

Commissioner's January Message



Happy New Year! We are providing the first *"Spotlight on What's Right"* newsletter for 2025!

"The time is always right to do what is right." As we celebrated the life and legacy of **Martin Luther King Jr.** this month, his words continue to resonate throughout our communities. It takes the **collective efforts** - of all of us - **to serve our children and families.**



"Staying the course" is also a theme which I will repeat throughout the year. We will continue to **rise to the occasion** as we serve our children and families in the best way possible. We are **built for these moments** and by staying together and supporting one another, **anything is possible.**



January is **Human Trafficking Awareness Month.** Connecticut remains proud in our work to both educate the public and respond to reports of **child sex trafficking.** In 2024, over **200 consults** were completed by **DCF's Human Anti-trafficking Response Team (HART).**

We thank the **Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz** and the **Division of Criminal Justice** for hosting a press conference that included **Dr. Nicole Taylor** speaking about the prevalence of this form of maltreatment in our state.



Thank you as well to **Representative Robin Comey** for including DCF in a **child sex trafficking forum** at the Branford Library. **Ken Mysogland** spoke and also appeared on the [WFSB Great Day at 9a](#) segment to discuss this very sensitive epidemic in our society.



Did you see the camels on Park Street in Hartford? This month we also celebrated **"Día de Los Reyes Magos"** or **Three Kings Day** complete with a parade moving right by Central Office.

We look forward to a **fantastic 2025** which builds upon our **successes in 2024!** One more time, here are our **major accomplishments** one last time: [Best of 2024](#)



The **primary goals moving forward** will continue to focus on three critical areas:

- **Safety of Children 0-5 years of age**
- **Supports for Transitional Aged Youth (TAY)**
- **Placement Crisis**

Take a few moments to read about **Elizabeth Saez** - a DCF worker and foster parent - who has cared for over **129+ children** and counting! She was 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**. *"Come here because you want to help families, not just kids,"* Elizabeth stated.



Mekhi not too long ago found himself at **Manson Youth Correctional** after falling in with a bad crowd. ***"I Kept Pushing Through"*** is his story of resilience. *"I changed a lot, I've grown. Not everybody who has made bad decisions should have that used against them because everybody*

deserves a chance," Mekhi tells us. While working with **DCF's Juvenile Justice Educational Unit**, he now continues to attend Gateway Community College with aspirations of **owning his own business**. Read his inspirational story!

Tours anyone? This month I again toured the state to visit and talk with staff from **Manchester, Solnit South Hospital, Centralized Transportation Unit, New Britain, Danbury, Waterbury** and the **Central Office Divisions**. **THANK YOU FOR YOUR THOUGHTS, COMMENTS AND CELEBRATIONS!**



And here it comes For the first time we have a **DCF Jingle** performed and recorded by the **Waterbury staff!** Quite impressive: [Waterbury Jingle](#)

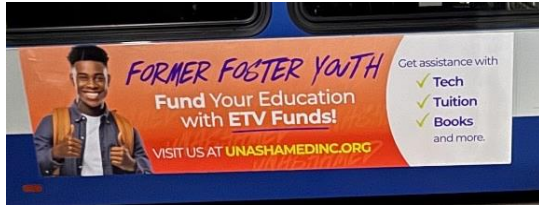


A shout out one more time to the **December Employees of the Month!** Who has been nominated to receive the **January Award?** Read on to see who is described as *"a ray of sunshine in the office"*, *"a friend personally and professionally"*, *"valuable asset."*

Connecticut's own **Dee Bonnick** is a **National Child Welfare Lived Expert and Race Equity and Justice Consultant** who has impacted thousands of families in her work. Dee was presented with a **2025 Casey Excellence for Children Family and Alumni Award** in the category of Birth Parent! You will hear more about Dee in a future "Spotlight" edition and in the meantime, learn more about her here: [Dee Bonnick](#).



Have you met **Zion Caines** with his electric smile and personality? You will soon as he recently appeared on the **"DCF Doors to Hope and Healing"** Cable television show. He is a **Transitional Aged Youth (TAY)** doing simply fabulous things in the community. You can find the show here: [DCF Cable TV](#)



Speaking of youth, **Unashamed Inc.** is administering **Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)** to help with costs related to student's success in the post-secondary education/vocation programs.

Eligible participants include former foster youth who:

- Spent time in foster care at or after the age of 14
- Left foster care through adoption or transfer of guardianship at age 16 or older
- Are currently between the ages of 16 and 26 AND are enrolled in a post-secondary education program or another institute of higher learning

Learn more about ETV funds by visiting: [UnashamedInc.](https://unashamedinc.org)

Congratulations as well to **Social Work Supervisor Rodney Moore** who was appointed to the **National Adoption Association (NAA) Board of Directors**. He will assist in supporting their mission to create meaningful changes in the adoption and child welfare community.



