

Commissioner's February 2025 Message



THANK YOU for an **AMAZING** first year as Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families!

In the first 12 months, we established the **Employee of the Month Award**, placed greater focus on the **0-5 and Transitional Aged Youth (TAY)** populations, **enhanced** our **Behavioral Health and Prevention** frameworks all while working out of a staffing crisis.

This work cannot be done alone, and I remain **grateful for the relationships established** with our sister **state agencies** and **community partners** across Connecticut.

I could not be **prouder** to work with such a **great group** of people - **inside and outside** - of the Agency.

February brings **Black History Month** celebrations where we recognize the contributions of Black people throughout our country. We still have much work to do in **addressing disproportionality and disparate treatment** of those in the Black and Brown communities as they remain overrepresented in our systems.



With great pride, I took part in **Black History** events hosted by **Solnit North** and the **Central Office Diversity Action Team!**

The Department's **2024 Racial Justice Report** on Data, Activities and Strategies was recently submitted to members of the **Connecticut legislature**. You can access it here: [2024 Racial Justice Report](#)



Listening Tours continued this month with visits to the **Hartford** and **Norwich Area Offices**. The **Willimantic Office** hosted the quarterly **Statewide Youth Advisory Board** meeting. My heart is filled by seeing all of you and talking with our **resilient, insightful and inspiring youth!**

A **shout out** one more time to the **January Employees of the Month!** Who has been nominated to receive the **February Award?** Read to see who is described as the "poster board for the Department," "always going above and beyond," and committed to "all things fathers."

"Supporting Families Impacted by Substance Use and the Evolution of CAPTA" was the title of a national presentation given by myself and **Commissioner Nancy Navarretta from the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS)**. Along with **Chief Administrator of Behavioral Health and Wellness Dr. Nicole Taylor**, we highlighted our CAPTA portal, supports for those experiencing a substance use disorder and the importance of lifting the stigma as seeking support is a true sign of strength.

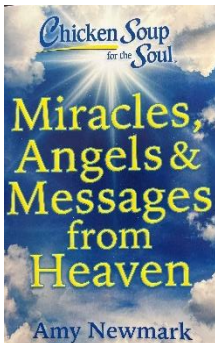




Behavioral Health Clinical Manager Christa Rider presented DCF's collaborative work towards protecting **survivors of child sex trafficking** at the **2025 Federal Preparedness Workshop** hosted by the **Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation** and presented by the **National Indian Gaming Commission**. Topics included Human Trafficking, the Opioid epidemic, Active Assailant and Best Practices in Emergency Management.

DCF Employee and Foster Parent Elizabeth Saez appeared on the **WFSB Great Day at 9a** segment to discuss being honored as the **2024 "Elevate and Celebrate"** honoree for her extraordinary dedication to foster care advocacy given by the **Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) of the Youth Law Center**. Watch her here: [WFSB Great 9a](#)

Congratulations to **Program Supervisor Jenny Vesco** who co-authored an article entitled, **"Economic Insecurity and Families Involved with Child Welfare: The Pivotal Role of Local Community Support"** with our partners from the University of Connecticut and Wheeler Clinic. This work can be found in the textbook, **"Child Neglect, Inequity, and Poverty: Practice Innovations, Concrete Resources and Justice"** published by the Child Welfare League of America. Read the article here: [CWLA Publication](#)



Community Outreach Coordinator Jackie Ford published a short story in the newest edition of **"Chicken Soup for the Soul: Miracles, Angels, and Messages from Heaven."** Read it here: - [Double Play - Chicken Soup for the Soul](#)

The **Legislative Session** has begun! Please watch the [Committee on Children](#) hearing that recently took place on 2/20/25 where I and some of the **Agency's subject matter experts** testified on our bill. As a reminder, if you are contacted by a **Legislator** with a question or request, please notify **Chief Administrator of Government Affairs and Policy Vinny Russo** at

Vincent.Russo@ct.gov

Legislative Program Director Mike Carone spoke in the **House Chambers** to students from his alma mater - **Trinity College** - about how his past education and work experience have prepared him for his current job collaborating with the Connecticut legislature. **Thank you, Mike!**



Prom season will soon be upon us! We are accepting **donations** for gently used prom gowns, men's suits and tuxedos as well as shoes and accessories at the **DCF Community Center in the Buckland Hills Mall** Please contact Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov to donate and watch her here on WFSB: [DCF Supporting Youth](#)

Congratulations to **The Bridge Family Center** for opening "**Mosaic House**" a Quality Parenting Center located in Cromwell and serving youth and families from the Middletown Area Office. **We appreciate your partnership!**

A **Commissioner's Monthly Video** will now be provided to keep you updated on Agency operations. Watch **February's** again here: [Commissioner's February 2025 Video.](#)

Thanks to each and everyone of you for all that you do!



More Than Brick Mortar: Urgent Crisis Centers a Lifeline for Families Impacted by Behavioral Health Emergencies



In response to the growing youth mental health epidemic in the U.S., the State of Connecticut introduced Urgent Crisis Centers (UCCs) which provide immediate care - no appointment necessary - to children and teens, ages 4-18, experiencing an active and urgent mental health crisis. UCCs were designed to divert youth from visiting the emergency room, which is often not the best environment for a person experiencing a mental health episode, by offering access to trained professionals in a clinic-like setting.

