

## Commissioner's March 2025 Message



**Happy Social Worker Appreciation Month** with the national theme of **"Social Work: Compassion + Action"**.

Described as **"heartwork,"** a **"calling,"** or **"mission,"** Social Work is **not what** we do, it is **who we are!**

Social Workers change lives with each and every action they take. I am **incredibly proud** of our staff for the work we do!

A huge **THANK You** to **Social Workers Lorraine Perez from Meriden, Deana Spero from Milford and Morgan Bell from Waterbury** promoted the work of DCF via **social media posts** created by our partners at the **Department of Administrative Services**.



March is also **National Women's History Month**. We remain grateful for the leadership and support of **Governor Ned Lamont and Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz** for their efforts to empower women in leadership roles across the state.



I was honored to speak during CREC's **"Leadership in Action. Women Changing Communities"**, lunchtime discussion.



The following week, I took part in a panel discussion at the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity (CWCSEO) annual Women's History Celebration with year's theme, **"Moving Forward Together!**

**Women, Educating & Inspiring Generations,"** that is all about building solidarity and mutual

support, especially among women of color.

Lastly, I was on another panel organized by Jendayi (Jen-Day) Scott-Miller, Founding Executive Director & CEO **Angel of Edgewood**.



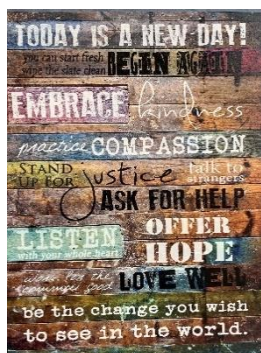
A **shout out** one more time to the **February Employees of the Month!** Who has been nominated to receive the **March Award?** Read to see who is described as "down to earth," instrumental," and "tireless."

Read in this month's "Spotlight" about **Miguel Santos from Solnit South Hospital**. Miguel is affectionately called "**Child whisperer**," for his calm demeanor while providing trauma informed care. He is a leader on campus as "**Miguel Monday**" is now an important Unit ritual as he guides and engages with our youth.



**Shaneka Hernandez** recently won the 2025 **Janet. E. Williams Humanitarian Award**. "My testimony becomes the piece of work that allows for other people in similar situations to **feel empowered**. So, I feel like that was the aspect of what set me aside [for the award] because I stood up in front of that room for four years training and **sharing pieces of me**," Shaneka stated. Read more about her in the newsletter.

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



**Urgent Crisis Centers (UCCs)** are a critical support for families to divert children experiencing a behavioral health crisis from being taken to an emergency department. Watch **Fox 61's story** on the UCC at The Village for Families and Children and the impact the program made for one family: [FOX 61 UCC](#)

We very much appreciate our collaboration with **Law Enforcement** personnel across Connecticut. Thank you to the **CT Police Chief's Association** for the opportunity to come and speak about the UCCs and the work of DCF.

Our partnership with the **Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division (JB-CSSD)** is also critical to support our youth. Thanks to the efforts of Deputy Commissioner of Operations Michael Williams, this month we held a first of its kind statewide forum between **DCF staff and CSSD Probation and Parole staff** to enhance our collaborative efforts.



Congratulations to **Deputy Commissioner Joyce Taylor and Family and Community Services Director Jon Jacaruso** for organizing an excellent **Program Lead Training**. A talented group of staff are supporting and managing our contracted providers!

**Prom time** is approaching! The **Olive Branch "Prom shop"** is here to help by offering **FREE** prom gowns, suits and accessories for high school teens who are receiving or have received DCF support. Contact [Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov](mailto:Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov) for more information. Watch **NBC 30's coverage** of the shop here: [Olive Branch Prom Shop](#)



**Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams** and **Director of Fatherhood Services Anthony Gay** attended the **25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the New England Fathering Conference!** We brought our innovative Fatherhood work to jurisdictions across the country.

Once again, this month I had the honor of speaking with staff at **Town Halls** across the state. From the **Behavioral Health and Wellness** team to the **Area Offices** in **Willimantic** and **Middletown**, it was great to celebrate our successes and hear directly from all of you!

This month, we also lost not just a colleague, but dear friend in **Eric Nixon**. His calm demeanor, always willingness to help and sense of humor will be truly missed. Of course, during the and IT and **CT-KIND Town Hall**



discussion, the **Fire Alarm** went off right in the middle of the meeting. Was that Eric playing one of his notorious jokes?

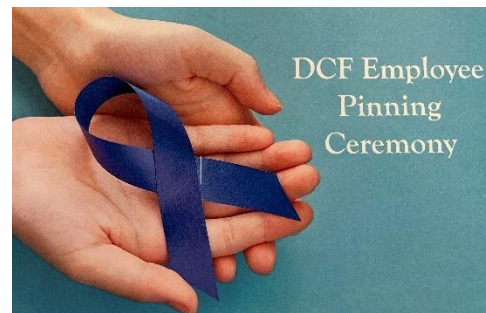
At Eric's service, we had the inaugural **DCF Honor Guard and Pinning Ceremony** to honor a member of the DCF family who has left us. **Thank you** to **Melanie Mercado**, **Yvette O'Brien** and **Karina Klemm** for this beautiful idea and for the successful implementation.



It was truly a moving experience to **present Eric's wife, Andrea, roses**, for the DCF staff to **wear ribbons** and **dress in blue** to honor Eric's memory. Andrea was beyond grateful for this tribute.

Let me leave you this month with a quote read by Eric's brother. **"Blessed are those who plant trees under whose shade they will never sit."**

Thank you everyone.