[WeAreCT.gov](https://wearect.gov) is a **joint initiative** between **DMHAS** and **DCF** to more easily connect all residents to the state's extensive network of resources for **prevention, mental health and substance use recovery**. Miranda Creative designed the site which has received awards from Graphic Design USA for Health + Wellness Design and American Graphic Design Award. Awesome!



A **Commissioner's Monthly Video** will now be provided to keep you updated on **Agency operations**. This month, we highlight some great work in our **24/7 Solnit Facilities**. The Solnit **PRTFs** achieved **accreditation** from the **Joint Commission** in May 2024 with the **Solnit South Children's Hospital** achieving a **three-year reaccreditation**! Here are some of their major accomplishments:

Solnit North PRTF

- **89% of youth successfully discharged** at the end of the treatment episode with **72%** discharged to a **home setting**
- From 1/1/23-11/15/24, **133 youth were served** on campus
- **Goal** is to **increase occupancy by 15%** in 2025

Solnit South PRTF

- **Opened the Lakota Unit** in February, 2024
- In 2024, **served 55 youth for 5,383 bed days** which is an increase of 1,166 bed days than in 2023
- **Goal** is to **increase occupancy by 15%** in 2025

Solnit South Children's Hospital

- **Increased capacity and admissions** admitting 81 youth from CT EDs, inpatient units, PRTFs and court.
- **62 youth** who were **not able to stabilize** in CT community units, were **admitted to Solnit hospital** for treatment and stabilization.
- **Wait time** for admission **decreased by over 50%** to only 15 days.
- **Hospital Nursing vacancies decreased by over 85%** in 2024; Overall, **Hospital staffing vacancies dramatically decreased by 74%**.



Fantastic work everyone!

Watch **January's** again here: [Commissioner's January 2025 Video](#)

Stay warm and thanks for all you do!

"Come here because you want to help families, not just kids."



DCF employee and foster parent Elizabeth Saez has a tradition. Before any child she cares for is reunified or transitioned into another family, she has a celebration. Her family and friends come together - complete with a cake - to wish the children the best!

This is not "goodbye" but rather an acknowledgment of the new relationships formed with the hope

that the children placed, and their families, will remain in contact with Elizabeth and her family moving forward.

Elizabeth's phone frequently rings with birth parents providing updates on their children. Achievement of life milestones and school accomplishments are discussed along with invitations to

parties and other events. Older youth

also outreach. Elizabeth is now a part of their extended family, and their families are part of her extended family.

To date, Elizabeth has cared for 129 children and counting. This includes babies up to a young adult 20 years old.

That's a lot of celebrations and a lot of cakes!

If the call from her own Agency comes, she says "yes." Facilitating a placement may require quick maneuvering within her home such

as the night a desperate 9:00 p.m. request was received that a child needed a family. With every bedroom in her home already filled, there was a simple solution. "I have slept on the sofa and given up my room so kids could have a bed to sleep on," she stated. On the couch Elizabeth went so this little one had a safe family to care for him.

Elizabeth's journey to fostering began after receiving "the call" in December 2011 to provide kinship care for a relative's newborn. Without even having a crib or other supplies for the baby, she agreed to the placement and mobilized her support system to prepare for the child's arrival.

She has never looked back.

"I've always been helping my family informally for years," she stated. "Fostering is an extension of that but in a formal way. I'm helping people I don't know."

From where did she develop the passion to give back?

Elizabeth's mother was a role model to her and is known in the community for always lending a helping hand. "My mom was very supportive of others. She would take them for groceries, do laundry and bring them medical appointments. I have a lot of her qualities. I told her I hope to be like you."



"I felt like I did what I needed to," Elizabeth stated reflecting back on when the first child placed into her home was reunified. She then became licensed as a CORE home in 2013 as a backup to her good friend who was soon to adopt a child.

While the volume of children who have been cared for by Elizabeth and her family is impressive, even more so are her beliefs on being a foster parent. "My role is to be a support. I'm here to take care of their kids and my only motivation is to be helpful and open," she explained.



Elizabeth is one of six people nationwide to be recognized for her outstanding contributions to improving child welfare services. She was 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.

Elizabeth's deep commitment to improving the lives of children in foster care and supporting families was noted as it has made a lasting impact on her community, particularly in the area of fostering teenagers.

The award was presented virtually with colleagues across the country in attendance, Elizabeth did not expect to be nominated and was "moved to tears" accepting the award. She still does not know who forwarded her name. "It's an honor. I don't do it for recognition. I just like helping people," Elizabeth stated.

Elizabeth's beliefs towards engaging with birth families are at the core of who she is and a primary focus of the Department's Quality Parenting Initiative. In fact, she exemplified the QPI philosophy well before Connecticut implemented the practice.

Her approach to interacting with families is clear. "I talk to them like they were a family member or a friend. I always think of if something was ever to happen to me, what I would want. How would I want someone to treat me if I was not capable of caring for my daughter at any point," Elizabeth described.