An active and urgent behavioral health crisis can take the form of thoughts of suicide or self-injury, feelings of depression, anxiety, or hopelessness, out-of-control behaviors, substance misuse, or any other mental health crisis.

The three centers, strategically located across the state, were created by [legislation](#) Governor Ned Lamont signed in 2022 addressing the growing youth behavioral health crisis. At the time of their opening in 2023, Governor Lamont made reference to this saying that the mental health needs of youth is an urgent issue that must be treated as any other public health emergency.

Melissa and Linda live in the greater Hartford area and are parents to four children. On several occasions, they have had to take their oldest daughter, who has special needs, to the UCC at The Village for Families and Children when she was experiencing a behavioral health crisis.

Prior to the UCCs opening, the couple would take their daughter to the emergency department at a local children's hospital. They said the difference in care and attention received was noticeable and they want other parents to know that this valuable resource exists.

"The UCC is just a much different feel than the emergency department. You get more individualized care for your child whereas, when we went to the ED, you just sit for hours, not knowing what was going to happen next, not knowing where [our child] was going because they separated us several times. You just feel like you're getting more one-on-one with the UCC," said Melissa.



Linda agreed, "Unlike the ED, with the UCC, you have a world of experts who are not just treating the child, but the whole family. While working on the

situation at hand, they're calming things down, taking an assessment, checking in on the parents, are we safe, and creating a plan for when we leave."

As Connecticut's lead children's behavioral health agency, DCF licenses the UCCs which were designed to provide more specialized care so that the centers are better suited than an emergency department for providing crisis stabilization support, completing a comprehensive mental health assessment, working with families to develop a safety plan, and connecting children directly to follow-up services.

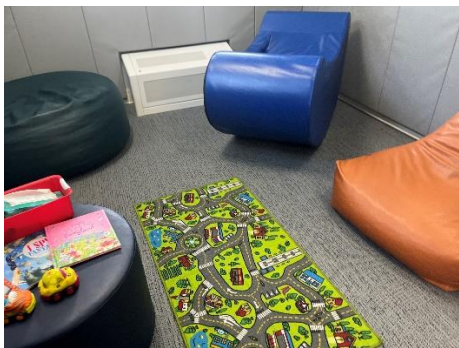
For youth already in crisis, emergency room visits can be further destabilizing and families often experience hours-long waits.

"The UCC is a warmer atmosphere, you're not going to be sitting in the ED with other children with, say, a broken arm. It could be dysregulating for your child being with somebody who's having an outburst if you're trying to regulate," said Melissa.



The availability of immediate, walk-in care without needing to visit an emergency room can make a significant difference in how quickly children and families get the support they need. There is that warmth that Melissa spoke of in addition to the UCC staff just making it easier for a family already dealing with a high-stress situation.

Lisa said, "You walk through that door, you are getting care right away whereas if you're in a big facility where they're dealing with 100 kids, you're not going to get that that immediate care."



"There are times where we haven't even gone past the waiting room and [the UCC staff] have been able to get [our daughter] regulated and have a safety plan ready."

Because Melissa and Linda bring their daughter to the UCC somewhat regularly, the family has developed relationships with the center's staff which has a significant positive impact for both adults and child.

"So it's really nice when [our daughter] is dysregulated to go in and be like, oh yeah, I've talked to this therapist before or oh, look, Joyce is sitting there at the reception desk right as we walk in. That's a huge comfort for her and, because we go in fairly frequently for her dysregulation, it helps regulate her more quickly."

With 72 daily slots across the three centers, the focus is on making care more accessible during times of urgent need. No appointment or referral is necessary. When a family visits a center, the goal is to deescalate the crisis, complete the evaluation and connect youth to services in under 24 hours.



The couple said the individualized service and one-on-one attention families receive at a UCC is lifesaver and families do not have to feel alone or lost as they might at the emergency department.

"At the ER, not only do you have 100 kids in the waiting room, but you have 14 kids back in the ward. Waiting for hours. At the UCC, they might leave your child with you and go attend to another child for 20 minutes or whatever but then they're back. But it's individualized so it's one child, in one room, being taken care of. The rooms are really nicely done with furniture that is safe. There are places to sit and hang out and they will bring coloring books, games, toys, whatever you need," said Melissa.

"And snacks," Linda added.



"Oh yes, snacks! That's a big one since hunger can make the outbursts worse," said Melissa. "But yeah, they'll check in and they'll talk to the parents. One day the staff was like 'I think you need a hug'. At the UCC, they're treating the whole family. They're not just treating the child."

Melissa said that she let her friends know that a family does not have to be a client of the respective provider to use their UCC and the couple encourages any family to use this valuable resource if their child is experiencing a behavioral health crisis.

"For the majority of kids who are just having those meltdowns, or kids who have autism, they don't need an emergency room, but the family still needs support in that moment. The UCC gives you that place."

