Commissioner's Monthly Message

I am so honored and grateful to have the opportunity to once again serve as your Commissioner! As some of you may know, I began my DCF career as a front-line social worker in 1993 and later became the agency's first legal director prior to being appointed as Commissioner by Governor Rell in 2007. When I left the Agency in 2011 after 18 years of serviceI went on to represent parents and children involved in the child welfare and youth justice systems for over a decade, which has provided an additional lens to view our successes and challenges. While I never would have imagined that I'd be offered the opportunity to return to DCF two years ago first as General Counsel and now as Commissioner, I am incredibly honored to have come full circle and to work again with all of you. The work we do together in partnership with families, our sister state agencies, providers, legislators, communities and others is by far the most important calling, and I thank you for your commitment to it.

We are an incredibly strong Agency of almost 3,000 employees "called" to this work. Each and every day, I see the personal and professional sacrifices you make to protect children, support and empower familes and work collaboratively with our community partners across Connecticut.

First, let me say that I recognize that our Agency has undergone significant change in the last several months that has impacted all of you in different ways. I am committed to promoting stability as we manage these changes togetherto support you, strengthen best practices and achieve the highest of outcomes.

Our children and families deserve nothing less.

In the coming weeks, you will hear more from me about our priorities and the path forward and I look forward to hearing from you and value your input. To that end, I will be visiting your offices and facilities soon to provide a meaningful opportunity for those conversations and to listen.

September brings in a number of monthly themes starting with Kinship Care. Our goal for any family we support is for children to remain safely at home. When this is not possible, the priority placement is Kinship Care. Connecticut currently has 53% of our initial placements with

Kin and approximately 50% of children in our care and custody overall placed with Kin. Great work!

We cannot truly measure the impact of the right family at the right time for our youth. Read in this month's "Spotlight" the story of Adrian, a college freshman majoring in music theory at Eastern Connecticut State University. In *"Music is Everything: From Hardship to Harmony"* we learn how Adrian is building a future for himself thanks to his resilience, and creativity and passion for music - and the influence of one special father figure who was there for him through some of the hardest times.

The emerging mental health needs within our communities is highlighted this month as Suicide Prevention is recognized with this year's theme,*"Start a Conversation. Be a Difference."* If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available at the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Call or Text 988 or chat by connecting to 988lifeline.org

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

24/7 CALL,TEXT,CHAT

Urgent Crisis Centers remain a significant resource for children experiencing a behavioral health crisis and their families and serve as a diversion from a visit to an emergency department. Thank you to The Village for Families and Children for hosting a press conference to raise awareness of the great work of the UCCs and the positive outcomes achieved.

Statewide, over 2,000 children have been served by a UCC since July of 2023 with almost 98% returning to their homes and communities after receiving support. When asked, approximately 52% of families said they would have gone to the ED if not for the UCC. Learn more about an Urgent Crisis Center in your community here: Urgent Crisis Centers.

"Collective Heritage, Growing Seeds of Hope, Safety & Respect," is Connecticut DCF's theme for Hispanic/Latine Heritage Month celebrated from September 15th - October 15th, 2025. Join the Central Office Diversity Action Team on October 10th for our in-person celebration. Please register here: Registration

September is also National Recovery Month. It is believed over 23 million Americans are in recovery from a substance use disorder. One support Connecticut has to offer is the 24/7 Substance Use Services Access Line at 1-800-563-4086. Operated by Wheeler and funded by Connecticut's Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services **(**DMHAS), staff utilize a recovery-oriented approach to ask screening questions, and provide callers with education, support, hope and tangible assistance, including transportation, for those individuals having difficulty living with substance use issues.

National Child Welfare Workforce Development Month is also a theme of September. The Mentoring program, Leadership Academy for Social Work Supervisors (LASS), Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM), and the Executive Fellowship Program (EFP), are supports our Agency offers to empower staff - personally and professionally - to enhance and develop their leadership skills and promote opportunities for upward mobility within the Agency. These programs also reinforce that leadership is not defined by one's position and is evident at all levels throughout the Agency.

Thank you, Thank you to DCF Customer Success Manager Chandra Hedge and Program Director of the CT-KIND Project Julie Flemmig for their around the clock support to answer questions, address systems issue and coordinate support for our staff since the CT-KIND launch in August. Simply put, we could not do this work without you! We know there remains much work ahead but rest assured that Chandra, Julie and the rest of the team are on it.

A shout out one more time to the August Employees of the Month! Who has been nominated to receive the September Award? Read to see who is described as *"deeply personal"* in their approach to the work, someone who has their *"heart in the right place,"* and *"passionate and inspiring."*

Read *"A Proud Parent Moment"* highlighting the unique talents of Social Worker Dan Podzikowski. When interviewed, Dan's first instinct was not to highlight his own accomplishments, but to spotlight one of the young people he worked with for over a decade—Dave. For Dan, Dave's success is not measured simply in professional milestones, but in resilience and hope. *"It's almost like a proud parent moment,"* Dan says. *"To see him overcome so much and then achieve the goals he set for himself—it shows what's possible when young people are given* support, *and when they refuse to give up."*

Congratulations to Program Director of Early Childhood and Family Support Programs Ines Eaton for being awarded the 2025 CT 359 "Giving Bear Award." It is presented to a person whose efforts and dedication to assisting young children and their families has led to change and improvement. Well done Ines!

Parent with Lived Expertise Consultant Samaris Rose was named as a recipient of the 2025 Soul of Philanthropy Award by Fairfield County Community Foundation. Described as a *"fierce and compassionate community advocate with a heart rooted in service and justice. Youth are at the center of her heart, inspiring her tireless efforts to build spaces of belonging, healing, and hope."* Awesome job Samaris!

A *"shout out*" was given this month to the Staff at our Child Abuse and Neglect Careline. A particularly traumatic case required their significant collaboration with the New Canaan Police Department to ensure the safety and well-being of two young children. A Police Captain notified the Commissioner's Office of how impressed they were with the Careline staff's professionalism and *"how quickly they responded and how thoroughly they vetted everyone right away."* Job well done by Director of Careline Operations Lisa Daymonde and staff!

Every five years, The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) are conducted by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in partnership with states to review the entire Child Welfare System, including the child welfare agency, the court system and the provider community. As the CFSR indicates, the Department demonstrates strong practice in several areas — such as kinship care, sibling placements, thorough behavioral health assessments, and strong community engagement— which are a direct reflection of our core values of family-centered practice, partnership, and a robust Quality Assurance System that drives continuous improvement.

While we humbly accept our accomplishments, we will continue to strive for excellence as a system.

Prior to the federal review being completed, we identified areas of focus to enhance our work. Recently, we brought together over 100 community partners to gain input on the Development of a Program Improvement Plan (PIP). It was a great day and special thanks to our staff in the Bureau of Continuous Quality Improvement led by Bureau Chief Rose Wieworka for their great work presenting and organizing this day.

I appreciate all that you do and look forward to our continued work together!