"I would want you to talk to me about how my daughter is doing."

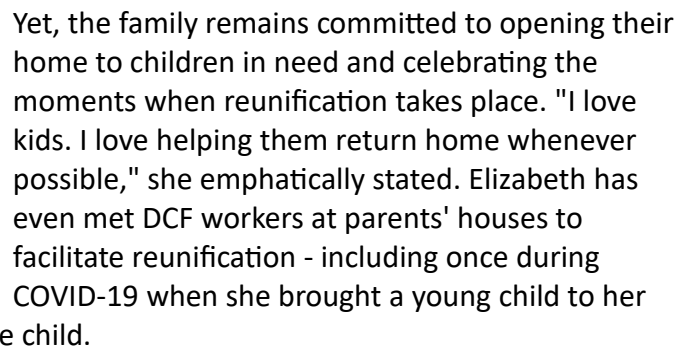
Elizabeth and her family currently have 3-and 5-year-old siblings placed in their home. They Facetime with the parents every day. That relationship is mutually beneficial as the parents can see and interact with their children while Elizabeth can gain specific information about them such as behaviors, interests and parenting customs and practices from the people who know them the best.

Without question, it benefits the children to see the most important adults in their lives working together on their behalf.

"I do the work because I love doing the work," Elizabeth stated. "I like parenting, I like helping families. I like having the ability to be supportive to someone else."



Elizabeth acknowledges that fostering does have trying moments. "It's not always easy when kids leave," she stated. Those joyful moments do not come without some feelings of loss. Elizabeth has a 17-year-old daughter who has experienced several relationships end when the children are reunified.



"Family doesn't always need to be blood."

Tangible and concrete support such as finding childcare before and after work and community-based services are also critical to making the placement successful. "The supports I have today are not the same ones I had 10 years ago. Things have changed and things have evolved," Elizabeth stated.

Her last piece of advice to other licensed caregivers is to "reassess yourself" and "practice self-care." The complexity of the children requiring placement today continues to increase so asking yourself "Am I still in a good place" is critical to remaining strong. Elizabeth has found regular respite helpful.

Elizabeth keeps a log of all the children's names and ages who have walked through her doors. The 129+ children break down to approximately 36 who are 0-5 years of age, 34 children 6-12 years old, 56 teenagers and one youth over the age of 18 years. "I don't think I finished counting because I got tired," she stated. Each picture brings back a memory.

What continues to motivate her to remain licensed, to answer the call and facilitate yet another reunification?

"I have continued on this journey because I believe that children deserve excellent parenting every day. Children deserve to have families that will provide them love, stability, and structure, While maintaining an ongoing relationship with their family of origin. I believe this can be done hand-in-hand in partnership. In working together, we can make children's lives better. That is why I'm still on this journey," Elizabeth stated.

"I Kept Pushing Through"



Mekhi with his diploma, earned six months early, through Gateway CC's "Gateway to College" dual enrollment initiative.

"My lowest moments as a mom, just my meltdown from what I went through with my son, Cynthia was always a phone call away," Tameka said of the time her son Mekhi, a high school senior, was incarcerated at Manson Youth Correctional facility but is now set to graduate high school in June 2025.

"Cynthia" is Cynthia Middleton, a Pupil Services Specialist with DCF's Juvenile Justice Educational Unit (JJEU). The unit's team of Pupil Services Specialists (PSS) play a vital role in helping youth in detention or juvenile justice facilities achieve better outcomes by offering guidance, education, and emotional support.

This includes ensuring a youth who is incarcerated has continued access to educational opportunities as well as support with transitioning back to their communities, staying on track to graduate and building a solid foundation for life after release.

Tameka said Cynthia came into their lives after her son, Mekhi, fell in with the wrong crowd and was eventually locked up at Manson. She said Cynthia was there for her and her son through the good and the bad - during incarceration and eventually when he returned home.

"Cynthia motivated Mekhi. She stayed with him the whole time and she's been supporting our family ever since. I can always reach out to her. She did everything for him to keep him on the right track."

When Cynthia met Mekhi at Manson, she could tell right away that he was an exceptional young man with high ambitions, but he got derailed by environmental factors both in and out of his control. Cynthia remembers that first meeting.

"Building a rapport with him it became clear that Mekhi wanted to do the right things. He had aspirations of being an engineer, going back to school, college was a goal."

While Mekhi is bright, Tameka said her son's prior experience in school was like a "roller coaster."

"It was hit or miss. He would fall behind because there was always some drama at school. He would get suspended, or he just didn't go or would attend but just didn't do the work. So I think it was a reality check when he went to [Manson] and then having the support of others like Cynthia and her team definitely changed him for the better."

Six months before he was released from Manson, Cynthia and Mekhi started building out a plan of action for his return to school and his community. Initially, he wanted to reenroll in his traditional high school but those "environmental factors" were a concern for Tameka and Cynthia. Mekhi resisted but they put their foot down and convinced him to enroll in Gateway Community College's "Gateway to College" dual enrollment initiative.