## Miguel Mondays: Weekly Ritual Helping to Make Break-Throughs at Solnit Hospital



*Miguel Santos, Children's Services Worker at Solnit South Hospital*

As a student athlete at the University of New Haven, Miguel Santos was trying to figure out his major. He settled on psychology because, ultimately, he knew he wanted to work with and help people. After graduating with a degree in clinical psychology, Miguel returned to his native New Jersey. One day, he got a call from his buddy, a supervisor at a residential treatment facility in Connecticut, who asked if Miguel would come in for an interview.

"I was looking for something new, something to start my career. I worked at group homes for about three years and went for an interview at Solnit [South] Hospital when it was still called Riverview. That was seventeen years ago and I've been here ever since," recalled Miguel.

Now a Children's Services Worker at Solnit South Hospital Manhasset, Miguel's supervising clinician noticed how the youth there gravitated to him and asked if he would be interested in running a group on Mondays. That group was dubbed "Miguel Monday" and has become a ritual and a reprieve looked forward to at Solnit hospital. Miguel was surprised by the longevity and popularity of his weekly group.

"I said 'sure, I'll start a group on Monday' but I didn't expect it to be something that would be still going today and a custom that the kids would really, really enjoy. And, they do a great job at engaging."

Julie Price, Behavioral Health Unit Supervisor at Manhasset, said Miguel and his weekly group, which has become an eagerly anticipated part of the unit's routine, have transformed the way youth at Solnit hospital engage with their environment and their peers. It has also led to many break throughs.

She said Miguel Mondays offer a unique opportunity for the youth at Solnit South to connect, learn, and have fun together as it offers a space to bond, explore life skills, and take part in activities that encourage both personal growth, future planning and group participation. Importantly, the sessions help the youth build confidence in both their abilities and their aspirations.

Topics at Miguel Mondays have ranged from life skills such as job applications, job interviews, personal finance and budgeting, and taxes. Additionally, the group enjoys lighter activities that encourage self-expression and fun, including karaoke, physical fitness exercises, and even participation in larger unit events like the talent show.



*Miguel as a college student at University of New Haven where he played soccer.*



*Outside of his position at Solnit Hospital, Miguel runs his martial arts studio Mongoose Training Academy.*

One of the "Miguel Monday" groups focused on grocery shopping. Miguel printed out coupon fliers and borrowed a replica cash register from the math teacher at Solnit. Most recently, Miguel taught the group the ins and outs of budgeting for and purchasing a vehicle, including hidden costs to look out for like carrying insurance, local car taxes and DMV fees.

"I wanted to help the kids get an idea of budgeting and what the costs are right now in the stores when they go shopping because eventually these are skills that most of our kids will need when

they're going out in the world."

He said that is what Miguel Mondays are all about.

"It's about life skill groups and giving the kids some kind of education on what's important and what's going on in the community. And what skills you'll need to be able to function in the community."

Based on the feedback, the youth who participate love Miguel Mondays. And they truly come out of their shells and engage in the discussion. So much so, that these cherished groups were cited by his supervisor in the write-up awarding Miguel Solnit Hospital's "Employee of the Month" for February 2025.

"They engage, they do an excellent job. The majority of the group, they're really partaking and do a good job participating in it."

Miguel's calm demeanor and charisma help the group run smoothly. He listens, he teaches and the youth clearly look up to him. He is trained to deescalate chaotic situations but it is also a trait that comes naturally to him.

"Years ago I was a part of the STAR team here, and that was one of the big things - being able to use verbal de-escalation and focus less on the physical aspect of things. [During a crisis that requires de-escalation], we can tell how that worked or this worked and apply those and other therapeutic methods to try to help and support the child who's in crisis. That was something that I worked on and learned. I saw for myself how that really helped."

His supervisor said Miguel's calm and empathetic approach to care allows him to connect with the youth in a way that goes beyond traditional programming. His skillful approach to co-regulating and de-escalating youth has earned him the respect and admiration of both staff and youth at Solnit resulting in the affectionate nickname of "Child Whisperer."

"The kids that I worked with directly, being able to coach them, just being patient, I was able to help them with what they were dealing with emotionally and guide them through those tough moments."

Miguel said it is his love for the kids he works with that motivates him to continue to dive into this work despite the day-to-day difficulties that occur at the hospital. He also carries that passion outside of the halls of Solnit.

"I love to work with kids. That was the big thing. Through my background being a martial artist, I ended up starting my own outside program. It was something that I really wanted to do in the community especially for the kids that we work with who don't have a lot of resources."

With the help of donations and fundraising, Miguel started his martial arts studio, Mongoose Training Academy, three years ago. While there is a fee to participate in the academy, Miguel awards scholarships to children of families who cannot afford the tuition. Two youth currently at the academy who received scholarships have proven their dedication to the training and that is the payback Miguel finds most rewarding.

"These kids showed they really wanted to do this and they really wanted to put in the effort. I had given out multiple scholarships previously, from businesses or donations from friends, and one of the things we found was some of the kids weren't really taking advantage of it."

"In those cases, some of it was because they didn't have transportation, or there's a parent situation. I had one kid who was so talented, but the mother had other kids and the mother worked all the time because she was a sole provider. That was sad to me because I couldn't really help in the sense of transportation."

But the story of the youth who had to drop out due to transportation had a happy ending partially because of Miguel's belief in and positive impact on that youth. One day, that youth sent a text to update his former martial arts instructor on things.

"He's a good kid. He'll text me once in a while and I'm so proud of him, because he texted me to say he's getting a full scholarship to Western New England to play football. And I was like, wow, man, that's amazing that you were able to accomplish that. I already knew he was a good athlete, and it was great to see that, coming from the situation that he was coming from, he was able to accomplish all of that."

"I was just really proud to be a part of his journey and that he still reaches out to me."

