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!

A Proud Parent Moment

DCF social worker Dan Podzikowski with transitional age youth Dave.

For much of the last 17 years as a DCF employee, social worker Dan Podzikowski, an August Employee of the Month, has guided dozens of teenagers and young adults through both life's ups and downs as part of DCF's Transitional Support Services (TSS) division.

Members of Dan's TSS team say he constantly goes above and beyond to support young people as they prepare for adulthood.

One colleague noted, "Dan builds strong relationships with his kids and never gives up on them."

Dan says his driving factor, keeping him motivated after nearly two decades, is simple: "I love being out in the field, spending time with youth, and making sure they know there's someone rooting for them who won't disappear."

Public service was a large part of Dan's upbringing. Both of his parents were military police, his mother later worked as a probation officer, and many of his family members worked in social service roles. Dan joined the military after high school and trained as a combat medic which gave him a foundation in caring for others in high-stress situations.

At UCONN, he studied psychology, which deepened his interest in people and behavioral health. He then worked in law enforcement for several years but found himself drawn more to the relationship-building side of the job. Dan knew he wanted a career in which he could support youth and families beyond enforcement. He decided social work was that career and DCF was the place.

"I really got entrenched in working with kids and families, being there day-to-day, helping them manage challenges and reach their goals."

When recognized as Employee of the Month, and later asked about being the subject of an article highlighting this recognition, Dan's first instinct was not to discuss 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.

Dan met this now young man at age 12 when Dave entered care. At the time, Dave faced enormous challenges: unstable housing, multiple foster placements, exposure to trauma, and the devastating loss of family members.

“He experienced about every challenge and loss you could imagine - then overcame them all to reach his goals,” Dan recalls. “Back then, he was lashing out at everyone and everything but underneath that, he was a protective kid who just needed someone to stick by him.”

Dave poses in his uniform post-basic training.

Dave remembers that stage of life, “Dan knew my biological parents, and when they passed away around the same time, he was still there for me—even though he didn’t have to be. That was huge. I never felt like I was just another kid."

"It felt personal right from the start—he gave a damn. It wasn’t just a job for him. He actually cared about my well-being, what I was going to be, what I was going to do.”

Through perseverance, Dave grew into a young man who found his purpose and pursued it with determination. The consistent presence and guidance provided by Dan was key.

“Dan was like a steady presence [in my life]. Always there. Definitely like a father figure to me. Even later at night, after work, he’d reach out—‘You okay?’ That meant a lot.”

After graduating high school in 2020—shortly after the passing of both of his parents—Dave tried college, then trade work and, inspired by Dan's own service, set his sights on the U.S. Army. Against the odds and through relentless training, Dave lost 100 pounds in under a year, secured the waivers he needed, and enlisted. Today, he proudly serves as a U.S. Army combat medic.

“It was a proud parent moment for me,” 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.”

Dave said, “Dan definitely gave me the idea to be a medic. That came from him. I wanted to show him that all the work he put into me—it meant something. I did something with it.”

His journey alongside Dan stands as a testament to the quiet but profound impact of a social worker who shows up, listens, and stays by a young person’s side through the hardest chapters of life.

Dave summed it up by offering advice for his fellow transitional age youth working with DCF, “Trust the

process. Trust in the professionals that are there to help you. Use the resources—they're only there to make sure you succeed."

"It might not feel like it at first, but if you stick with the program and make the right decisions, the outcome is always going to be positive. I couldn't have done it alone. But at the end of the day, I put in the work—and I'm proof that you can get through anything."

Music is Everything: From Hardship to Harmony

Adrian, formerly in the care and custody of DCF and now Music Theory major at ECSU, with his cello - one of many of his creative pursuits.

As college students across the country settle into their dorms and adjust to life back on campus, Adrian, a freshman majoring in Music Theory at Eastern Connecticut State University, is doing much more than adjusting—he is thriving. Once Adrian begins telling his story, it becomes clear that getting to this point, pursuing his dream of a career in the arts, was no small feat.

Born in NY, Adrian's early years were filled with transition and hardship. By the time he was nine, he had relocated to Connecticut to live with his aunt, where family struggles led him into the care and custody of DCF.

From there, Adrian experienced a whirlwind of foster homes, a stay in a psychiatric residential treatment facility (PRTF), and battles that would test even the strongest individuals—including a life-threatening cancer diagnosis.

But now, as he embarks on his college journey, majoring in music theory at Eastern, Adrian is building a future for himself thanks to his resilience and passion for life and art - and the influence of one special father figure who was there for him through some of the hardest times.

For Adrian, music has been more than a hobby—it has been a lifeline.

"I wake up with music, I go to sleep with it," Adrian explained. "It's not just something I do—it's part of who I am."

Adrian speaks about music with a rare kind of emotional fluency, describing how instruments like the piano and cello allow him to express what words cannot. His love for the arts is deep and expansive—spanning chorus, music production, painting, and digital media.

"When I sit at a piano, everything I'm feeling just comes out," he said. "I'm not thinking about the next note. It's like a conversation—one hand speaks, and the other responds."

It was this all-encompassing love for creative expression that made choosing a college major so difficult. But music theory ultimately won out, thanks to its ability to connect technical understanding with raw emotion.

Adrian's journey to Eastern was anything but linear. At one point, college was not even on the table. He was working at a fast food restaurant, unsure of what the future held.

“I saw older couples working there, people who had clearly been doing it for a long time,” he said. “No judgment—but I didn’t want that for myself. I realized I couldn’t settle.”

