

## A Message from Commissioner Hamilton



Thanks to each of you for your ongoing and unwavering commitment to serving our children and families. I recognize that the past few weeks have been unusually difficult given recent media coverage involving a tragic child death. Please remember to support each other and take a few moments to read our *"Spotlight on What's Right"* newsletter highlighting important events, milestones and the unique accomplishments of our staff.

Thank you to Monica Rams and the Central Office Diversity Action Team for putting together the Hispanic/Latine Heritage Month celebration! *"Collective Heritage, Growing Seeds of Hope, Safety & Respect,"* was Connecticut DCF's theme for the month. We were treated with inspirational words, videos, a panel discussion and yes..... salsa dancing lessons!



Congratulations to Social Work Supervisor Stephen Heredia who was awarded the 2025 William Rivera Humanitarian Award. "Mr. Heredia is respected by colleagues, trusted by families, and admired for his calm leadership, empathy, and unwavering advocacy," his nomination stated. "Through his vision and dedication, Mr. Heredia has created pathways of support for Hispanic and Latine families, ensuring they are seen, valued, and empowered within our system." Read more about Stephen in this month's Spotlight.



Nominees for the award also included Sandra Ramirez, Kathie Marotta, Nina Bentham, Bereniz Cote-Luna, and Annika Diaz. Click [here](#) to read their nominations:

[William Rivera Nominees.](#)  
Congratulations everyone!



We raise heightened awareness this month of the epidemic of Domestic Violence across our communities. CT Safe Connecticut is a 24/7/365, free and confidential information and resource line for anyone impacted by domestic violence. Contact can be made by calling 1-888-774-2900 or visiting [CTSafeConnect.org](#) to call, chat, text or email for assistance.

A shout out one more time to the September Employees of the Month! Who has been nominated for the October Award? Read to see who is described as "*compassionate and kind,*" having a "*bubbly*" personality and a "*can do/positive*" attitude.



Were you seen at the Region 6 Foster Care Division Trunk or Treat event? A great night for all including our fabulous foster, kinship and adoptive parents and children in our care! Our staff even joined in the fun of dressing up!

Foster Care Division Program Director, Eduardo Rivera, discuss the importance of Kinship care on the WFSB Great Day at 9 show: [Eduardo Rivera](#). Clinical Behavioral Health Manager, Christa Rider, outlined the warnings signs of child sex trafficking: [Christa Rider on NBC 30](#)



Clinical Behavioral Health Managers Kristen Oliver and Melissa Milardo presented on the role of the Regional Resource Groups at a Connecticut Bar Association Child Welfare and Juvenile Law Section meeting. Important information to discuss!

Connecticut DCF strives to ensure every child has a permanent and loving family to support them. In fact, approximately 93% of children and youth in our care and custody reside with a family with about 7% in congregate care. This month, I attended the Ending the Need for Group Placement (ENGP) community forum to continue to assess ways to address gaps in our system, maintain children with their families, and enhance our service array.



After my opening remarks, the ENGP group heard from Deputy Commissioner Tina Jefferson, Director of Fatherhood Services Anthony Gay and Bureau of External Affairs Ken Mysogland about how their work intersects with this important topic.



Social Workers, Theresa Watkins and Alexis Williams, from the Hartford Office recently attended a Child Welfare class at Central Connecticut State University, where they shared their passion for the work they do. They spoke about the challenges and rewards of the work, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to make a difference every day. *"Even on the most challenging days, we're reminded that our work has purpose... helping children and families build hope and healing is what keeps us going,"* they stated.



Congratulations to the Waterbury Office for being honored by Kuhn, a Connecticut based nonprofit that helps people with disabilities find employment. This year in a vote, participants and staff selected Waterbury DCF as "Employer of the Year" for their Group Supported Employment program.

October is also National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The 2025 theme is *"Every story is unique, Every journey matters."* As we recognize that almost all of us know someone impacted by breast cancer, we can agree that early detection saves lives! The Connecticut Department of Public Health's [Early Detection and Prevention Program](#) provides breast cancer screenings at locations throughout the state for patients who have low income and who have no or limited health insurance.