UCC Outcomes Since Opening in 2023

- Overall, 99% of children met treatment goals (Jan 1-Dec 31, 2024)
- On average, families spend 3.3 hours at the UCC
- 97.5% of children served in UCCs returned to their homes and communities
- 52.6% of families said they would have gone to the ED if not for the UCC

- Total Served = 1,781 (July 2023-December 2024)
- 95% of children were rated as having improved during UCC episode

Find contacts, addresses, and more information about an Urgent Crisis Center in your region [here](#). Or visit [WeAreCT.org](https://www.WeAreCT.org) for non-emergency behavioral health resources and support for you and your family.



Employee of the Month Awards!

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

Anthony Gadsen Jr.- Norwalk Area Office

Social Work Supervisor Anthony Gadsen Jr. is the poster board for the Department, as he believes deeply in the work. He always sees the best in people. His experience as a Social Worker allowed him to develop leadership skills, which ultimately led him to become a Supervisor-promoted 2 weeks ago. When Anthony started with the Department 8 years ago, he stated that he would make a career here. He is a kind and southern gentleman. Anthony greets everyone with a warm smile and a friendly hello. He is dedicated to working hard to make those around him proud. Anthony has an exceptional work ethic and far exceeds expectations. He consistently follows through on every action step or request, whether it comes from a youth, a parent, or a community provider. One of Anthony's cases involved a child in care because his guardian was unable to provide for him. Every Friday at 8:30 a.m., Anthony called the guardian to update her on her nephew. He never missed an opportunity to strengthen communication and foster a strong partnership. Anthony is committed to celebrating the empowerment and uniqueness of the children in our care. He refuses to be limited by myths or stereotypes. Anthony challenges all of us to become better individuals. He genuinely cares for the families we serve and supports his coworkers. At times, we may feel vulnerable, but we emerge stronger because of his presence. Great leaders must be great servants—Anthony possesses this quality in abundance.



Jewel Silva - Waterbury Office

The Waterbury Area Office is happy to nominate Social Worker Jewel Silva as Employee of the Month. Ms. Silva began her work with the Department in July 2019. Prior to that, Ms. Silva worked for the Department of Corrections. Ms. Silva's professionalism, engagement skills, and compassion for the work we do is evident in her work both internally and externally. Ms. Silva displays such compassion for the families she serves and makes all her families feel heard. Ms. Silva strives to connect her families to supports and services, she is a great advocate for those who need it most. Ms. Silva has been faced with some difficult cases this past year. Ms. Silva is

the type of Social Worker that when you learn she is assigned to a case you are able to take a sigh of relief knowing the family/case is in great hands. Ms. Silva also takes on a mentoring role in our office. You will often see Ms. Silva taking out new Social Workers to shadow her and being a support system to her peers as they acclimate to the Agency. Ms. Silva is very respected amongst her peers. Ms. Silva is a true asset to this Agency and an example to follow!

Kevin Real - Torrington Area Office

The Torrington Office has selected Kevin Real Program Supervisor from Intake as Employee of the Month. Kevin has been with the Agency for the past 31 years, starting his career in the Norwich office and then transitioning to "T-Town" for the past 28 years. Kevin is hard-working, dedicated and well-liked by all. Kevin has an easy-going personality and can articulate his directives clearly. Kevin makes the work, though difficult at times, look easy with his calm demeanor. He is always trying to mitigate safety by thinking outside the box and pushing the limits and is forward-thinking in his decision making. The positive outcomes that come from Kevin's Intake workgroup are reflective of his leadership, guidance and support. Kevin should be celebrated for the good work he does in "T-Town" as it does not go unnoticed. Thanks Kevin!

Annika Diaz- New Haven Area Office

We would like to express our heartfelt appreciation for Social Worker Mrs. Annika Diaz whose dedication and willingness to go above and beyond exemplify true leadership. Not only does she consistently assist her peers with care and professionalism, but Annika has also taken on the added responsibilities of the New Haven Police Department liaison role, supervising an intern and developing a mentoring program in the New Haven Intake work group. Annika can also be described as a mentor for her peers. Her guidance and support have made a lasting impact, fostering growth and collaboration within our team. Thank you, Annika, for your unwavering commitment and exceptional contributions!



Nicole Bines - Milford Area Office

Social Worker Nicole Bines has been in state service since 2006, previously working with DSS and employed by DCF since 2014; with her past 7 years as an Intake Social Worker for the Milford Office. It is our pleasure to nominate Nicole Bines as Employee of the Month for her advocacy for staff, families, and her community work. She is an integral part of our office's Racial Justice Committee, which includes our book club. Nicole assists in choosing culturally diverse topics for the book club and leads conversations on the materials. In addition to her Racial Justice work, Nicole is always searching for professional development. She took initiative when our agency needed trainers and educates the public with Mandated Reporter Training, Discover's Training and Human Trafficking 101. Nicole values the importance of professional development and staff retention and participates in the Agency's Mentoring Committee and volunteers for the oversight of an intern. Nicole volunteers for the Region 2's Disaster Behavioral Health Response Network (DBHRN) Team. It is our pleasure to recommend Nicole

Bines as the Employee of the Month and we have no doubt she will bring her leadership qualities to her next role as she was newly promoted to Social Work Supervisor, to begin in March, in the Norwalk Office.