"We were concerned about peer pressure, the normal teenage things. We toured Gateway and because Mekhi has a great team around him, we were able to convince him to try Gateway for 30 days," Cynthia said.

"He did everything in his power not to go to Gateway. We told him, no, [returning to your old high school] isn't an option. When he did enroll in the program, he did amazing and realized for himself it was the best thing for him," Tameka said.

When the 30 day "trial period" came to an end, Mekhi did not want to leave. Despite the initial push back, Mekhi said he was happy to accept the new challenge and graduated the Gateway program six months early.



"Mekhi not knowing anybody there and not acclimated to a college campus, understandably, he was anxious about it. Now, he's graduating early and even has an opportunity to get an associate's degree for free through Gateway," Cynthia said.

Cynthia noted that Mekhi was bonded out of Manson, not released on a judge's order, so he is under less scrutiny. He is already off probation and continues to make all the right decisions - which says a lot about his drive and commitment to staying on the right side of things.

"His mom bonded him out and he's been out ever since. Youth who aren't bonded out have to do check-ins, wear a monitoring bracelet, etc. Mekhi still has to check-in but it's not as stringent. He got off probation early. So, he has a lot of leeway and opportunity to excel, do well in school and excel as a teenager.

At the end of the day, Mekhi had to want it for himself, and he did. He is sticking to the path that Tameka, Cynthia and his team helped him blaze. And, he is continuing to grow as a person.

"I can't blame anybody, I put myself in that situation. Cynthia was my support mentally and physically. [That experience] was tough love but at the time it taught me a lot. Cynthia was always just making sure that I'm good. If I needed anything I could contact her and, when I did, she came through for me."

For her part, Tameka has also seen that growth in her son and is grateful he had access to a PSS like Cynthia, the resources that go along with the involvement of JJEU team and, ultimately, the

second chance it provided for Mekhi. She is a "happy parent" and encouraged other youth and families to welcome that support if they find themselves in the same situation.

"Take advantage of it because it definitely helped. I'm glad Cynthia became a part of our lives. I'm so proud of my son. I have something to brag about now."



On top of attending Gateway, Mekhi is working full-time. He is also eager about the future. Just like Mekhi, that future looks bright. He "likes numbers" and said he is going to use his second chance to continue postsecondary education at Gateway so that he can eventually own his own business and be his own boss.

"I changed a lot, I've grown. I'm just doing my best to stay in a good pattern. It's not easy but I'm doing it," Mekhi said. "I recommend this program to anybody in the same position because not everybody who has made bad decisions should have that used against them. Everybody deserves a chance."

"There were a lot of changes, a lot of family issues but I kept pushing through. Just put your best foot forward and keep driving."



Employee of the Month Awards!

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

Brian Mitchell - Careline

At SIU, we are fortunate to have dedicated team members who continuously go above and beyond in their role. This month, we are proud to nominate Social Worker Brian Mitchell for Employee of the Month, a well-deserved recognition of his outstanding contributions to the Special Investigations Unit since he joined in June 2008.

Brian has consistently demonstrated not only comprehensive knowledge of investigative procedures and policies but also the ability to execute them efficiently and effectively. Whether dealing with high-profile investigations or complex cases of abuse and neglect, Brian has handled each situation with grace, professionalism, and a deep commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of children. His work often goes beyond regular hours, but Brian's dedication remains unwavering, and his positive response to change speaks to his resilience and strong work ethic.

Brian is known for his respectful and engaging nature. Over the years, he has been a champion for CT-KIND as a subject matter expert and collaborated with the Academy for Workforce Development to train SIU investigation procedures for new Intake staff and TFC agencies. Outside of his work, he is a father, husband, coach, and mentor. His leadership extends into his community and his passion for helping others grow and succeed. Brian Mitchell embodies the values of dedication, respect, and professionalism that we strive to uphold in the Special Investigations Unit. He is a role model not only for his work but for the positive influence he has on others. We are proud to nominate Brian for Employee of the Month, as he truly deserves recognition for his exceptional service and unwavering commitment to our mission.