As always, please remember the real and lasting impact you make every day on the lives of the children and families we serve and thank you for your continued dedication to this difficult yet rewarding work.

## Championing Equity and Cultural Understanding: Meet DCF's 2025 William Rivera Humanitarian Award Recipient



Since joining DCF in 2014, Stephen Heredia has approached his work with humility and purpose. He was the recent recipient of the 2025 William Rivera Humanitarian Award which recognizes individuals who embody compassion, advocacy, and commitment to community. According to those who work alongside him, Heredia exemplifies those values in his day-to-day interactions and through his leadership within the Department.

Reflecting on the award, Heredia shared his gratitude and what humanitarianism means to him - pursuing your calling in life with selflessness and service.

“I’m honored. I feel very humbled to be recognized by my peers and the work that we do. I think all of us do a tremendous amount to help our communities... I appreciate being chosen among so many great [nominees].”

“[Humanitarianism] is about giving back to your community and making sure everyone has what they need in order to thrive and be successful.”

Born to a Colombian mother and Puerto Rican father, Heredia draws strength from his multicultural heritage. His leadership style is shaped by those roots and the family values that he carries over to all aspects of his work.

“Spanish was actually my first language because my parents didn’t speak English when they first moved here,” he shared. “That experience shaped how I see others—through a lens of empathy, patience, and understanding.”

Heredia credits his father with instilling his lifelong commitment to respect and dignity.

“My father always said, no matter your status—whether you’re maintaining a building or you own it—you treat everyone with the same level of respect. That’s something I carry both personally and professionally.”

Heredia’s path to DCF began while studying psychology at UCONN. In turn, that blossomed into a deep desire to support children and families. During college, he interned at Hartford

Hospital and volunteered with the Village for Families & Children in Hartford, where he saw firsthand the disparities faced by under-resourced communities.

Working with students from Hartford's Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School opened his eyes to inequities in both education and opportunities for those youth.

"I saw such a need," he recalled. "I saw we needed to do more to invest in our kids, especially those in the inner city."



That realization led Heredia to pursue a career focused on child and family well-being. After working briefly in children's residential care, he joined DCF and later earned his Master of Social Work from the University of Saint Joseph. After graduation, he worked directly with children in foster care—an experience that solidified his calling.

"That was my first real introduction to child welfare. I knew then that I wanted to join the Department and make a positive difference."

Heredia said the work is far from easy but, at the end of the day, helping and supporting families is its own reward. He said he loves his job, "I'm in it for the long run."

Described by colleagues as steady and collaborative, Heredia sees leadership as an exercise in balance.

"I try to bring calmness to the chaos that is this work," he said. "No matter the crisis, my team knows they can come to me, and I'll be cool, calm, and collected."

Heredia believes strong leadership comes from knowing one's own identity. For his part, he considers diplomacy and harmony to be the foundation of his identity.

"Being a great leader is about understanding your strengths and building on them," he explained. "For me, that's empathy, composure, and collaboration."

As a proud Latino leader, Heredia has dedicated much of his work to supporting Hispanic and Latino children and families—especially those who are undocumented or face systemic barriers.

"The challenges our Latino community faces have evolved. Distrust of government, fear of deportation, and language barriers are still real—and in some ways, more heightened now."

He emphasizes the importance of empathy and communication in breaking down those barriers, “As social workers, we have to disarm people with our approach. We’re in their lives to make a positive difference.”

Heredia has also spearheaded the development of a digital immigration resource guide, an initiative designed to connect undocumented families with essential supports such as health care, housing, legal aid, and education.



“Whenever I worked with undocumented families, there was never one guide that could help them navigate all their challenges,” he said. “The idea was to create a simple, digital tool families could access on their phones—something that makes finding help easier and less intimidating.”

“The beauty of it is its simplicity. It’s about lowering barriers and empowering families to access what they need.”