Karen Thompson - Norwich Area Office

The Norwich Office would like to nominate Secretary 2 Karen Thompson for Employee of the Month. Karen has been with DCF since 1999 and joined the Norwich team on 6/30/23. Karen has been an asset not only to the office's management team but to the entire office. Karen assists the Program Supervisors with tracking systems, scheduling meetings, and taking minutes during office meetings facilitated by the Program Supervisor. This includes tracking for and scheduling 90-day and 270-Day Permanency Review meetings, 120-day In-Home Review meetings, and tracking for TPR determinations. Additionally, Karen is responsible for scheduling transfer conferences on all cases transferring from Intake to Ongoing; following up on and entering MDE data into LINK; running Lexis Nexis reports; and tracking, following up with assigned staff, being the point person for CFSR reviews (secures parking and office space for reviewers, and ensures they have access to the case records); and completing AFCARS on all cases as a support to the entire office. Karen's work on AFCARS has enabled the Norwich office to lead the State in AFCARS compliance. Karen recently began maintaining the SWCA and visitation room schedules. Karen also assisted in tracking and creating certificates for children adopted on National Adoption Day. She is a true team player, always willing to help. Karen will drop what she is doing at a moment's notice to assist. She is extremely organized and efficient, resulting in her ability to manage and multi-task many activities. Her addition to an already strong support team has greatly assisted the office during a period filled with high caseloads and workload for all office staff. Congratulations Karen!! The Norwich Office is grateful to you.



Mark Terreri - Middletown Area Office

Social Worker Mark Terreri is the Middletown Office Employee of the Month. "Great leaders don't set out to be leaders. They set out to make the difference. It is never about the role-always about the goal." Mark has clearly demonstrated himself as a leader. What makes Mark different is his authenticity and compassion for the people he works with both within DCF and in the community as well as the families he works with. Mark worked in facilitating Permanency Team meetings in Middletown for approximately 6 years. He was well respected by his peers, the community (i.e. school staff, programs), Attorneys in Court, as well as the families he worked with. He had an impact on the work, which resulted in achieving great outcomes for children and families. His reputation followed him, and he was so well respected that Court personnel/providers/families were requesting him by name to facilitate meetings for families. Mark also took on other leadership roles. He was the lead for Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team in Middletown for years and then shared the work with his co-lead until he passed the baton. He motivated the staff to focus on the work with fathers, so that fathers could

be included and have a voice in the life of their children. He also stepped in as a mentor to help guide the Social Worker Trainees in the office. Mark has now transitioned to take the reins back as a Social Work Investigator and continues to make a difference in the front lines with families. We expect great things from Mark, as he truly sets out to make a difference as a leader in this Agency.

Antoinette Scott- Willimantic Area Office

Social Worker Antoinette Scott consistently demonstrates exceptional dedication, hard work, and an unwavering commitment to the children and families we serve. She approaches every task with care, professionalism, and a positive attitude, and is always willing to go above and beyond to support her peers and the office. Recently, Antoinette handled an extraordinarily difficult situation, managing three separate removals that involved six children, within nine days. Despite the demanding nature of these cases, she showed nothing but compassion and attention to detail, ensuring each child's needs were met with the utmost care. Her ability to navigate these complex situations without complaint and with such poise is a true testament to her work ethic and character. Moreover, amid this already intense workload, Antoinette went the extra mile to assist a newly removed youth in reuniting with her cats. Leveraging her

connections through JD, a local veterinarian was located to secure free spay/neuter services and vaccines for the cats. Antoinette not only facilitated the pickup of the youth and her cats, but she also ensured the youth was able to attend school while making sure the cats received the veterinary care they needed. Antoinette is an invaluable asset to our team. She constantly supports her colleagues, stepping in to help whenever and wherever needed.

Her compassion, work ethic, and willingness to take on additional tasks make her an indispensable member of our office. We strongly believe Antoinette deserves to be recognized as "Star of the Month" for her extraordinary contributions, unwavering support, and exceptional service to our office and the families we serve.



Nathalie Zea - Hartford Area Office

It is with great pleasure and admiration that we announce Social Worker Nathalie Zea as our Employee of the Month. Nathalie's unwavering passion for the work she does, her dedication to her clients, and her professional demeanor make her a standout member of DCF Hartford Office. Nathalie is someone who consistently goes above and beyond to ensure families have the resources they need to thrive. Her commitment to the success of those she serves is evident in everything she does. She takes the time to listen, understand, and respond to the unique needs of each individual and family. Nathalie not only meets deadlines with efficiency and professionalism, but she is also an incredibly approachable and reliable colleague who brings positivity and warmth to the workplace. Her ability to communicate effectively, both with clients and her peers, makes her an invaluable resource to all of us. In addition to these remarkable qualities, Nathalie was nominated as Employee of the Month due to her exceptional work with

a family impacted by intimate partner violence. This family faced significant barriers to accessing support services because of their immigration status, but Nathalie did not hesitate to step in and assist. Through her tireless efforts, she connected the family with vital community resources, including the Larabee Fund Association, the Intimate Partner Violence Hub, the Department of Social Services, and numerous other organizations that provided the family with essential support. Nathalie's commitment to this family, and her ability to navigate complex systems to help them access the help they needed, exemplifies the heart and soul of Social Work. She is a true advocate and a source of strength for those who need it most. Nathalie Zea is a shining example of what it means to be a compassionate, dedicated, and hard-working Social Worker. She continuously makes a positive impact on the lives of others, and we are incredibly fortunate to have her as part of our team. Thank you, Nathalie, for your exceptional service, your big heart, and your tireless dedication to helping others grow stronger. You are truly an asset to our Agency.