Miguel remains motivated by the break-throughs he sees occur with the youth at Manhasset and by the "great group of people" working side by side with him. He made sure to give his colleagues a shout out by acknowledging the team effort it takes to do their jobs effectively.

"The passion [Manhasset staff] have for helping the kids, it makes it really easy to come to work every day. They're here for the right reasons. I know DCF, at times, is in the news for the bad, but people should definitely see how much good work comes out of this on a day-to-day basis."

## Pieces of Me: Meet the 2025 Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Awardee



*Shaneka Hernandez, Child Services  
Consultant at DCF's Transitional Supports  
and Success Division.*

With more than two decades of service to DCF, Shaneka Hernandez has made a significant impact through her work both inside and outside of the Department. Shaneka has had a profound impact on the lives of many, particularly children and families of color, because of the authentic and empathetic approach she takes as a former Child Welfare Trainer at DCF's Academy for Workforce Development and now a Child Services Consultant at DCF's Transitional Supports and Success Division.

"When I became a trainer at the Academy, I wanted to make sure that those unsung things got attention - social and racial justice, that racial awareness and that understanding of human decency when it comes to different people from all walks of lives."

"Not just when it comes to working with and understanding our families of color, but also embracing that with each other - the people we work with. That's my biggest passion."

For those reasons, at the Department's annual Black History Month ceremony in February, Shaneka was selected out of a number of colleagues for the Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award which honors an African-American DCF staff member who has shown exceptional passion and commitment to children and families within the Black community. When asked what she believes stood out about her work that led to her nomination, Shaneka is humble.

"I honestly wasn't expecting the award at all because, everything I do, I don't do for the accolades or the acknowledgment. What I'm most passionate about is shedding a light on the 'privilege', for lack of a better word, for people that don't necessarily embrace or think about what that means."

Using her personal experiences to help others understand bias and the concept of "othering", Shaneka demonstrates both vulnerability and strength in her approach to training. She said being free to share her personal story is a huge component to her success as a DCF trainer.

"My testimony becomes the piece of work that allows for other people in similar situations to feel empowered. I feel like maybe that was the aspect of what set me aside [for the award] because I stood up in front of that room for four years training and sharing pieces of me."



Her focus on empowering others by sharing her story - which she refers to as "pieces of me" - creates a space for people to see themselves in her narrative and feel motivated to rise above their own challenges.

"Sharing my experiences with the most authentic piece of my heart, never having to hold back - the good, the bad and the ugly - that I've experienced working at DCF. That allows me to use that as a tool for [colleagues] to take from that what they will. My hope is that that will allow someone to understand or be able to move things forward themselves a little differently - a little better."



*Shaneka finds out she is the recipient of the 2025 Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award.*

In her professional and personal life, Shaneka described how she felt the need, as a Black woman, to 'code switch'.

"As I shifted my way through the agency, I haven't always experienced the welcomeness for being my authentic self, so I had to rebuild some of the 'pieces of me' from those experiences. I had to think about what I'm saying and make sure I'm saying it the right way and making sure that I'm articulating it in the right way."

"Having to do that constant brain switching to make sure that I am received, that's a thing I'm always mindful of. I was always taught, you got to be 10 times better, 10 steps ahead, to make sure that I am at the same level as my white counterparts. Others may have had that experience but that's a topic that doesn't always get talked about or acknowledged."

When she got to the Academy of Workforce Development, Shaneka said those past experiences helped shape and start her journey of being a greater changemaker by telling her story in a way that was going to help others and make an impact on society at large.



"Breaking it down, I began to understand that it was okay to be my authentic self and there was power in my voice. Those trials and those tribulations built me to be a stronger person. There was power in the understanding of who I am as a person."

Recognizing the power of language and its long-lasting effects, Shaneka created and presents a training entitled "The Power of Words: The Long-Term Implications." She explained her past experiences were the catalyst for this brainchild of hers. The training explores how words can either uplift or harm communities, particularly in the context of racial discrimination. Shaneka educates participants on how

generalized statements can impact families of color and provides practical strategies for addressing and intervening in such situations.

"I wanted to do a training that was going to break that myth of the angry black woman. Break and address that lack of understanding of when you're going to a home, and you're going to a home of a person of color, and understanding that mother's defensiveness is not anger, it's her being scared. It's 'DCF is coming to my house.'"

"It's the oppression that she's already dealt with in her life and here's the system coming to infringe on me again."



*Shaneka in action delivering a training to DCF provider My People Clinical Services.*

Shaneka wants to make sure that new employees, many of whom will eventually conduct home visits, understand the power dynamics at play and the emotional weight that families, for example Black mothers, carry when dealing with a system that can feel intimidating and oppressive.

The training uses perspective-taking, and Shaneka urges workers to place themselves in the shoes of the individuals the Department serves to foster greater compassion, trust, and ultimately, more effective and respectful interactions.

The training emphasizes the importance of empathy in the role of social worker by pointing out the privilege that DCF employees bring into their roles, especially when working with marginalized communities. In that light, Shaneka encourages trainees to reach a deeper level of self-awareness and cultural sensitivity.

"I want them to take away an understanding of where the other person is coming from. [When developing "Power of Words"], I said I'm going to shift all of my experiences that I've had where I felt I was treated as 'less than' and use that to empower our new staff [when they interact with families]."

"What's underneath that's creating this [doing 'air quotes'] the aggression or the non-compliance? What words are we using that are actually going to make things worse for this family versus that family? What are the stigmas that are out there, because of the reality that society looks at this group of people one way or another?"

"Take the time to step back and think about where that mom is coming from. She may fear her kids will be separated from her. My hope, through my training, is that people just take a pause to better understand the [families we're serving]."