Though the project is still being piloted, Heredia is confident in its potential. He plans to expand the initiative to be made available in multiple languages while improving both family and community engagement.

Beyond his direct service work, Heredia has been doing his part to inspire the next generation of leaders as an active participant in the LEAD Mentoring Program and the Leadership Academy for Supervisors, where he continues to mentor new staff and promote professional growth across DCF.

For the Department's newer hires who are looking to develop as leaders and social workers, Heredia had some advice, “DCF offers so many opportunities for learning. Seek mentors, take advantage of trainings, ask questions. You don’t have to be an area director to make a difference.”

For Heredia, his greatest inspiration remains close to home. He says his family is his greatest motivating driver to continue to lift up his community and the communities served by the Department.

“My wife and kids are my biggest inspirations. They make me want to be a better father, husband, leader, and mentor—and to do the kind of work that leaves the world a little better for them and for the families we serve.”

Through his vision and dedication, Heredia will remain focused on connection and progress, continuing to build pathways of understanding and empowerment for Hispanic and Latino families—ensuring they are seen, valued, and supported.

Looking to the future, Heredia hopes his work will inspire a new generation of DCF staff to lead with empathy and courage.

“Even moving the needle slightly in the right direction makes a difference,” he said. “When we all do that together, over time, our agency and the communities we serve will be stronger.”

As the 2025 William Rivera Humanitarian accepts his award, Heredia wanted to leave his colleagues with a simple yet powerful message:

“Inspiring others is the gateway to our future. No matter how small our contributions may seem, together they make a lasting impact.”





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

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

#### **Stacey Vertula - Bridgeport Area Office**

It is with great pleasure we nominate one of our Clerical, Stacey Vertula, as Employee of the Month as Support staff are too often our unsung heroes. They do most of their work behind the scenes. They keep units, workgroups and offices running with little fanfare. Bridgeport, like many offices, deals with staffing issues. The Clerical team is no exception. We are down a couple of Office Assistants and the Office Supervisor. She stepped up as a leader to ensure the Office and Clerical kept running without skipping a beat, in short, she helped fill that void. They say nature abhors a vacuum; well Stacey Vertula Secretary 2 is a testament to that. Stacey has been with the Department for 24 years, having worked in both the Norwalk and Bridgeport Offices. She has experience in every discipline, having supported staff in Ongoing Services, Foster Care, Intake, and for many years worked to handle invoices and payments for the Bridgeport office. Stacey is incredibly kind, thoughtful and conscientious. She is always willing to help and provide support whenever it's asked of her. She is always responsive with a positive attitude and shows patience even on the most challenging of days. Stacey is an asset to the Department and an employee we are proud to recognize and celebrate her. Stacey is one of those people that asks what she can do to help. She tries to come up with solutions instead of dwelling on the problems. We all know how important that can be to a team, especially during times of turmoil. We don't want that to go unnoticed. Please join us in appreciating and congratulating an important member of our team in Bridgeport.

#### **Paul Franco - Norwalk Area Office**

This month, the Norwalk Office would like to nominate an exceptional employee for Employee of the Month: Social Worker Supervisor Paul Franco, who demonstrates a strong commitment to his role as a leader and to the Department. He is being nominated by Kim Watson. Paul consistently goes above and beyond through his proactive approach to meet the needs of both the families we serve and his fellow colleagues. Especially with some of the most challenging cases, Paul exceeds expectations to consistently respond with empathy and deliver immediate and effective outcomes for children and families. Paul is quick to jump into action by communicating with families, relatives, and providers in an effort to plan, resolve barriers and