Thaddea David - Norwalk Area Office

It is with great pride that we celebrate the remarkable contributions of Intake Supervisor Thaddea David from the Norwalk office as Employee of the Month. Ms. David exemplifies passion, commitment, and an unwavering dedication to advancing racial justice for the children and families we serve. Over the last couple years, she has taken the helm of the Region One Racial Justice team, fostering a cohesive and diverse group united by an anti-racist vision for the

child protective system. Under Ms. David's leadership, the team has made significant strides toward acknowledging and addressing the systemic injustices present within our society. She tirelessly engages in exploring effective strategies to eliminate biases that affect families, ensuring that conversations around racial justice and equity are central to our work. Her active involvement and genuine concern empower staff to examine these critical issues through a compassionate and informed lens. Moreover, Ms. David's commitment extends beyond the office, as she collaborates with local school systems to shed light on the unique challenges faced by students of color. By developing strategies to dismantle biases and promote understanding, Ms. David plays a crucial role as an Investigations Supervisor. Her approach encompasses not just serious discussions but also the importance of community and connection. Through her efforts, she creates opportunities for growth and learning in the Norwalk Area Office, often incorporating humor and uplifting activities that foster a sense of belonging and respect among staff. The admiration and respect she garners from both management and her peers speak volumes about her professionalism and collaborative spirit. Her ability to handle high-pressure cases with empathy and skill is a testament to her deep compassion for the families we serve. Ms. David's outstanding dedication to social work serves as an inspiration to us all, and her influence will undoubtedly lead to a lasting positive change in the lives of many. In recognizing Thaddea David's impactful work, we not only acknowledge her exceptional contributions but also encourage other social workers to aspire to her level of dedication and compassion. She is truly an asset to our field, and we are grateful for her relentless commitment to advocating for racial justice and equity in child welfare. Thank you, Ms. David, for all that you do. Your efforts do not go unnoticed, and you are making a profound difference in the lives of countless families and children.



Monique McNally - Danbury Area Office

Monique McNally is an Ongoing Social Worker in the Danbury Area Office. It's with great pleasure to nominate Monique for the Employee of the Month. Monique is an incredible asset to the Danbury office, evidenced by her demonstrating exceptional assessment and engagement skills. She balances the demands of the job along with managing some of the more challenging case assignments. Her case load utilization is often the highest in the office, yet she remains humble and on task. Her professionalism, dedication and commitment to the work is remarkable, despite stress-induced situations that often arise. Monique has been recognized by attorneys, families and providers for her outstanding work coupled with the fact she is well respected in the office and within the community. Monique is a mentor to new employees, always available to support peers, and goes above and beyond to help families. Not too long ago, Monique was tasked with managing two sperate removals in the same week. Despite being challenged with competing tasks (i.e., complete multiple Court documents, numerous case consults, etc.), Monique managed these tasks efficiently and timely, all while balancing the demands of other families on her caseload. Despite the overwhelming demands during this

time, Monique maintained a positive attitude, a strong work ethic, and exemplified commitment to her duties.

Margaret Quintana - Torrington Area Office

Margaret Quintana is a Social Worker and has been with the agency for 19 years. Many of us could share a story of how we have been touched by Maggie and in some way been the recipient of her generosity, wisdom, and support. Maggie is a champion for the most vulnerable and her time for others seems limitless. When a trainee is looking confused at their desk, Maggie makes the time to check in and ask if they need help with something. When a mom on her caseload calls and says her baby has a doctor's appointment and her ride fell through, Maggie simply asks, what time can I pick you up? When the 17-year-old was abandoned in our office lobby, Maggie made sure she gave the youth all the time she needed to talk and be listened to. When her sixth sense tells her that her Supervisor is having a tough day, Maggie makes the time to stick her head in the office and say, "How are you, are you okay? She is a constant source of knowledge and DCF and the Area Office benefit from her strength, skills, advocacy and just from knowing and working with her each day! Maggie at times can be stretched thin in her day-to-day responsibilities though her families we serve never experience this. The Torrington Office appreciates Maggie and wanted to acknowledge her hard work and dedication.

Stephanie Brooks - New Haven Area Office

We would like to acknowledge Social Worker Stephanie Brooks for her steadfast dedication to the youth she

services within the Transitional Supports and Services (TSS) Division. Stephanie has persevered through many long nights over the past few months and must deal with Human Trafficking incidents, psychiatric episodes and persistent AWOL and delinquency behaviors. Despite maintaining a large caseload, Stephanie has been able to meet with her youth and has been able to address the immediate needs of her clients. Stephanie has spent long hours daily to make sure that her Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) receive the attention and care they need despite their behaviors, and she has done this with a smile on her face and a great attitude toward her team.



Angel Moore - Milford Area Office

We would like to nominate Social Worker Angel Moore as Employee of the Month. This past month she has shined both because of some strong work she has done on her own cases but also her assistance with her peers in the office. This month in particular, Angel who has for months been supporting a single mother who has a blended family of bio, and stepchildren was faced with a removal of one of the children at the caregiver's request. Angel was able to support both the youth who felt abandoned and rejected as well as continue to work with the mother who was still trying to strengthen her parenting ability with the remaining children in her care. Angel was a strong advocate to find this youth fictive kin to stay with as well as

navigating relationships with his stepmother to maintain sibling connections. Angel exemplified compassion and respect through these complicated dynamics. She additionally continued to juggle the needs of the rest of her cases which included acts of kindness such as collecting coats for one family, making housing referrals for another and seeking donated items to support families. It doesn't matter how busy she is, she never falls behind with being responsive to phone calls or emails. Additionally, Angel has raised her hand to help her coworkers. When Angel is in the office the first thing, she does is check in on other coworkers who are also in the office. She is always signing up to bring in home-made food for Office events or even just to bring a smile to a coworker's face. Angel truly fulfills her given name. She embodies the spirit of service and collaboration. For this she is deserving of employee of the month.

