach their full potential through guidance, encouragement, and consistent support. He approaches everyone and family with empathy and respect, addressing their needs in a nonjudgmental manner. Brandon's ability to build trust and maintain a supportive presence allows those he serves to feel heard, valued, and empowered. For these reasons, and just his overall dedication to youth on his caseload, we feel Brandon is deserving of Employee of the Month!



### **Melissa Dunlavey – New Haven Area Office**

Social Worker Melissa Dunlavey is being nominated from the New Haven Office. Melissa is the epitome of a team player and leader. Melissa goes above and beyond to assist her peers who are in need. She has co-led the

Mentoring Initiative in the New Haven office, which onboards new staff to the role of an Investigator. She puts a lot of her energy into this role without any reduction in her own work responsibilities AND her own work never falters and is always submitted timely. She has taken on the task of disposing a caseload of a co-worker who went out unexpectedly. She wasn't asked to do this but offered to do this to assist her peers. She disposed of these cases quickly and efficiently. Melissa likes to fly under the radar and does not seek to be the center of attention; however, she deserves to be recognized for all that she does in the New Haven Office, which lifts the load for everyone in our workgroup! We so appreciate having Melissa in our workgroup!

### **Kevin Jones - Milford Area Office**

We would like to nominate Social Worker Kevin Jones as the Milford Office Employee of the Month. We have had the opportunity to see the evolution of Kevin Jones's career here from his start as a Trainee in June 2004 to his current position as an Adolescent/Transitional Support Worker and it gives us great pride in nominating him for the Milford Office Employee of the Month. Kevin is a father figure to many of the adolescents within the Milford office and has been a strong advocate of Fatherhood Engagement. Over the years, he has established trusting relationships with many of the youth/young adults that have transitioned from care but still maintain contact with him for advice, encouragement and to share their accomplishments. Kevin has a reputation with the community providers, foster parents and parents that have allowed him to at times make miracles happen for his children. He has reunified several young adults with their parents/relatives prior to their launch from care and assisted with re-establishing family ties between young adults and family members out of state and helped young adults to solidify life-long family ties when re-entering the community after a period of incarceration. His willingness to go beyond the call of duty both during and outside of the regular work hours has given the foster parents, community providers, and congregate care facilities a level of security that they are always willing to give his most difficult youth/young adults a chance or two. One of our proudest moments with him occurred recently when a young adult that launched from care a few years ago and his previous foster mother called. During the conversation, the young man shared he is a father, still maintains contact with his foster mother whom he fondly calls Grandma, and he then said "Thank you Kevin, for never giving up on me. I know I wasn't living right, I know I was doing things I should not have been doing, and despite my bad choices, you kept trying to refocus me. "He said you are my "Dad" and if it were not for



you, I would not be alive, a father or a decent person. You saved my life, and I wanted to take this moment to thank you, Grandma and Denise, because you cared even when I didn't deserve it. His prior foster mother then said she never gave up on him because we never gave up on him, and whenever she called one of us always answered.

### **Kashea Kenton - Norwich Area Office**

Intake Social Worker Kashea Kenton is being nominated as Employee of the Month. Kashea shows nonstop support for her peers, families, and children on a daily basis. Kashea is always willing to assist coworkers with difficult cases such as engaging families and being a support in situations that may be more stressful. This is a quote from a covering Supervisor applauding Kashea in an email noting she "was the best and helped so much, on top of banging out [her own] cases. She's pretty awesome." Kashea took time away from her own workload to help with transport and other needed tasks. This is a testament to who Kashea is and how she carries herself every day, no matter what is going on around her. Kashea will go out of her way to ensure that families feel seen and heard. Kashea meets her families where they are and with her empathic but transparent approach, families are willing to engage and work with Kashea in order to ensure the safety of the children involved. Kashea is an amazing social worker and an amazing person and asset to this Agency. She goes above and beyond for others, including the families she works with. Kashea has dealt with a variety of difficult cases, but most recently, she had a removal of 2 young children. Kashea was tasked with caring for the children in the Office throughout the week, this included an infant and a very active 2-year-old. Kashea never let her smile leave her face despite the multiple challenges she had to face. Kashea was a full-time in-office mom and handled it with grace and professionalism. Kashea is a very important piece of the puzzle, that is the Norwich Office!

### **Amanda Lee - Willimantic Area Office**

Investigations Social Worker Amanda Lee is being nominated for Employee of the Month. Recently, the MDT/CAC had a case come to us in the afternoon on a Friday that had multiple bumps. Putnam PD's Detective Donna Brown, while planning for a forensic interview, had nothing but glowing praise for Amanda Lee's work. Detective Brown said, by the time DCF and law enforcement went out to the home, the case had hit multiple hurdles on law enforcement's end, and the home visit was looking like no one was going to cooperate. Detective Brown said that Amanda did an amazing job explaining the situation when they finally got in contact with the caregivers and did so in a way that is in line with our protocols and protecting each Agency's case. By the time the family arrived, Amanda worked incredibly hard gathering appropriate minimum facts and evaluating the home and in Detective Brown's words, "helped to save the day" because the case was in dire straits. She said it was a complex case that required skill in gathering information and Amanda was able to pull it off. Amanda did not have to be there - she offered to help a

peer with her first ever child sexual abuse case and Amanda stayed on the case to almost 11 p.m. Amanda is always willing to assist her peers. She manages the work with ease and never gets flustered when things go sideways. She is diligent, detail-oriented and thoughtful. Amanda can confront a client who provides inaccurate information in a respectful way, which allows her to gain truthful information. She is an excellent Investigator who works very well with law enforcement.