promote connection during times of crisis. Furthermore, Paul maintains a demeanor of calmness and professionalism in high pressured situations. Paul's leadership and willingness to provide emotional support to his peers exemplifies the true meaning of teamwork and elevating the success of others. He understands that we can't do this work alone. His peers describe Paul as "compassionate, kind, having a great sense of humor, hardworking, and supportive." Although Paul is new to his role as a Supervisor, he consistently demonstrates a positive and accommodating attitude toward both his staff and peers. He is eager to learn, receptive to feedback, and always open to suggestions for improvement. When considering future leaders in the department, Paul clearly stands out as a strong candidate. Paul has been with the Department for over 6 ½ years and was promoted to Supervisor for the Norwalk Office in June 2024. Paul shows unwavering commitment to racial justice work as a team member and has taken on a leadership role in the FELT Fatherhood inclusion work. Paul's Program Supervisor is deeply grateful for his exceptional dedication, empathy, strong work ethic, and much appreciated humor. We are proud to have Paul as a valued member of the Norwalk Office team.

### **Dawn Applegate - Danbury Area Office**

Dawn has been employed as a Social Worker with the Department since May of 2024 and subsequently transitioned to the Adolescent Unit. She is being nominated for Employee of the Month as she is a staunch advocate for her families and has excelled tremendously in her role. Her determination and commitment were recently acknowledged by a parent who worked closely with Dawn, as she highlighted Dawn's efforts and willingness to go above and beyond to support children and families, which exemplifies real social work practice. Dawn is highly respected by her peers. She is known to face every challenge without complaints, as she is often seen with a smile always maintaining professionalism. Dawn is reliable; dependable; she is always open for feedback, and she strives to continuously improve her work. Dawn projects unity and is a key contributor to making the Danbury Office a positive work environment.

### **Allison Droheim - Torrington Area Office**

Alison Droheim has been with the Department for the past year and is being nominated for our Employee of the Month. Alison works as an Office Assistant and runs the front desk receptionist area. Alison has been nominated by the office for her "bubbly" personality. Alison is pleasant, kind and has a warm welcome when families come into the office. Alison is always willing to help in any way she can. She always has a smile on her face and is very approachable. Alison has really figured out the Fleet Scheduler, as everyone knows, is not an easy task managing the cars. Alison has a nice way about her when interacting with our families over the phone who might not be at their best when calling the Agency. She goes out of her way to make people happy. Alison is an asset to the Torrington DCF office. Congratulations Alison!

### **Melissa Stasiak - New Haven Area Office**

Social Worker Melissa Stasiak is being nominated as the Employee of the month. Melissa has been with the Department for 4 years and has an exceptional work ethic! Melissa has built great relationships with her youth and



families on her case load. Melissa goes above and beyond for her youth. Melissa is very organized and takes great pride in her work. Melissa is a team player and always helps when we need it. Melissa has a youth that was recently academically dismissed from CCSU and had to move her off campus on very short notice. The youth was placed in temporary housing and 2 weeks later Melissa had to move her again to a shared apartment. Melissa did this with such poise and came back the next day ready to go. Recently, Melissa happened to be the only Social Worker working in a Unit and yet another emergency came up on someone else's caseload. Melissa to the rescue!! We had a challenging youth that was arrested for destroying property at CCP. The youth was made aware she would be going to a STTAR home and of course was not happy about it. Melissa was able to put things at ease and decided to take her to get a bite to eat and engage her in conversation. The youth was able to make it to the STTAR home without incident. We are grateful for Melissa's dedication and hard work!!

### **Kaitlyn Grayson - Norwich Area Office**

Social Work Supervisor Kaitlyn Grayson is being nominated as Employee of the Month. Kaitlyn has been with agency for 7 years now. She was promoted a year ago to SWS where she took on the role of a Training SWS. As a training SWS, Kaitlyn showed up for her team daily, and showed nonstop support, and guidance and revamped the training program for our Trainees in the Norwich office. On many occasions, Kaitlyn would be the only Supervisor in the office and would always have an open-door policy and help Social Workers with questions or others who needed assistance. Kaitlyn is a HART liaison for the office, the Norwich PD liaison, and the Norwich Public Schools liaison. Kaitlyn is also a DAT co-chair. Kaitlyn is not only an amazing Supervisor but a truly good person and asset to this Agency. Kaitlyn goes above and beyond for the office, the families she works with and her team. If you are looking for someone to be there no matter what look no further than SWS Kaitlyn Grayson. She is one of a kind and the Norwich Office appreciates her!

