

## 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.”