### **Danielle Filer - Middletown Area Office**

We have nominated Adolescent Social Worker, Danielle Filer, as Employee of the Month. Social Worker Filer has embraced her role in Adolescent Services. As soon as she started adolescent services, she volunteered to be a part of the Youth Advisory Board and has become an active member. She engages with her peers in the Region to support the youths in their learning and growth. She ensures that the youth get to the meetings and engages them in the process. Social Worker Filer is one of the Statewide Youth Consultants and works closely with the Launch provider. She has developed a great working relationship with the young people on her caseload and is invested in their progress. She has worked through some of her youth challenges and continues to support them in their goals. Social Worker Filer did very well with one of our youth's that has been struggling with her mental health and needed clinical settings to address her needs. Social Worker Filer effectively engaged with providers, internal clinical supports, and the youth for her to be successfully placed in a Therapeutic Group Home with a plan to secure an FFT foster home in the future. It has been a pleasure to oversee Social Worker Filer in her role with Adolescent Services.

### **Liz Santiago - Hartford Area Office**

The Hartford Management Team would like to nominate Considered Removal Facilitator Liz Santiago as Employee of the Month for December 2025. Liz deserves this recognition as she is an integral part of the CRTM team and the Hartford Office as a whole. Within her duties, Liz and her counterparts oversee the CRTM mailbox and ensure that each request for a CRTM is responded to. If staff don't immediately respond with their availability for a pre-meeting, Liz will circle back with the team to confirm that a CR meeting is still needed. Liz upholds the Office practice of ensuring that CRTM meetings are held prior to a child/children's formal removal of the home. She also makes every effort to ensure that CRTM meetings are held in-person and only offers virtual and/or hybrid meetings when the needs of respective family members are such that they cannot meet in-person. Liz also maintains the CR Log for Hartford and sends this log out at the beginning of every month, with data that includes the number of CR meetings for the previous month, the number of children associated with those meetings, if the children were removed, placement types for the children, and information related to fatherhood and relative

engagement. During the month of November 2025, and part of October 2025, Liz was the only CTRM facilitator for the region as her counterparts were out of the office for extended periods of time. During those months, Liz was the sole CTRM facilitator for the Region, ensuring that the needs of our families remained at a standard that Region 4 is used to. Liz was asked to seek support from the Region 6 CTRM team but managed to facilitate about 100% of all the CR meetings for both Hartford and about 30% of the meetings for the Manchester office. For the month of October 2025, Liz facilitated 36 CR meetings for the Hartford Office and 4 in the Manchester Office. For the month of November 2025, Liz facilitated 27 CR meetings for the Hartford Office and 3 for the Manchester Office. Liz always exhibits a positive attitude, often motivating others with her enthusiasm for the work and her kind gestures. Staff report that Liz has a great ability to diffuse emotionally heightened situations and bring the conversation/meeting back to being child focused. Staff also appreciate her write-ups, always giving staff a shout out for their work with the family/on the case.



### **Elizabeth Reggio – Manchester Area Office**

Social Work Case Aide Elizabeth Reggio is being nominated for Employee of the Month. She recently helped out on a difficult case and here is what the team had to say: From Erin, "Liz's assessment was on point. Liz remained calm in the moment and was able to go to CCMC when directed. Liz met the Social Worker at CCMC and stayed beyond her timing to ensure the Social Worker was not alone with the family as there had been discord with the Social Worker and family. Liz was able to calm the situation down and gain the focus on the child's medical attention. Liz was able to call me from the field and deliver a great assessment as to what was happening in the moment. Liz was appreciated beyond measure and went above and beyond during this case. Liz also volunteered hours to supervise parents in the hospital, where she was again able to de-escalate father during an incident at CCMC. Liz had amazing engagement skills with a very hard family and was able to keep me informed all the way. Liz went above and beyond her title of a Case Aide and was much appreciated in the moment. Shout out to Liz for taking the initiative and really helping above her job title, with no questions asked. Liz even went the extra mile to check in about the case, inquiring if there was anything else she was able to help with. Amazing team player! Again, she also had an on-point assessment of the family dynamic which is always appreciated." Trent stated, "She has always been willing to adjust her schedule to help out when someone is in need. She has been very responsive when I have to touch base with her in last minute emergency requests." Celeste stated, "As the Case Aide scheduler, Liz has been a dream. Very easy to work with and quick to volunteer. It is enjoyable to watch her be fun, positive, caring and loving towards the children in her care."

### **Amy Gionfriddo - Meriden Area Office**

We are honored to nominate Social Work Supervisor Amy Gionfriddo for Employee of the Month. Her consistent dedication, unwavering determination, and strong advocacy for both our team and the individuals we serve make her an outstanding candidate for this recognition. Amy consistently goes above and beyond her responsibilities, ensuring that tasks are completed with excellence and that her team feels supported. Her commitment to the success of our work is evident in her reliability and willingness to step in wherever needed. Amy approaches challenges with resilience and a problem-solving mindset. Whether faced with tight deadlines or complex situations, she demonstrates perseverance and inspires others to remain focused and motivated. Perhaps most notably, Amy is a passionate advocate for the children we serve. She ensures that voices are heard, needs are addressed, and solutions are implemented with fairness and compassion. Her advocacy has directly contributed to improved outcomes and stronger families. In addition to these qualities, her positive attitude and collaborative spirit make her a role model for her peers. Amy deeply embodies the heart and soul of social work, inspiring everyone around her with genuine compassion that lifts the standards of professionalism and care. For these reasons, we wholeheartedly recommend Amy for Employee of the Month. Recognizing her contributions would not only honor her efforts but also highlight the kind of excellence we strive for as a team.

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