She jokes that the implicit bias course she taught was a Level I college elective, whereas "Power of Words" is like a 200 Level course requiring participants get into the "nitty gritty" about how an individual can make a meaningful difference in the work of DCF. Shaneka achieves that by taking a raw, authentic approach and, of course, doing so through a lens using those pieces of her.



*Shaneka and DCF Comr. Jodi Hill-Lilly pose with Shaneka's Dr. Williams Humanitarian award.*

"Now can you imagine [how much more impactful the training is] if I'm sitting across the table from you and laying out that these are the pieces of me that you guys should know and understand. 'This is me authentically. This is who I am.'"

While conversations of underlying systemic racism can be uncomfortable, Shaneka does not shy away from engaging in those discussions. She explained that it is easy to brush aside or ignore racial injustices and implicit bias but, for someone who is working with families of various ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds, you must embrace and acknowledge cultural differences.

Shaneka calls it "healthy dialogue."

"There is a difference, even though people want to make it seem like there isn't, there is a difference. So, we talk about it. We put it on the table, we create the space to be able to have open dialogues around those differences. And we have to embrace that so that we can actually do what's best for our families."

Through her "Power of Words" training, Shaneka has reached over 300 DCF staff and community providers, ensuring that the message of empowerment and inclusion extends far beyond her immediate circle. She has even delivered the training nationally, often for free, reflecting her dedication to making those "pieces of me" accessible to all.

Other pieces of Shaneka include being a foster care provider for years. She is a proud mother and adopted her youngest child, who is now fifteen, when she was three. As a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., she carries forth with her the organization's founding principles of giving back through public service to uplift and enrich others with an emphasis on programs that assist the African American community.

Shaneka's work in support of children and families of color extends beyond her role as a DCF trainer. She remains active in her community providing opportunities and safe spaces for young people of color to enjoy with their peers.

"I founded a hip-hop dance group for teens and adolescents from 12 to 18 and then 18 turned into 23 and then 23 turned into these kids are not kids!," she laughs. "We performed at different things like the True Colors conference, some staff appreciations at DCF. Those were my Black and Brown young people who didn't have anywhere to go. I just wanted to offer them a space, a safe space to just be themselves and not get caught up in the street life."

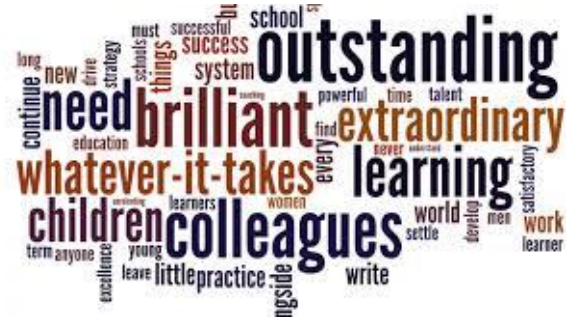
While Shaneka said she does not love the spotlight, she ensured she will be unwavering in her commitment to continuing to build and share those authentic pieces of her.

"My trials are a testimony that will help the current and future generations coming into DCF. I'm humbled by the fact that my voice is a conduit for that, and for the staff that I've touched through different aspects of my job and, of course, for the kids. Being here 20 plus years, it's uplifting to be part of this full circle thing called DCF."



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

Eric Nixon unexpectedly passed away in March 2025, leaving an incredible legacy. His family is being given the Employee of the Month Award in his name in recognition for his outstanding service to DCF, spanning decades. In July of 2022, Eric was offered and humbly accepted his position as the IT Manager 3 in the Customer Success Manager (CSM) role. Eric was a driving and innovative force behind the CT-KIND Project. His ability to talk in layman's terms was beneficial to the CT-KIND Project team overall, but especially for the Business staff. While his accomplishments in IT are profound, it is his personality that we will miss the most. A lover of cats, 80's and 90's rap, and the occasional cigar, Eric was described as "down to earth" and is "always ready to help others." Perhaps his best attributes were his calm demeanor and willingness to answer the most basic or complex questions from staff or providers with ease, leaving you feeling listened to and important. Eric was much more than a colleague - he was a true leader for those around him. He will be missed by all.



The Norwalk Office is recognizing Social Worker Erica Perkins. Erica has been with the Department for 19 years and currently is in the Adolescent Unit. The impact she has on the youth she serves is amazing. Erica helps the youth realize their value and find their voices. Erica brings the youth's voice to the table. We appreciate her tone, as she speaks with kindness. Her work has always exceeded expectations. We want Erica to know that we are incredibly proud of what she does and that her contributions are valuable. Erica's efforts and work mean a lot to the department. Jeannie House, Family & Children's Agency Director, stated "I have worked on several cases with Erica over my 12 years of working in foster care. Throughout the years, Erica has always been incredibly responsive, consistent and collaborative. She is knowledgeable about adolescent services available to youth and is always a strong advocate for the youth on



her caseload. Erica has always been a true partner in the work that we do and embodies the essential collaboration between the provider and state agencies. I have firsthand witnessed how empathetic and supportive Erica can be with youth during challenging times. Erica consistently shows up in every aspect of the work which is appreciated not only by youth but also by me and our staff at FCA that have worked with her! I'm happy to say many positive things about Erica! I could write paragraphs! I'm so happy she will receive this well-deserved recognition".