### **Barbara Krasinski - Middletown Area Office**

Barbara Krasinski is being nominated for Employee of the Month in the Middletown Office. Barb has been a Social Work Case Aide for the Department since September 1999. In her time with the Department, she has been known for her consistency, dependability, and attention to detail. Aside from her noteworthy engagement with children and families, comprehensive (and timely!) documentation, Barb has assumed additional roles in the office, above and beyond what is expected. Barb continually checks the Middletown car seat inventory, helps sort out expired seats, and aids with purchase orders. If you are fumbling with securing a car seat, Barb is the woman to see! In the past, Barb voluntarily took the leadership role in organizing and monitoring ongoing car maintenance and car repairs. Barb has worked with many reluctant family members, supervised many difficult ongoing visits, some in place for over a year. She works tirelessly to ensure parents are afforded consistent visitation, and navigates complex emotional situations with reverence, ease, and comfort. She is respectful of clients, DCF staff, providers, and foster families. Most importantly, Barb ensures the youth she works



with feel seen, heard, and valued. She understands the importance of consistency for the children in DCF care and will often work to rearrange visits around scheduling conflicts, to ensure the children are not needlessly with unfamiliar DCF staff. Barb will be retiring from her state service in February 2026. She will leave a void that cannot be filled. An exceptional employee and person, with a heart of gold.

### **Jennifer Torres - Willimantic Area Office**

Social Worker Jennifer Torres transitioned to the Adolescent Unit in January 2025. Since that time, she has seamlessly transitioned to her new role in Adolescent Services and is being nominated for Employee of the Month. She has worked to learn all aspects of her new position, built great rapport with her youth, emersed herself in the Youth Advisory Board, assists her unit mates whenever she was able, and has worked tirelessly to advocate for the young people on her caseload. Jennifer also works to help all her teenagers and young adults, regardless of their situation, to try and achieve permanency or transition successfully to independence. She reunified 2 youths back with their parents, one of which was 17.5 years old! She was able to get another youth's (17.10 years old) adoption finalized, and that youth was placed with relatives in New Mexico. She has been an asset to this Unit!

### **Akesha Jordan - Hartford Area Office**

We would like to nominate Akesha Jordan for Employee of the Month. Akesha is an Intake Social Work Supervisor and goes above and beyond to be a support to not only her peers but also the staff she supervises. Akesha's unit has expressed on several occasions how much they appreciate the support that she is able to provide daily in Intake. Akesha wears many different hats and truly exemplifies the qualities of a leader. She is a co-lead for the Intake Wellness Team and also takes part in the Cultural Committee and Hartford Advisory Committee and has been integral in implementing Peer to Peer for both the Supervisors and Social Workers on the Intake team. Akesha has also been selected as a primary/back up to our screeners and has been supportive of our Clerical staff in the Intake screening process throughout the CT-KIND roll out to ensure cases are distributed timely. Akesha has been an integral part of our staff while we navigate the implementation of CT-KIND. Akesha is a team player and is truly dependable. Akesha's positive attitude and smile on her face are the attributes that make working with her so seamless. Akesha consistently goes above and beyond demonstrating a true partnership whenever approached for support or assistance and always finds a way to make it happen!