Bianca Bolado - Norwich Area Office

Social Worker Bianca Bolado has been with the Department for over 7 years and during her tenure she has used her direct and compassionate approach to help families achieve their goals. Bianca works predominantly with families where children are in the home and her unit specializes in FBR cases. From the moment she is assigned a case, Bianca is hands on assessing and making timely referrals. She uses the CFTM process to ensure providers and families are working collaboratively to address any issues that may arise but also highlights parents' strengths and builds on them. Recently a provider advised Bianca that a family was struggling with the upkeep of their home and before the situation escalated to an unsafe situation, Bianca secured cleaning supplies and went to the home to assist the parent in cleaning and organizing. Bianca's compassion at that moment exemplifies, in part because she has been selected as Employee of the Month. Bianca also understands the importance of family connections and is consistently bringing family and other supports to the table. On occasion, when a family is unable to have the child remain in the home, Bianca makes every effort to ensure they are placed with family/kin. Since she has already done such work upfront, she is almost always able to make a relative placement. In one challenging situation, a 15-year-old youth was residing with her mother who struggled with substance abuse. The youth felt conflicted in leaving the home, including her school where she was thriving, but also understood the situation was deteriorating. Bianca worked closely with the child and extended family members, as the parent was unwilling to create a plan for safety. Bianca was able to make a kin placement and ensure that the child remained connected to her community. Bianca is a consummate professional who is one of the first people to offer to lend a hand and pivot when a crisis arises with calm demeanor and positive outlook.

BEAUTIFUL

Angela Frank - Middletown Area Office

We would like to nominate Social Worker Angela Frank as an Employee of the Month for January. Angela was assigned a case on 12/12/24 regarding a 14 yr. old adoptive youth in the hospital. This youth had been sent from Wellspring where she was placed since March 2024.

When we received our report from Wellspring, they had stated due to her behaviors at their facility she was sent to the hospital, however, her anticipated discharge date from their program was 12/18/24. Angela immediately met with the youth at the hospital, contacted the adoptive mother, as well as Wellspring. The program did not want to take the youth back and Angela worked so hard with consultations with our RRG and the hospital to determine appropriate care for this youth. Thank you, Angela, for all that you do!

Lisa Rickey - Willimantic Area Office

Social Worker Lisa Rickey is being nominated for Employee of the Month from the Willimantic Area Office. We have received many compliments about Lisa's work. "Lisa does a great job engaging and advocating for her youth," is one. We heard from a foster parent for one of Lisa's youths on her caseload who wrote this: "I've been doing foster care for about 15 years in CT alone. We have had Lisa Rickey for quite a few years now. She goes above and beyond for "her" kids. Today we had a meeting at the East Conn transition program for a youth in my home. Lisa remained professional as the Director of the school, the Teacher & the Therapist were insisting that the Surrogate Parent and DCF were not doing their job. The school staff were discussing the home, finances, and DDS. Both Lisa and the Surrogate Parent remained professional the entire time. Despite the challenges Lisa faced with what was presented in this meeting, Lisa was steadfast in her advocacy of this youth. Also, Lisa is so great with the youth in my care. One of the best Social Workers we have ever had!!!"



Dominique Wright - Hartford Area Office

Office Assistant Dominique Wright has been an employee of DCF in the Hartford Office since November 2022. She has shown dedication to the work that she does. Dominique comes into work every day with a continuous positive attitude which is like a ray of sunshine in the workplace. She has a cheerful outlook, and her can-do attitude not only brightens everyone's day but also inspires others to approach challenges with optimism. I am thankful for her always assisting and always having a smile and being a team player!"

Joseph Zebzda - Manchester Area Office

Paralegal Joseph Zebzda has been with the agency for many years and his last day at DCF is 1/31/25. Joe has been in the Manchester Office for 20+ years. Joe has been an amazing support with an array of expertise. He goes above and beyond due to his passion for this work and dedication to others. Joe has helped regarding records requests, subpoenas, and has a wealth of knowledge, even outside of his paralegal duties. Joe is considered as a friend professionally and personally to many. If anyone deserves the title of Employee of the Month, Joe certainly does. The Manchester Office is lucky to have him.