Tashawna Mitchell -Manchester Area Office

We would like to recognize Tashawna Mitchell for always going above and beyond completing her duties as an Investigations Social Worker. In particular, we would like to recognize Tashawna's work regarding a particularly complex case with many layers to address such as jurisdictions, language barrier, supervised visit, and preserving placement just to name a few. We appreciate how Tashawna worked with the Ongoing Team at the beginning of the case to allow for both the Intake Team and Ongoing Team to partner with mother whose primary language was Spanish and advocated for a Spanish speaking Social Worker and Social Work Supervisor. Tashawna went above and beyond communicating with Mother and the Foster Parents almost daily addressing barriers and ensuring we work with Mother's schedule on getting her supervised visits as Mother traveled to Connecticut from New Jersey for over 6 hours to attend her supervised visit. Despite the crime Mother committed that led to the Department's involvement and to her baby's removal, Tashawna showed empathy and worked with Mother without judgement. Moreover, Tashawna worked with our AAG to help address the jurisdiction issues which led to the case being transitioned to New Jersey CPS allowing mother quality supervised visit as traveling from NJ to CT for a two-hour supervised visit two times a week was not sustainable financially and time wise. We are truly proud of the way Tashawna worked with the Ongoing Team, AAG and NJ CPS Team to achieve a positive outcome to get the case transition to NJ to allow for quality intervention and services.



Alice Nedd - New Britain Area Office

Alice Nedd, Intake Social Work Supervisor, is diligent in her work, extremely supportive of her staff, and has great assessment skills. The thing that we appreciate most about Alice is how she treats the staff in her unit. Alice is always there to lend a hand when needed. She will pick up

tasks during emergencies and if her staff needs anything she is there for them. Alice has created an environment within her unit of trust. Her unit knows that she is there to support them and their cohesiveness as a team is unmatched. Alice epitomizes everything you would want in a supervisor. Furthermore, Alice is currently a part of the Leadership Academy for Supervisors (LAS) cohort where she is putting together a change initiative project to help our Intake Staff make more thorough assessments. Her devotion to this and her creativity for this project is truly admirable. At times, we may overlook someone like Alice who does her job so proficiently because we become accustomed to how they are on a day-to-day basis. This is the perfect opportunity to highlight Alice and to let her know how much her work is appreciated and how valuable she is to the Intake team and the New Britain office as a whole.

Robert Hicinbothem- Meriden Area Office

We are pleased to nominate Robert Hicinbothem for Employee of the Month for the Meriden Office. As the Considered Removal Facilitator, he plays a vital role in ensuring thoughtful, collaborative decisions regarding child safety. In addition to covering the Region, he also supervises Social Worker Case Aides, providing guidance and support. Robert consistently goes above and beyond, bringing calmness, professionalism, and expertise to every situation, creating a space where families and professionals can engage in meaningful discussions about child safety and well-being. As a dedicated Supervisor, he fosters a supportive environment and steps in wherever needed. It is an honor to nominate Robert for Employee of the Month, as his contributions greatly benefit Region 6, our staff, and, most importantly, the families we serve.



Lauren Coppola - PRTF (South)

Lauren Coppola, a Registered Nurse on the South PRTF Kiwani Unit, is being recognized as Employee of the Month for the Solnit South PRTF. Since joining Solnit South last year, Lauren has consistently demonstrated dedication, professionalism, and a positive attitude, making her a valued member of the team. Her commitment to providing quality care for our youth is evident in everything she does, and her meticulous attention to detail ensures that all documentation is thorough and accurate. Lauren's organizational skills and proactive approach allow her to manage her responsibilities efficiently while also supporting her colleagues whenever needed.

Vanessa Ortiz- PRTF (North)

Solnit North Children Services Worker Vanessa Ortiz is nominated for Employee of the Month because of her exceptional ability to build a genuine rapport with the Solnit youth and consistently demonstrating positive regard and strength-based teaching principles. She fosters a supportive environment not only for the youth but also for staff, ensuring that everyone feels valued and encouraged. Thank you, Vanessa!

Tammi Cuyler - Careline

We are pleased to recommend Tammi Cuyler for Employee of the Month. Tammi, a Careline Social Worker with 34 years of dedicated service at DCF, has consistently exemplified professionalism, expertise, and a strong commitment to teamwork, making her an invaluable member of the Careline team. We are so appreciative of all Tammi brings to the Careline and those around her!

Barbara Crouch - Fiscal

Barbara Crouch, Fiscal Administrative Supervisor, is nominated for Employee of the Month. As Acting Chief Fiscal Officer of the Department of Children and Families, I have had the privilege of working closely with Barbara, and I can confidently say that she is an exceptional professional who embodies the values of our agency. We are so grateful for Barbara and all of her contributions to support the Agency and our staff!