### **Lori Green - Manchester Area Office**

Nominated by her peer, Ryan Cichowski: " Social Worker Lori Green is being nominated by Ryan Cichowski as Employee of the Month and acknowledges her continued and unwavering desire to provide support and assistance to her fellow-coworkers. More specifically, Lori deserves commendation for taking on additional tasks outside of her regular caseload to include assisting with OTCs and legal work for other Intake Social Workers, and, insisting/lobbying to take on cases for other staff when knowing that those workers



have had very difficult and complex previous caseload assignments. Lori consistently operates in a selfless manner, and, always looks to go above and beyond for her Manchester Intake team whom she demonstrates a sincere and genuine care for. For these reasons, among countless others, we believe Lori Green is deserving of designation as Employee Of The Month to reward her dedication, commitment, and compassion. In addition, others have noted the following: "When I think of a social worker, I think of Lori. She always advocates, collaborates, supports and never steers away from having the "tough love" conversations clients sometimes need to hear. We all appreciate our Lori and I'm so happy to have her apart of our team." "Lori is the ultimate team player. Over the past couple months, Lori has helped me with transportation and home visits on cases that aren't hers. I know she's flooded with her own work like we all are, but literally ANY time I've ever asked her for help, she says yes or tries to find someone else who CAN help me. Lori always has a good attitude despite a lot of changes within the office and within her own personal life. She also has awesome style, comparable to Ms. Frizzle in the coolest way possible."

### **Winifred Brown - Meriden Area Office**

Winnie Brown is nominated by her peer, Alyson Perez, for Employee of the Month in recognition of her outstanding performance and commitment as an Intake Social Worker. Although Winnie joined our intake team only recently, she has quickly demonstrated exceptional professionalism, compassion, and dedication to the children and families we serve. Initially, Winnie wasn't eager to join the Intake world after only a year and a half of being with DCF, but she decided to give it a try. During her transition, she not only had to continue to learn the role of the Department, but also balance, assess and utilize critical thinking all while learning the new world of Intake. When she started, she struggled with keeping organized, was overwhelmed with how fast the cases came in, but now almost a year in, has grown so much! She is organized, completes thorough interviews, does not wait to respond to cases, sends out collaterals right away, and has become a CT-KIND expert to her peers and to me. From the start, Winnie has shown an eagerness to learn, and an impressive ability to apply new knowledge in complex and sensitive situations. She approaches cases with empathy, strong communication skills, and a focus on safety and collaboration. Her positive attitude, strong work ethic, and ability to balance compassion with professionalism have made a significant impact in a short time. Winnie is an asset to our team and a shining example of the values and mission of our agency. For these reasons, we wholeheartedly recommend Winifred Brown as this month's Meriden Employee of the Month.

### **Tracee Melendez - Behavioral Health and Community Services**

Region 2 has known Tracee since June 2013, when she transferred from Solnit to take on position of RRG in New Haven, then not long after was promoted to Supervising Clinician and it has been a pleasure to watch her grow. Our Region has been lucky to gain such a gem as her strengths and qualities are abundant and have been visible every single day for past 12 years. She is being nominated for

**THE BEST**

Employee of the month by Elizabeth Wojtyniak. Tracee is steady, consistent every day, all the time. She is always able to embrace challenges with ease and move the work forward. She is passionate, dedicated, and quick to jump in to assist no matter the issue or who is asking or calling her, whether that's one of her staff, someone from CPS team or any of the providers. We have suspected for a long time that most of our CPS staff in the Region and providers alike, especially hospitals, have her on speed dial. Tracee can quickly organize resources, brainstorm through difficult situations or organize the team to figure things out. She is always respectful, available and calm. Her aim is to help, and we have never seen her stop working tirelessly until whatever issue she is dealing with is settled or resolved. There have been countless times when we find ourselves reminding her to punch out on time or asking if she did when she calls me after hours or telling her to put in for compensatory time. Where she really shines is how she conducts herself as a Supervisor. Tracee truly cares not only about the DCF work but also about the staff she supervises. She understands the impact of this work on staff professionally and personally and cares about supporting them as much as the clients we serve. She is always available if you need assistance with a case. Tracee advocates for her supervisees and wants to assure that they are taking care of themselves as well as the clients we serve. She has a genuine heart. Tracee is resourceful and works collaboratively with others. Regardless of what she is doing she makes it a point to check in to see how others are doing and is always available to provide guidance around complicated issues. She understands the importance of forming relationships with the community partners and engaging with them from a place of respect which results in better outcomes for the children and families the agency supports. She approaches difficult situations from a solution focused perspective. Tracee challenges those she supervises to think outside the box when confronted with complex cases. She is supportive and always open to helping. Tracee always presents with a positive, professional attitude and is interested in focusing on the strengths of her employees. Her willingness to help makes her staff feel like they are never alone in navigating the many challenges that arise throughout this work. As busy as Tracee is with her own schedule, she somehow finds a way to help her staff, whether that includes clinical case discussion, joining provider meetings, or helping navigate and network with treatment programs. Tracee is one of the most compassionate, supportive, and responsive Supervisors we've ever had! Well-deserved Tracee!