Amaury Vazquez - New Britain Area Office

Administrative Assistant Amaury Vazquez has been an employee of the Department for over three decades. Dedication to public service is truly commendable, especially over such a long career. Three decades represent a significant commitment to supporting families and children. Amaury has made a commitment to ensuring that the New Britain office functions like a well-oiled machine. He will do whatever it takes, which includes his daily runs throughout the building to monitor the visitation rooms cleanliness, check the building's temperatures, spread some cheer (which usually comes in the form of breaking out into a dance), and ensuring that we all have a snack! Amaury is always pleasant and willing to provide the support and assistance needed to everyone. Amaury, we want you to know that all your efforts don't go unnoticed and that you are greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Katie Verrastro - Meriden Area Office

Social Worker Katie Verrastro is one of the least senior people within the Intake Unit in Meriden at 16 years! Though she is one of mighty Meriden's least senior Social Workers, she is one of the office's biggest assets. Katie is hard working no matter what is going on, or what frustrations are in the way. She leads her work with humor, and the right sensitivity. Katie is the leading example of what an Investigator should be. She is thorough, is always critically thinking, meets families where they are, advocates where she can, and writes the most precise protocols. Over the past few weeks, Katie has had two removals back-to-back, which were complicated in nature, and was able to balance and meet all aspects of the tasks given to her. Katie is someone who can be relied on for support and a good laugh at the worst of times.

BEST

Vanessa Gonzalez - PRTF (South)

Children's Services Worker Vanessa Gonzalez has been a cornerstone of the Kiwani Cottage at Solnit South's PRTF for the past two years, consistently demonstrating exceptional dedication to the youth she serves. Her ability to connect with the individuals in her care is truly remarkable; she seems to always know the right thing to say or do, meeting the youth where they are and helping them navigate their personal challenges. Vanessa goes above and beyond in fostering an environment where youth feel comfortable and encouraged to engage in activities that focus on their personal goals, all while supporting their journey toward success. Her unwavering commitment, coupled with her positive attitude, has earned her the respect and admiration of both her colleagues and the youth she works with. Vanessa's communication and interpersonal skills are second to none, allowing her to build strong, trusting relationships and contribute to a collaborative and supportive team dynamic. As a Children Services Worker, she has not only met but exceeded expectations, making her an invaluable member of the team and an outstanding candidate for Employee of the Month.

Robert Frosolone - PRTF (North)

Head Nurse Robert Frosolone consistently demonstrates exceptional compassion and empathy towards our youth, taking extra time to listen to their concerns and address their needs with a

personalized approach even with challenging youth. He not only provides clinical support and nursing expertise, but he offers emotional support. He has clinical knowledge and ability to quickly assess and respond to complex situations and able to recognize subtle changes in the youth's status. His rapport interventions and approach to intense situations have helped to reduce or eliminate a crisis. His dedication to youth safety is evident in his attention to detail and offering suggestions to help ensure thorough documentation and processes. Robert brings a positive energy to the Solnit North and readily assists colleagues with tasks, actively supporting team morale and offering educational support to staff as needed. He actively participates in staff education, precepting new nurses, immunization clinic, establishing electronic health records and so much more. He is affectionately called "Dr Frosolone" by his clinical peers.

Christine Rios - Fiscal

For Child Welfare Accounting (CWA), we would like to nominate Fiscal Administrative Officer Cynthia Rios for January Employee of the Month. Cynthia has been a strong contributor to our team and has a great relationship with her Area Offices. She was part of our development of the travel debit card request form to assist Social Workers who are traveling with kids. She is currently testing a new form to assist Social Workers who have youth in Chap/Cheer programs. This form would help calculate payments for the youth. She is a strong team player and is always available to assist others, regardless of where they are in the Agency. She is always researching new ways for us to make the workflow easier.



Lindsay Eccleston - Behavioral Health Family and Community Services Division

RRG Mental Health Clinician Lindsay Eccleston is an absolute pleasure to work with! She has such a positive attitude, is reliable and always conducts herself with the upmost professionalism. I am constantly struck by her wealth of knowledge and ability to quickly reference best practices/research in her justifications during consultation. We are certainly lucky to have her here in Region 1.

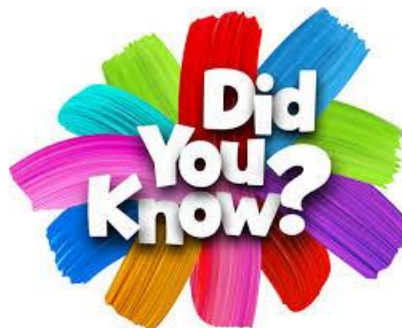
Amy Anderson - Education/Unified School District #2

Office Assistant Amy Anderson has served USD#2 Schools for nearly 10 years and has over 20 years of state service. From her days as a Social Worker in the field, to her role as an Office Assistant at CJTS and Albert J. Solnit South (Riverview School), Amy has demonstrated nothing but professionalism. She effectively communicates with all departments on campus, school district personnel, and outside partners. Amy is responsible for managing the main office for both the East and West Schools- school mailings, configuring purchasing and school supply orders, archiving school records, and completing any student record requests. Not to mention, directing phone calls to appropriate school staff, sending out report cards and other essential school documents, as well as entering/exiting students from PSIS and PowerSchool, and navigating the copier and printer! So, to say the least, not sure how Amy fits all these

responsibilities into her daily schedule. The relationships and rapport that she builds, with students and staff, are just a couple of her greatest strengths. Amy's flexibility, friendliness and personality continue to make her a valuable asset for the school, facility, and agency.