Anthony Gay- Behavioral Health Family and Community Services Division

We nominate Anthony Gay, Director of Fatherhood Services, for Employee of the Month for his commitment to all things "fathers"! Anthony joined the CCCSD a little over a year ago. Since the start, he has skillfully expanded

Fatherhood work in many ways. He has created a cohesive network among the Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES) providers. He has increased collaboration with other divisions such as the Academy for Workforce



Development (AWD), Regional Resource Group (RRG) and Transitional Services and Supports (TSS). Anthony recognizes the value of engaging fathers with lived experience. He recently created DCF's first Fatherhood Steering Committee. This group of 12-15 fathers (fathers with past DCF involvement, foster/adoptive fathers and community fathers) will provide input into the work deliverables at DCF. Anthony has also emphasized the work with incarcerated fathers, in partnership with the DCF Department Of Corrections liaison team, and created various ways to engage with DCF and in the lives of their children. Part of this work includes a comprehensive data collection log. Anthony is also participating in some of the RRG multidisciplinary consultations to infuse the Fatherhood perspective into the discussions with CPS staff. Anthony's career has been led by his passion for Social Work and in particular - Fatherhood work. Anthony participates in the statewide CT. Fatherhood Initiative (CFI) and is the chair of the CFI Domain 2 subcommittee: "Fathers in healthy relationships with their children, co-parents, significant others." In 2022, he was awarded the Janet E. Williams Humanitarian award. We are very proud to have Anthony as part of our team!

Anna Gawel - Education/Unified School District #2

It is with great pleasure to award State School Teacher Anna Gawel as our Employee of the Month! It's wonderful to see Anna's dedication and passion for teaching through her students'

artwork and projects. She is truly making an impact on the lives of her students by fostering both creativity and student collaboration in her classroom. Anna demonstrates her commitment to our students' academic growth by designating time for students interested in learning more beyond the standard curriculum within the graphic design course. Anna proudly displays students' work throughout the school year in the school's main office as a great way to celebrate their achievements as well. Anna's classroom is a space of calm and creativity that enables students to develop their artistic skills, explore their creativity, build resilience, and improve their self-esteem. Annually, students create Artwork that is proudly displayed at Solnit North's Black History Month celebration in an Art Gallery exhibit. Guests are welcome to view the pieces and purchase student's work- such an empowering opportunity for our students! Thank you, Anna, for all that you do in contributing to our students' well-being!!!

AnnMarie Robertson - Office of Legal Affairs

It is our pleasure to nominate AnneMarie Robertson as the February Employee of the Month for the Legal Division. AnneMarie Robinson is a Paralegal Specialist in the Hartford Area Office who has worked with the DCF Legal Division for over 15 years. She is very knowledgeable and happy to share her knowledge with those coming into the agency or joining the legal team.

AnneMarie handles exceptionally challenging assignments with grace and professionalism. She is a team player who works diligently to support the Hartford legal team and the Division as a whole. In addition to the foregoing, AnneMarie's smiling face and sunny disposition are always appreciated... Thank you, AnneMarie, for the support you provide and for always being you!



Janis Courter - CT-KIND

Janis Courter has been on the CT-KIND Project since day one and has been a driving force behind the team. She is a Program Supervisor with over 25 years of experience in multiple offices which she has applied to be a Product Manager, Product Owner and Program Lead with CT-KIND. Her experience as a Social Worker and Social Work Supervisor includes Ongoing Services, Permanency, Training, and Intake. Janis collaborated directly with Area Office staff to gather business requirements for the project, worked on approximately 40 LEAN's that have been completed to streamline business processes, participated in the time studies for Intake and Ongoing Services and was a Product Owner for the Phase II SDM tools that were implemented in 2018. Janis has been instrumental in building a collaborative environment with our IT partners, business staff, training team, and the vendors involved in this endeavor. Janis knows how important this project is in reshaping the face of Child Welfare in CT and making the work more efficient through new and improved technology for all DCF staff. Janis is dedicated and passionate about the work done at DCF and is focused on releasing a modern system that will allow our staff to spend more time with the families served instead of simply entering data into a computer system. She has lived experience working with families, understands the

importance of the work done at DCF every day and knows CT-KIND will benefit the entire agency by being a more intuitive, streamlined, and innovative experience.

Anushka Saadat - Area Office Behavioral Health Family and Community Services Division

We proudly nominate Anushka Saadat (RRG MH - Bridgeport) for the Employee of the Month award. This is a joint nomination with the Bridgeport Area Office. We recognize Anushka's commitment to families and children! Clinical PD Christa Rider writes: "Anushka is such a wonderful asset to the Bridgeport RRG Team. Anyone who has worked with her knows she puts in 150% every single day and is the definition of a team player. She is highly reliable, well respected, thoughtful, thorough and one of the strongest advocates I have met professionally. I continue to be impressed by her racially and socially just assessments and her ability to find strengths in the most complex family systems and builds upon them. It's a privilege to work alongside such an exceptional RRG like Anushka. We are so very lucky to have her in Bridgeport! She is an incredible asset to our team." Office Director Chrichton Stewart states: "The Bridgeport Area Office would like to recognize Anushka Saadat, an ARG Clinical Social Worker, for her outstanding work and expertise as a mental health specialist. She has consistently gone above and beyond in working with children who have special needs, and complex mental health and behavioral challenges. Her ability to triage challenging cases while providing guidance and support to social workers and identify appropriate services for families is truly remarkable. Anushka has built strong collaborations with schools, providers, hospitals, and the families we service, ensuring a holistic and effective approach to care for our families. She is always willing to make herself available for meetings and offers invaluable insight on the most challenging cases. Her commitment and collaborative spirit make her a tremendous asset to our agency and an essential part of the team. Thank you Anushka!