### **Chad Schrock - Education/Unified School District #2**

Unified School District #2 proudly recognizes Chad Schrock as our Employee of the Month for his outstanding leadership, dedication, and unwavering commitment to our school community at Solnit South. He is being nominated by Matt Folan. We want to thank Chad for his temporary time this past summer in his leadership role. He provided us with steady leadership, thoughtful guidance, and care for our students, staff, and families. We deeply appreciate Chad's flexibility, strong communication, and commitment to maintaining our school's values and standards of excellence. Chad's open-door policy, compassion, and tireless work ethic has made a meaningful impact for everyone at Solnit South. Thank you, Chad, for your leadership and the positive impact you make



every day. Your passion for education and genuine care for our students and staff is truly appreciated. Congratulations on this well-deserved recognition!

### **Lisa Daymonde - Bureau of External Affairs**

Lisa Daymonde has been with DCF for almost 36 years. As Director of Careline Operations, she handles one of the most complex, demanding and grueling assignments within the Agency. Lisa would not want to be recognized as Employee of the Month given her humble and straightforward demeanor, which is one of the many reasons why she is being nominated. The Careline is perhaps the most public facing Division in our Agency. It demands a leader with sincere dedication, passion for the work, someone able to manage multiple complex tasks at once and the ability to make difficult decisions regarding a child's best interests. Lisa has led the Careline through the COVID-19 pandemic, Fentanyl Crisis, new Mandated Reporter changes, development of the EPIU and many other initiatives while handling call volumes unprecedented in our State. Day after day she comes to work, without hesitation. The Careline is open 24/7 365 days a year - which literally are the hours Lisa works. She is available to her staff, attentive to their needs and always a call away when the most difficult and tragic incidents regarding children occur. Well done Lisa for your unwavering commitment to DCF for over three and a half decades!

### **Heather Jones - Transitional Supports and Success**

Heather Jones has been an employee with State of Connecticut for 30 years and is being nominated for Employee of the Month. After first working for DSS, she joined DCF in 2001 and has since contributed significantly to the agency in roles such as: Ongoing Services, Behavioral Health, Transitional Aged Youth, and Foster Care. In 2018, Heather was promoted to Social Work Supervisor, and most recently worked in the Meriden Foster Care Unit before joining our team in 2024. Heather has been a pleasure to work with. She is always willing to take on new tasks and is consistently helpful and collaborative with other team members. She often goes out of her way to support colleagues, offering guidance and encouragement without being asked. She also collaborates effectively with community partners and stakeholders, ensuring cohesive, coordinated service delivery. Heather successfully led the planning and execution of our "Building Wings" youth conference in 2024, and demonstrated exceptional project management, creativity, and dedication. She also conveys passion and excitement around our Youth Arts Collaborative, of which she oversees, connecting young people interested in art with community artists in a mentorship relationship.