Annette Polizonis - Office of Legal Affairs

The first Legal Division Employee of the Month for 2025 has seen a lot of changes within the Department and the Legal Division. Office Assistant Annette Polizonis has been a support in the Records Unit since before it was even part of the Legal Division (when it was still housed at Long Lane!). She not only managed the transition to the Meriden Office on East Main Street when Long Lane transitioned to CJTS, she then coordinated the move of the Records Unit to the new Meriden Office on Research Parkway all on her own. The move happened during a period of transitioning employees so there was no one else in the Records Unit to assist. Annette took on organizing files, packaging boxes, labeling and identifying them (many with historical documents that were decades old), and office equipment (including the microfiche machines!) all while keeping up with her regular day-to-day assignments. Annette is a part-time employee who has a full-time impact on the Legal Division. She goes into the office most days so she can better support the Department staff and clients. Annette is one of two-Records unit staff who assign more than 6,000 record requests received every year to Legal Division paralegals. She promptly accesses and forwards records to the Legal staff so they can complete assignments in a timely manner. Annette also fields a vast array of public inquiries that are received through the Central Office telephone queue. This is a new function for Annette, and she interacts politely and efficiently with clients, ensuring they are directed to the appropriate staff. Annette's smile and welcoming personality makes it a pleasure for clients and staff to interact with her. It is with great pride that the Legal Division can recognize the tremendous support Annette provides. Thank you, Annette, for your tireless efforts on behalf of the Legal Division, the Department and the families we serve!



Miguel Santos - Solnit South Hospital

Manhasset Children's Services Worker, Miguel Santos has spearheaded a Children's Services Worker(CSW) led group program in the Solnit South hospital. "Miguel Mondays" have become an important unit ritual. Miguel prepares for the Miguel Monday group each week and has engaged our youth in a variety of activities. The youth love and look forward to this time with Miguel and their peers. Topics have ranged from life skills such as job applications (including completing a basic job application), job interviews (what to wear how to present), basic budgeting, and taxes (taxes add to the cost of an item and why); to fun activities such as karaoke, physical fitness skills; to generating excitement and participation around unit activities such as the talent show; and goals and future planning. In addition to group programming Miguel is affectionately called "The child whisperer" by Manhasset staff. He is skilled in co-regulating youth with his calm demeanor providing trauma informed care, de-escalating youth, and reducing acuity.

Allison Bombard - Health Management and Oversight Division

With great pleasure the HMO division nominates Supervisor Allison Bombard for Employee of the Month. Allison is one of those quiet, dependable, skilled employees who is very humble as to the value of her contributions to the division. She is the Supervisor of the Health Advocates who, as a group, are gems of the department. They provide Area Office staff with support and resources for case-related activities related to insurance and access to care issues.

Allison came into this newly created position in February of 2019 and has provided the group with consistent leadership and standardization of their practice. The nature of the work the Health Advocates are involved in requires them to communicate regularly with many stakeholders both within DCF and with outside state agencies and providers. She has worked to standardize processes including the collection of dental information on children in care and working with the CT Dental Health Partnership and facilitating the process of attaining the claims health profile which provides a snapshot into the medical and healthcare needs of the children coming into care. She actively connects families to resources that will help them manage their children's asthma and works with insurance companies to get bills for healthcare needs paid.



Also, she adds a unique and vital perspective on committees outside of her Health Advocate role such as Nursing Standards and Practice and Multidisciplinary Evaluation (MDE). Allison is also an integral member of the HMO Racial Justice committee and actively participates in the quarterly meetings. She consistently volunteers her time on sub committees to create and conduct training for the Division as well as the development of resources for the several change initiatives that the HMO RJ committee is working on. Allison is also well-liked by all her colleagues - often volunteering to coordinate celebrations for staff. She is also very skilled with computer programs and analyzing data and is often asked to prepare reports of data collected in the Division. We are all very lucky to have Allison on our team.

Diane Fasano - Central Office

Executive Assistant Diane Fasano has served the past two Commissioner's with dedication, grace, a fierce loyalty and a never-ending commitment of support. She is so deserving of the January Employee of the Month award! Diane will soon be retiring from DCF where she has diligently and professionally served the employees of the Department of Children and Families since January 2007. She has demonstrated great skill and composure in her complex and high-profile role. Despite a long commute to work each day, she continued each and every day to exhibit true compassion while listening to and intervening with countless individuals experiencing a personal crisis leaving them heard and empowered. Her attention to detail is impeccable! Diane Fasano exemplifies the true values, morals and ethical responsibilities of a State of Connecticut employee. She will be missed!