Dion Carson - Solnit South Hospital

Dion Carson is one of our very talented Children's Services Workers for Solnit Hospital who works on the Manhasset Unit. In describing the reason for his nomination, we wanted to share some sentiments from his fellow peers and colleagues. "Dion has one of the longest service records at Solnit Hospital. While Dion is a 3rd shift staff, he has consistently accepted 1st shift overtime work to support Manhasset's high acuity and patients who need extra support. If consistently and frequently working 3rd into 1st isn't impressive enough, Dion's clinical skills are outstanding. Dion is talented at supporting youth with verbal or cognitive skills challenges. Some of staff's favorite stories are from Dion's time with a youth who struggled with speech and communication and watched them walk through the building hand and hand. Dion used this opportunity with this youth to teach and role play some ADL skills. Later that day in a family session, the youth, who could speak about 25 words, was able to happily verbalize the name "Dion" to all. Staff have shared many other endearing stories of Dions ability to connect with our patients. Dions ability to teach and lead is also very apparent in his everyday skill set when de-escalating youth during emergency situations. He has intervened, helping many, while always maintaining a calm demeanor, and gentle manner, quickly restoring safety for all." One

of our Social Work supervisors shared they "attended the same high school and wanted to note, Dions high school senior superlative was 'most talented' for his combined music and athletic skill, indicating Dion was as incredibly humble about his talent then, as he is now. They didn't know then that his true talent was in this clinical arena." The compassion he demonstrates on a consistent basis for our youth conveys how incredibly special and unique Dion is. Dion shows a dedication to the youth we serve which is unmatched. Not to mention, his insight around effective interventions for our youth, collaborative brainstorming with the team, and consistent positive demeanor offers a wealth of resources for the Manhasset Unit and the entire Solnit hospital. Thank you, Dion, for your talent and dedication, we all congratulate you on this honor!

Be the Best Version of Yourself



Karrol-Ann Brown is many things. The daughter of Jamaican migrants, Karrol-Ann is an attorney, an advocate, a youth mentor, and active in the NAACP of Connecticut. She was an Assistant Attorney General, Director of the Racial Justice Project at the Center for Children's Advocacy, and currently serves as Chief of Staff to the DCF Commissioner. On top of that, she leads the departments initiatives on racial justice.

Karrol-Ann's approach to her personal and professional endeavors, and her outlook on life, is always through a racial equity lens. That is something that was instilled in her from a young age.

"Coming from a predominately white high school, yes I had White friends, but I also had Black friends who didn't really understand the [African American] struggle. My parents really encouraged me to study my culture - as a young Black girl but also as a Caribbean American. I got the best of both world's when it came to understanding my ancestry," said Karrol-Ann.

Karrol-Ann gets her motivation from being able to make a meaningful difference in others' lives by always striving to do the right thing. That first spark to change the world for the better was ignited at Penn State where she attended college.

"I have to make sure I'm walking and working with a purpose. Whatever [I'm engaged in], it has to be meaningful, and it has to bring me some joy. If it doesn't do those things then maybe it's not for me."

"While Penn State is not a HBCU, I learned there to find my voice and walk with purpose. It's where I became very active in the in NAACP as well as the couple of other Black organizations."

Karrol-Ann reflected on one particular demonstration which she participated in and was one of the catalysts for her future work around racial justice and equality.

"We did a sit in because we wanted to have Black Studies as an actual course and not just an elective. Around that time, that's where I really found my voice because I was surrounded by very passionate students, White and Black, that wanted to see this happen and it just kind of started from there."

Karrol-Ann's path was also shaped by her early involvement in civic work, particularly volunteering with youth back home in Connecticut after graduation. That transitional stage of



her life, taken together with her college experience and volunteerism, revealed that not only did she have a natural affinity for working with young people, but it was also energizing.

Harkening back to those post-undergraduate years before she entered law school, Karrol-Ann said she knew she was excited by the work.



Karrol-Ann with NAACP youth council members and CT State Treasurer Erick Russell (center).

"When I graduated, I didn't immediately go to law school, so I did a lot of community service, working with young students with literacy issues, read to them, worked with them on their phonics and volunteered with my church."

"I love children, teenagers, but especially children because there's a lot you can do in those years when it comes to educating them and shaping them to be young adults."

Fast forward to 2000, Karrol-Ann's journey continued to evolve in interesting ways. That was the year she met Connecticut's NAACP statewide president Scot X. Esdaile and he asked Karrol-Ann to be the organization's legal redress attorney for the CT NAACP State Conference. A pivotal moment for her, both professionally and personally, the role opened many doors, not just within the legal arena but also within the field of social justice.