### **Peter Catania - Office of Legal Affairs**

The Legal Division is pleased to recognize Peter Catania as the Employee of the Month for October. Since joining the Division in 2023, Peter has drawn on his experience in child protection and with the Public Defender's office to provide sound legal guidance to the team in the Norwich Area Office. Peter's sense of humor and cheerful demeanor are just two of the reasons it is a pleasure to work with Peter. He is reliable and never hesitates to volunteer to help with

A large, stylized, yellow and orange text graphic that reads "STUPENDOUS!" in a bold, bubbly font. The letters are outlined in black and have a three-dimensional, shadowed effect.

training or coverage for other Area Offices, for which he has received positive feedback from the area office teams. Peter's supervisee, Heidi Jaskiewicz, shared, "I truly appreciate Pete as a boss, he treats me as an equal, he is supportive and is always there for me...he fits right into the Norwich office. I told him that I would not want to spend my twilight years at DCF with anyone else." Keep up the great work, Peter! Pete has been an excellent addition to the Norwich team. From day one he has been the consummate professional utilizing his years of experience as a private and panel attorney to help us keep children safe. Pete has also utilized his experience and connections with the local courts to gather important information in a timely manner. Pete has developed relationships with all in the office and is always available for any staff who need expert legal advice. Pete has provided training for all staff and especially our newer staff. With so many newer staff in our office, it is invaluable to have an attorney with the experience and expertise that Pete possesses. The Norwich office is lucky to have him.

### **Sara Hetzer - PRTF (South)**

Sara Hetzer, the Lead Children's Services Worker on the Quinnipiac Unit 1st shift, exemplifies strong and effective leadership that ensures each shift runs smoothly and with purpose. She is being nominated for Employee of the Month. Her focus is always on engaging young people in their treatment while maintaining safety for both staff and residents — the top priority on every shift she leads. Colleagues describe Sara as proficient, intuitive, and deeply committed to her role. She makes it a point to engage with and get to know every youth on her unit, which proves invaluable when they experience moments of crisis. Sara is not only a dependable team leader but also a supportive team player who values collaboration and open communication. Always receptive to feedback, she continuously strives to bring her best self to every interaction. Known for her caring nature, positive attitude, and readiness to go above and beyond, Sara approaches her work with genuine passion and dedication. Her compassion and drive to see each youth succeed speak volumes about her character and the heart she brings to her leadership role.

### **John Nolasco - PRTF (North)**

Solnit North is pleased to announced John Nolasco, Children Service Unit Supervisor of Spruce Cottage, as October 2025 Employee of the Month. John consistently demonstrates exceptional leadership, a strong cottage presence, and an unwavering commitment to both the youth and his team. John is a highly supportive Supervisor who regularly steps in to assist wherever needed. Whether it's covering the floor to ensure staff can take breaks, escorting youth to designated locations, or maintaining a steady presence in the dining hall, John leads by example. His hands-on approach creates a stable and reassuring environment for the youth while fostering a positive and collaborative atmosphere for his team. He is deeply respected by both staff and youth for his dependable work ethic, approachability, and dedication. As advocates for the young people in his care, John consistently champions their needs and ensures their voices are heard. His leadership has been instrumental in strengthening the Spruce Cottage team and enhancing the overall



quality of care. John embodies the core values of Solnit through his professionalism, compassion, and commitment to excellence. For these reasons, he is truly deserving of recognition as Employee of the Month.

### **Natasha Sweeney - Solnit South Hospital**

Natsha is a part of our dynamic Nurse Consultant duo for Solnit Hospital. She is being nominated for Employee of the Month. As part of the supervising Nurses, she along with her colleague, oversee the newly implemented Hospital curriculum for on-site Hospital orientation for all disciplines. With her extensive background in Critical Care Nursing, Natasha brings a wealth of experience and insight into Nursing, and Hospital Care standards. She works with the hospital's multidisciplinary staff for continuous quality oversight and professional development opportunities. Natasha's wealth of knowledge in education and hospital standards has served as the inclination to many projects the Hospital Nurse consultant team have implemented and continue to work on. One of these projects, Unit Standardization, seeks to promote universal standards of practice throughout the hospital based on current research. From providing units support, to one-on-one teaching, Natasha's can do/positive attitude and support illustrates the goal of professional development. We are extremely fortunate to have Natasha as part of our Solnit Hospital Family and thank her for all or her efforts and dedication to our Mission and Values!