### **Carrie Glennon - Bridgeport Area Office**

The Bridgeport Office would like to recognize Social Work Supervisor Carrie Glennon as Employee of the Month for her unwavering dedication, exceptional service, and compassion. Carrie has been with the Department for over 25 years. Carrie has consistently gone above and beyond to support the individuals and families that we work with along with her staff, particularly over the last 6 months, demonstrating a true level of professionalism and empathy, even in the most difficult, threatening, and complex situations. During a particularly complex and volatile situation in January 2024 where a youth in the Bridgeport Office was making serious threats towards staff's well-being, Carrie stepped up. She acted quickly in coordination with other staff, DCF security and then the Police to contain the situation and prevent the situation from further escalating, thus keeping everyone safe. Carrie's staff recognizes her as an amazing Supervisor who will always go above and beyond to ensure that her workers are supported. Carrie has a passion for serving and advocating for the needs of the families we work with. Despite the difficult and complex cases in Carrie's unit, Carrie gives 100% attention to all the cases. Carrie is empathetic, respectful, and dependable. Carrie demonstrates a high form of professionalism when working/speaking with children and families. She communicates effectively to unit members, providers, and families and provides support whenever needed to ensure children get the best possible outcome in the moment and long term.



### **Michele Koslowski - Waterbury Area Office**

The Waterbury Employee of the Month is Michele Koslowski, our outstanding Administrative Assistant. Michele has consistently gone above and beyond by not only supporting the Office Director but also any staff in need and her contributions deserve our heartfelt recognition. In a role that often goes unnoticed, Michele has been a "Gem" for our operations. Michele is in the office on time, every day with a smile. Her organizational skills, attention to detail, reliability and unwavering support to ALL staff have made a significant impact on our team and the families we serve. Whether coordinating meetings, managing schedules, or organizing a toy drive or donations for our families, Michele does it all with grace and a positive attitude. What truly sets Michele apart is her genuine compassion for Social Workers and the work we do. She understands the importance of our mission and brings that understanding into every task. Her dedication to helping our Waterbury team function smoothly allows us to focus on what truly

matters: the well-being of the Children and Families we support. Thank you, Michele, for your hard work, commitment, and the positive spirit you bring to the Waterbury office. We are grateful for everything you do, and we celebrate you as our Employee of the Month!

### **Wendy Valerio - Torrington Area Office**

Wendy Valerio has been with the agency for the past 2 years. Wendy is a Social Worker and can only be described as someone who brings her heart and soul to the work. She values and understands the processes of this job to effectuate change for her families, no matter what hurdle she faces. She stays persistent and determined to achieve outcomes for children, following up consistently to move the work. Wendy's tact and approach has allowed her to influence significant changes in family's lives that have appeared to be on the verge of destruction. She maintains strong boundaries and a supportive hand with her families, helping them flourish. Wendy, you are very appreciated and have made a difference in many lives. We thank you and celebrate you!

### **Victoria Sheridan - Danbury Area Office**

Social Work Supervisor Victoria Sheridan is being nominated for Employee of the Month.

Victoria is an invaluable member of the Danbury team with a strong knowledge base and skill set that is exemplified in her daily work. She is always willing to help by going above and beyond to support her peers and staff within her unit. She is always ready to lend a hand, offering help and guidance wherever needed. Her collaborative spirit fosters a positive and inclusive work environment, making her an indispensable resource to the team. She is also a remarkable coach and mentor.

She is incredibly patient and thoughtful towards her colleagues, often taking time to understand their needs and offering advice with empathy and care. Her approach helps build confidence among her assigned workers and peers, making a lasting impact on their growth and success. Furthermore, Victoria is a passionate advocate, both for her staff and the families we serve. She always ensures that the needs of those around her are met and continuously advocates for improvements when deemed necessary.



### **Brianna Reynolds - New Haven Area Office**

Social Worker Brianna Reynolds is being recognized as Employee of the Month. Brianna demonstrates genuine compassion and empathy in her work with the children on her caseload. Recently, she was assigned a particularly challenging and emotional case. Through her dedication and advocacy, she was instrumental in accessing critical resources for the child and family. Brianna consistently provides thoughtful insight during case consultations and exemplifies true commitment to the families she serves. Her passion for the work is inspiring, and she truly goes above and beyond to make a difference. Congratulations, Ms. Reynolds, and thank you for your outstanding contributions!

### **Julie McDaniel - Milford Area Office**

Not only has Social Worker Supervisor Julie McDaniel been a dedicated employee at the Department of Children and Families since 2008, but she has also been a Supervisor for many years providing guidance and support to her Ongoing Treatment Services Unit. Julie exemplifies how to build a positive team environment and fosters a sense of belonging within the office. Julie McDaniel balances leadership and mentorship and encourages others to do the same by encouraging others and having a "can do" attitude. Julie is committed to advocating for what is best for the families involved with DCF and is a strong champion of family engagement and permanency. Recently Julie has supported one of her Social Workers in working with a family with a child with complex medical needs who spent several months at Hospital for Special Care. Julie and her Social Worker, along with other DCF representatives, worked tirelessly to improve his quality of life by engaging his extended family so that he could be placed with his loving aunt until his passing in March 2025. Through this trying and difficult time, Julie never stopped advocating and stepping in when needed to ensure the wellbeing of her staff. Her empathic way helped others feel encouraged when experiencing the highs and lows, setbacks and accomplishments that often come with cases when unfortunate events occur. She has shown strength and helped others realize the opportunities to become greater advocates for change even in times of despair.



### **Kalvin Bunkley - Norwich Area Office**

Kalvin Bunkley has been an employee of the Department of Children and Families for 15 years as a Social Worker. Calvin serves as a great asset to the Norwich DCF Office. Not only is he a great Investigator, but he also offers ongoing support to the Ongoing Services Units by picking up overtime for challenging cases. For example, Calvin transported a parent overnight from the airport consistently for weeks to ensure that a child had visits on the weekend. Calvin has also accompanied a youth at the hospital overnight and then clocked into work for regular hours for several weeks at a time. Calvin is very dependable and will often drop whatever he is doing to help a peer in need when requested. Calvin is a strong leader and has great interpersonal skills which is reflected in his strong connections within the community. Many of the clients that meet Calvin often reach out to him for ongoing support due to his compassion and love for the work. Calvin has maintained great professionalism and is more than deserving of being nominated and selected as Employee of the Month.