Karrol-Ann's passion for community work, particularly with youth, caught the attention of the NAACP leadership and she was tapped to be advisor to the organization's Greater New Haven NAACP Youth Council and subsequently the CT NAACP State Advisor overseeing a total of 14 NAACP Youth Councils and College Chapters across the state. With this opportunity, Karrol-Ann continued to steer her way toward a profession in child protection services and well-being.

The combination of her legal expertise with her desire for working with and on behalf of youth made the Office of the Attorney General the logical next step. When she decided to pursue a position as an Assistant Attorney General, Karrol-Ann recognized it was an opportunity to take her work to the next level and could be a platform for real systemic change.

"I was already a panel attorney working at a private firm that had tapped me when I was a working Temporary Assistant Clerk (TAC) at the New Haven New Haven Superior Court. When I did the interview



Karrol-Ann with her former boss, and former CT Attorney General, now U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal.



with then Attorney General Blumenthal, you have three options on the application for [which field] you want to focus on as an AAG. AG Blumenthal said, 'you put down child protection three times!'"

"I said 'yes!' because that's where I believe I can make the most difference and I can also grow personally and professionally because it's something that I'm passionate about already," Karrol-Ann laughed as she remembered that conversation.

Her experience up to that point was formative to the direction her legal career was taking and helped shape her understanding of the challenges children and families face. Also importantly, how she, in the Attorney General's office, could play a crucial role in protecting and supporting them.

"I started to get more involved with the NAACP and concurrently working with the Attorney General's office. To me, even though you saw a lot as an assistant attorney general representing DCF it didn't take away my purpose, which was to do the best job I could with the facts I have. Even though I didn't have a social work degree I learned so much working so closely with the department sometimes I felt like I was able to look at cases with the same lens as a social worker and balance that with a legal perspective."

Karrol-Ann learned a lot during her time in the Attorney General's office. She grew as a person and as a professional.

"Just the basics of just being a good human being, doing the best job I could as an attorney and following the letter of the law while also being compassionate and being able to meet youth and families where they are. I learned the real basics of being a good attorney, a good litigator and a good listener."

Karrol-Ann believes her racial justice experience and knowledge has evolved since being in this space.

"I'm always going to be that advocate for making sure that there is equity in whatever we do and racial equity when it comes to our black and brown families."

That is because, according to the National Institutes of Health, across the U.S. and in Connecticut, Black children experience foster care placement at higher rates than White children. In her role leading racial justice initiatives for DCF, Karrol-Ann said it is her responsibility to do all she can to help reduce those disparities and inequities.



"I want to identify those disparities and disproportionalities and see what we can do as an agency to reduce and address them head on. That's one of the reasons why the Commissioner wanted me in this role - not just because of my legal acumen, but because of my experience working with the NAACP and National Coalition of 100 Black Women, as assistant attorney general, and in my previous role at the Center for Children's Advocacy as the director of their racial justice project."

She does that, in part, by going into the communities served by DCF to find out what stakeholders and families feel the agency is doing right, what areas need improvement, and what relationships need to be expanded upon. For example, she continues to leverage her relationship with the NAACP to assist with foster parent recruitment, education around mental health and financial literacy, and to achieve greater culture competency as an agency.

Karrol-Ann said wants to bring awareness to the Black struggle and also celebrate the successes of Black Americans. She said she is constantly reminded that there is much more work to do and that means human services' agencies like DCF need to continue to raise awareness and encourage others to join or else true equality will never exist.

"I am very, very proud to be an African American Caribbean woman, and I'm very pleased to see the work that we've done to get to this point. We worked too hard to go backwards. I hope that I can play some part even a small part in making sure that the children who come after me, the next generation, is able to do anything they want because they're inspired by the progress we've made."

Karrol-Ann stresses that you cannot get through the metaphorical door as an adult in a leadership role with an accomplished career, and as a person of color, and then close that door behind forgetting about the younger generations trying to get through that same door. That is why she is proud to mentor young men and women of color and see them achieve success of their own.



Karrol-Ann (center) with Bobbi Brown (far left).

"As a mentor to youth, my job is to advise and open doors but also to help the next generation become not just the leaders of tomorrow but the leaders of today. I just want them to be the best version of themselves because that's the same thing I strive for myself."

One of the "stars" she has mentored is Bobbi Brown, who is also the founder of 100 Girls Leading and was recently installed as the branch president of the Bridgeport NAACP. Bobbi is now a mentor to youth in her own right.

"I've mentored many young people that are now very successful adults. I met Bobbi as a teenager when she was a youth council president for Bridgeport NAACP. When she became the branch president, to see her as an adult in her 30s, it brought me to tears. It really did because I remembered just mentoring her, working with her on public speaking, etiquette. So many people from the NAACP and outside poured into her because they saw something special in her and she was so passionate about civil rights work," said Karrol-Ann.

One of her other "star" former mentees is second term state Representative Derrell Wilson from Norwich who is vice-chair of the legislature's Black and Puerto Rican Caucus.

"To see a young man and young woman who you mentored grow to be successful and prominent individuals in Connecticut just warms my heart. Knowing that I played a part and helped shape them into the leaders that they are today. That's why I do this."



Karrol-Ann, Derrell Wilson (second from left standing) and Bobbi Brown (third from left standing).