### **Shontez James - Middletown Area Office**

Social Worker Shontez James is being nominated as Employee of the Month, recognizing her unwavering dedication to the work as exemplified by her tireless efforts to support a complex youth on her caseload, who faces numerous challenges, including placement disruptions, hospitalizations, and multifaceted medical, educational, behavioral, and mental health needs,

and yet, Shontez remains a constant, driving force in this youth's life. She masterfully has been coordinating a large team of providers and DCF supports to ensure this youth's needs are being met. She does this with a seamless approach, all without complaint or expectation of recognition, simply because, as she puts it, it's part of her job.

### **Monica Smith - Willimantic Area Office**

Monica Smith has made the Department of Children and Families her home in every sense of the word over the last 19 years as a Child Protection Services employee. Monica has held the roles of Social Worker and Social Worker Supervisor and Team Meeting Facilitator. Monica's dedication to her profession and commitment to the children and families in the State of Connecticut has made Monica a highly valued employee, colleague, and mentor. Monica has applied that same level of committed servant leadership to the broader community, improving the lives of many through countless efforts, activities, and projects. Monica has used her voice to effectuate positive change and was a passionate member of the Peer to Peer, Racial Justice and Diversity Action Teams. Retirement is a milestone that signifies the peak of a rewarding career and the beginning of a new chapter.

### **Nina Bentham - Hartford Area Office**

Nina embodies what it means to be a Social Worker. On a daily basis, Nina communicates with the Intake team about food and resources that are available to our community. Additionally, Nina has taken initiative and has created the Hartford Office Immigrant Families Collaborative. Nina regularly meets with community stakeholders and works with Jennifer Avenia from Central Office; her passion is to ensure that our refugee/immigrant population is educated about standby guardianship and is also made herself available to train staff and go out on home visits. Nina is always willing to lend a helping hand and works tirelessly to make sure that families on her caseload have their needs met!



### **Macy Stavens - Manchester Area Office**

Social Worker Macy Stavens is being nominated as Employee of the Month due to her excellent and hard work on behalf of O.F., a 15-year-old youth in foster care who has a significant trauma and behavioral health history. For the past several months, O.F. has been in crisis, while engaging in very high-risk behaviors resulting in AWOL's, ER visits and psychiatric hospitalizations. Following O.F.'s recent discharge from Natchaug Hospital, the APRN from Natchaug Hospital reached out to commend Macy on her work on behalf of O.F. She noted, "A huge kudos to Macy, as well. From what I could see, Macy worked so hard in the care of this child! She has a great rapport with this kiddo that was clearly built on trust and consistency. Macy, your calls to this child went so far in her feeling heard and understood. The amount of time you put into coordination with the various agencies and parents was very noticed, and you were incredibly quick to get everything done." Macy's responsiveness to O.F. when in crisis and

her willingness to go above and beyond to support O.F. has been admirable. Macy has worked long hours and managed very stressful situations while responding to O.F's needs. She has done so with a high level of professionalism and without any hesitation and/or complaints. Macy has handled everything with such grace, diligence and professionalism to the youth, youth's family, law enforcement and multiple providers caring for this youth to ensure positive outcomes. Macy is a great asset to our agency.

### **Melissa Garden - New Britain Area Office**

Melissa Garden is one of the original Court and Community Liaisons and has been a fixture in the New Britain DCF office, New Britain Court and greater New Britain community for years! While she has endured many practice and staffing changes, she has been a constant. Through her work in the court, Melissa has connected CPS, Probation and attorneys in an effort to coordinate planning for children and families and diverting several Bench OTCs along the way. Melissa also organizes New Britain's Lunch and Learn series with the Court and our quarterly meetings helping to build and strengthen our working relationships. Through her community work on the Juvenile Review Boards (JRB) she helps to identify resources and link children and families to services and supports in an effort to keep them from becoming involved with the Child Welfare and/or Juvenile Justice Systems. Over the last few years, Melissa has also taken on the role of HART Liaison for Region 6 where she's a one woman show managing some of the highest number of HART cases in the state. She also provides numerous HART trainings to our community providers and has been facilitating groups within the New Britain schools educating youth and staff about trafficking. We're not the only ones grateful for the time, effort and are Melissa pours into her work every day. Judge Barbara Aaron notes, "Melissa is a very important resource to the Court. She acts as a bridge for us in both child protection cases and delinquency matters when we need coordination between the community, the court and the Department. Melissa is hard working and very knowledgeable about community resources and educational resources for our youth and their families. I am very grateful to have her as a liaison." Probation Supervisor Tanique Thompson added, "Melissa is amazing! She's responsive to the Probation Officers, she offers great feedback and guidance about appropriate next steps and is always available to brainstorm. She's a good listener and always takes the time to see and hear all sides of a situation." Melissa is an integral piece of our team whose hard work and dedication sometimes goes unnoticed which is why we're thrilled to have this opportunity to be able to recognize her as employee of the month!



### **Cathy Saja - Meriden Area Office**

The Meriden office is honored to recommend Social Work Supervisor, Cathy Saja, for Employee of the Month. Cathy is an exceptional leader who not only provides guidance to her staff but also embodies the true spirit of support and dedication to her staff. Cathy has consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to her staff's success, ensuring Social Workers feel



supported in their roles. She goes above and beyond by stepping in whenever needed—whether it's covering for staff, assisting with the workload, or providing mentorship and encouragement. Cathy's dedication, work ethic, and unwavering support make her an invaluable asset to our office. For these reasons, we proudly recommend Cathy as Employee of the Month, in recognition of her outstanding contributions and the impact she has on the staff and the families we serve.

### **Velee Lindsay - Careline**

It is with great pleasure that Velee Lindsay is nominated for the Employee of the Month. Velee has consistently exemplified the qualities of an exceptional Education Professionals Investigations Unit (EPIU) Social Worker, demonstrating a level of dedication and professionalism that has also been recognized and highly regarded by Legal staff, Early Childhood Staff and School Systems. Her work has been nothing short of outstanding, particularly in the areas of her level of detail in her assessments, positive relationships with colleagues, and always maintaining a positive, solution-focused attitude. Velee has shown an unparalleled commitment to conducting thorough and comprehensive school investigations and ensures that every aspect of an investigation is meticulously completed. Her diligent approach has not only assisted in providing sound assessments, but also advocacy to ensure that the children and families we serve receive the best outcomes. Her attention to detail, coupled with her ability to synthesize complex information, has significantly contributed to improving outcomes. In addition to her investigative skills, Velee has maintained excellent relationships with Attorney's, Board of Ed, OEC and the families we service. Her collaborative nature fosters an environment of trust and mutual respect. Velee is always willing to assist others, share insight, and offer support when needed to ensure a healthy, productive, and cohesive work environment. Her dedication, ability to communicate and positive attitude has been integral to the success of her work and has helped foster a supportive work environment and makes her an invaluable member of our EPIU team.



### **Melonie Luter-Rogers Fiscal Division**

The Revenue Enhancement Division would like to nominate Melonie Luter-Rogers for Employee of the Month. Melonie has been with DCF since 1997 and is currently the Social Services Program Manager-where she provides support to both the IV-E team and IV-E Prevention Program. Melonie Luter-Rogers' professional demeanor is matched by her expertise and kind-hearted spirit. Melonie is a true leader, and she brings a high-level understanding of all the intricate policies and regulations related to Title IV-E. Melonie represents true dedication, passion, and loyalty to DCF's mission. Along with her staff, and the very complex work in both IV-E and claiming, DCF accounts for over 200 million dollars in revenue for the State of CT. Melonie's team has been with her for many years; some accounting for decades. They too

wanted to share their appreciation: "As one of the newest members of the RED Team, I definitely agree that Melonie Luter-Rogers is an excellent leader. Her kind, intellectual and open-minded approach to training staff is unmatched. Her positive and optimistic attitude, in addition to her charisma and versatility, is what makes her a great candidate for this meaningful consideration."

### **Kelly Lofredo - Education/Unified School District #2**

Kelly is one of Solnit South School's Instructional Assistants. She takes on many roles in the classroom, including tutor, mentor, confidant, and more. Kelly comes in every day with a smile, ready to work with her students to help them succeed and navigate any challenges they may encounter. She works well with both her students and the rest of the staff. Kelly advocates for her students while also holding them to high standards in the classroom. She helps the teacher monitor classroom behavior, ensuring a safe and focused learning environment. Additionally, she provides one-on-one support to students, assists those struggling to stay on task by building their confidence, and helps maintain classroom goals and expectations. Kelly encourages positive peer interactions, which fosters a collaborative classroom atmosphere for everyone. Her strong rapport with students is evident every day of the week. Thank you, Kelly!!!



### **Shaneka Hernandez - Transitional Supports and Success Division**

Shaneka Hernandez's is being nominate for Employee of the Month. Shaneka has been a dedicated member of our Agency for several years, serving in a variety of roles, including Social Worker, Social Work Supervisor, Child Welfare Trainer, and currently, as a Child Services Consultant with the Transitional Supports and Success team. Throughout her tenure, Shaneka has consistently demonstrated commitment to our Agency's mission, particularly in advancing the Agency's Racial Justice initiatives. Shaneka has a profound passion for serving youth and families, which is rooted not only in her professional identity but also in her personal experience as both a loving parent and foster parent. Shaneka has exhibited strong leadership and creativity. She spearheaded the development of an in-service training offered through our Academy for Workforce Development titled "Power of Words: The Long-Term Implications." This training helps participants understand racial discrimination-particularly through generalized statements, and equips staff with strategies to recognize, address, and intervene, ultimately creating an equitable environment for all families we serve. Beyond her professional contributions to the agency, Shaneka earned recognition as the recipient of the 2025 Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award which is a testament to her commitment to making a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of those in our community. With this we are honored to support her nomination for Employee of the Month.

### **Jasana Levy - Office of Legal Affairs**

This month, the Legal Division proudly celebrates Jasana Levy, who has recently been promoted from Staff Attorney in the New Haven Area Office to Assistant Legal Director at Central Office. Jasana is not only a superstar in her role but also an inspiring educator, teaching in the Legal Studies program at Post University and Quinnipiac University, as well as in the Legal Practice program at UConn Law. Her passion for teaching has made her a standout in training at the Academy and in ad-hoc sessions for CPS staff in the Area Office. Jasana exemplifies a commitment to personal and professional growth, currently participating in this year's Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM) cohort. Her natural leadership abilities led her to establish the inaugural Wellness Committee for the Legal Division, where she has organized activities and outings to foster team bonding and relaxation. With her calm demeanor and strategic approach, she consistently strives for the best outcomes for children and families. Jasana's commitment to public service is evident in her legal experience and her passion for education. As she steps into her new role as Assistant Legal Director, we look forward to seeing her continue to lead with integrity, compassion, and a strong sense of purpose.

Congratulations, Jasana, on this well-earned promotion!



### **Mike Carone - Government Relations and Policy**

Mike has done exemplary work during the first 2 months of the legislative session. He has successfully advocated for the Department's position on several bills by spending hours at the Legislative Office Building and Capitol speaking with legislators. Mike never shies away from an assignment and rather goes full steam ahead, regardless of the complexity or political sensitivity. His instincts and amazing interpersonal skills serve him, and the Department well. He is known to be an honest and credible asset to Legislators and their staff, the Governor's office, other State Agencies and private Lobbyists. Whether through humor, historical knowledge or just old fashion friendliness and respect, all at the Capitol complex feel comfortable with Mike. Those attributes have led to several accomplishments in this session. His efforts enabled our agency bill to be passed unanimously by the Children's Committee. He also worked with Legislators and Advocates to fix several pieces of legislation that would have negatively impacted the Department and those we serve. On a personal note, Mike is a trusted colleague and friend. His understanding of the legislative process provides us with a valuable ear to discuss strategy with and determine areas of opportunity. Those conversations always lead to improved ways to move forward. But he also is someone I can vent to laugh with, talk sports with and find ways to chill out during stressful times. Even when I get too deep in my own head, Mike doesn't relent and continues to be a support that offers advice. He is deserving of this acknowledgment...only a few more months to go!

### **Thea Korytkowski - PRTF (South)**

It is with great pleasure that the Solnit South Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) nominates Thea Korytkowski for Employee of the Month. With more than a decade of experience in child welfare, including many years as a training supervisor in the area office, Thea joined Staff Development as a Trainer in July 2024 and quickly thereafter made her mark. As a consummate collaborator, Thea has prioritized relationships as she has tackled the work within Staff Development. Staff across campus quickly learned that Thea is committed to improving processes, especially if it means being more efficient, and she is quite skilled in her role. You can't walk down a hallway in Silvermine or through a training room without seeing evidence of Thea's work. In her short time at the facility, Thea has created a QR code for staff to access training evaluations, developed infographics with key data, proactively identified training needs and worked with facility partners to develop curriculums. Thea has built trusting relationships with staff who regularly seek her out for support and feedback, and it is no surprise, she is more than willing to step in to help. Thea is a forward-thinking leader who has already impacted so much at the facility. We are extremely fortunate to have her as part of our team and we are proud to recognize her as the PRTF employee of the month.

### **Abraham "Max" Ford - PRTF (North)**

Solnit North is lucky to have Abraham "Max" Ford as a member of our Rehabilitation Therapist team. Max has put in countless hours of effort and dedication into the basketball team on campus. This has greatly improved the youth's morale and respect for each other. Their ability to work as a team is night and day from when they first got here. The youth now have pride in being part of a team which some have never had an



opportunity to have in their past. Max is the type of staff who approaches his jobs with integrity, care, and commitment. Many of us would vote him "captain" to guide us in any competition, challenge, or activity! He has a wide range of skills and focuses on the therapeutic value of traditional sports and teamwork in his work with the youth in our care. He teaches our youth skills that will benefit them far beyond their time at Solnit North such as how to manage their emotions, work effectively with others, and challenge themselves to reach their individual potential. Max is patient, calm, and caring in his approach to working with our youth every day. He is a vital member of the Solnit North Rehabilitation Therapy Department!

### **Dr. Paul Rao - Central Office Clinical and Community Consultation Division**

CCCSD is very excited to nominate Dr. Paul Rao for March 2025 Employee of the Month. Dr. Rao is the Regional Medical Director of CMCU is a child/adolescent psychiatrist. He provides regional consultation to DCF Area Offices, on-call for the Careline and Centralized Medication Consent Unit. Christa Rider, BHCM Region 1 states, "Dr. Rao is well respected by his peers and an absolute pleasure to work with. He has always been very approachable, available, and willing to help our team despite his multiple demands. He is an incredibly intelligent man, who is

committed and has a deep understanding of our youth who interface with the child welfare system. In every interaction, he goes above and beyond to understand our youth's clinical profile and what is driving any given behavior vs just medicating it. He regularly collaborates with Regional CPS and RRG staff to make informed decisions and ensure clinical interventions are also in place. Dr. Rao will go out of his way to review evaluations, collaborate with inpatient units, and observe youth to name a few. I appreciate his ability to push the system to shift the perspective of our youth and always doing so in a racially just way. I feel incredibly lucky to have Dr. Rao as a colleague and supporting, and advocating, for our youth. The Region 2 Mental Health RRG Team commented, "Dr. Rao's expertise is invaluable to the Region 2 CPS and RRG staff. We really appreciate that he is down to earth, easy to talk to and we can have transparent clinical conversations to best plan for our children. The RRG staff often reach out to Dr. Rao during urgent situations, and he goes out of his way to help us. Dr. Stephney Springer, Health Management Administrator stated, "Dr. Rao is well respected in the psychiatric community and leverages his relationships to intervene on our children's behalf. Not only does he look at the medication regiment, but he also thinks about therapeutic modalities that can support clinical regulation. Dr. Rao is able to assist the clinical and CPS teams of the Department in these consultations while balancing medication approvals via his role at CMCU (Centralized Medication Consent Unit). In understanding the benefits of medication, but also the detriments if not closely monitored, Dr. Rao has provided to the Clinical and CPS leadership a list of young children who may be on more than one psychiatric medication. His diligence in doing so, demonstrates his team approach to monitoring our children. "Dr. Rao is an extremely valued support to the RRG team. His calm demeanor compliments his expertise in the psychiatric field and his thorough and comprehensive assessments of youth and their needs. Dr. Rao consistently advocates on behalf of our youth and makes himself available whenever possible to support teams in case reviews and planning. We very much appreciate Dr. Rao's support and are honored to have him as a resource to the team and as a colleague," stated Lindsey Miller, Health Management Administrator.