That mindset pushed him to reconsider education, and ultimately to apply to multiple schools. Eastern stood out—not just because of its strong arts program, but because it offered something more intangible: a sense of belonging.

“People here actually talk to each other. I’ve made a ton of friends already,” he said. “It’s different from anywhere else I’ve been.”

T.J. and Adrian take a selfie while grabbing a bite to eat.

Adrian said a large part of his support network was his foster parent T.J., a longtime social worker and foster parent, who heard about Adrian’s while he was still in a PRTF. After years of instability in care, T.J. remembers hearing Adrian make a plea for a family. What he heard was an honest recognition that Adrian was ready for change and a forever home.

After learning Adrian's story, and visiting him in the hospital as he faced a stage four cancer diagnosis, T.J. and his wife Kristin got relicensed to become foster care providers specifically to open their home to Adrian.

Now living at a dorm on the campus of Eastern, Adrian remembers his time together with T.J. and his family vividly—at the hospital during his cancer diagnosis, and later in more everyday moments, like family dinners and backyard chores.

“T.J. became a father figure. I looked up to him in a way I hadn’t looked up to anyone before.”

T.J. did not just offer Adrian a home—he offered stability, guidance, and love. One day, T.J. got home to find Adrian mowing the lawn without being asked. On top of that, Adrian had just got a new job and was proactively applying to college.

On that day, Adrian recalled “T.J. said, ‘I’m proud of you.' That hit me hard. I don’t think I’d ever heard a male figure say that to me before. I mean, I could care less if my friend said that to me, you know? But coming from T.J. meant a lot to me."

When asked if he remembers that moment, T.J. laughs, "I don't!"

Regardless, for T.J., it was a small, intentional gesture—but one he tries to make often.

“I think it’s important for young men in particular to hear the positives,” T.J. said. “Negative news travels fast. We share the complaints too easily, but not enough of the encouragement. So, I make a conscious effort to celebrate the good things.”

That effort has had a lasting effect on Adrian. He reflected on the quiet but profound impact his foster father T.J. had on his life, describing how an initial indifference turned into deep admiration.

"[When we first met], I didn’t really look up to him too much, he was just a guy… but after the first week I spent with him, I began to look up to him as a father," Adrian shares. “That feeling of, like, *that’s my dad, he treats me like I’m his son*… I’ve never experienced that before.”

For Adrian, T.J. became more than a role model—he became family. From T.J.'s perspective, the feeling is mutual.

“This isn’t a story about me or my wife,” T.J. said. “It’s about kids and resilience. Adrian may not have looked great on paper, but he was ready. He just needed someone to show up, believe in him, and stick with him. I adore that kid. He’s all future, all possibility.”

Adrian is humble when asked how he made it through so many challenges. But his quiet strength is unmistakable.

“Growing up in tough environments teaches you patience and persistence,” he said. “After a while, things that seem hard to other people… they feel normal to you. You learn to appreciate where you are and who’s around you.”

Cancer, foster care placements, PRTFs, Adrian’s experienced so much for someone his age. Now, he walks across campus, music in his head, maybe an instrument in hand, a student determined to shape his own path.

As for what’s next? Adrian is not putting limits on himself. He hopes to get deeper into more areas of art, perhaps film or visual media. But for now, he is letting the music guide him.

In the quiet of the university’s auditorium, where he sometimes plays piano alone in the evenings, Adrian finds a peace that is hard to describe but easy to hear.

Employee of the Month Awards!

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

Ayanna Pierce - Careline

Social Work Supervisor Ayanna Pierce is proudly nominated by Lisa Daymonde for Employee of the Month in recognition of her exceptional leadership, dedication, and over 25 years of service to DCF. Ayanna has served in both the Middletown and Hartford offices, demonstrating a deep passion for working with adolescents. Her journey from Office Assistant to Social Worker, and now Social Work Supervisor, speaks volumes about her commitment to our Department, and the children and families we serve. She joined the Careline in 2017. Ayanna continues to be an invaluable asset to our team. Most recently, she played a critical role during the transition from LINK to CT-KIND. Amid a 25-hour system shutdown, her leadership and meticulous attention to detail ensured a seamless transition that supported the entire Careline operation. As an after-hours supervisor on Saturdays, Ayanna is respected by her peers for her ability to set the tone for the day and ensure our after-hour responses begin smoothly. Her commitment to earlier start times and coverage of additional shifts throughout the year and during extended holiday weekends has brought much-needed structure and consistency to some of our most challenging shifts. Ayanna is also deeply invested in the professional growth of her staff. She encourages critical thinking, supports ongoing development, and is recognized by her team for the valuable mentorship she provides. Known for her professionalism, dependability, and collaborative spirit, Ayanna treats everyone with respect and compassion. Her genuine care for our work, the children we serve, and their families is evident in all she does. Ayanna's unit most recently shared that "Ayanna is always attentive to our needs, will take the time to hear your concerns or questions regarding a report or anything else you want to talk about. She is very supportive and preaches work/life balance along with having good work practices. Ayanna is awesome and I couldn't ask for a better supervisor. Always looking out for everyone's well-being/ wellness, which is a priority. Always offering to help out as a supervisor, such as taking extra shifts when no one is available. Whenever my family or friends ask about my work with the department (33 years), the first thing I mention is how fortunate I am to have such a knowledgeable, thorough, and supportive supervisor. Ayanna is focused, conscientious and respectful to say the least. It's an awesome day to know that you've had a little hand in assisting children and families in the most vulnerable times of their lives and most, if not all the

time, Ayanna has played an invaluable role in these 'decision makings'. She's been employee of the month for me ever since I've joined her unit. Also saying, Ayanna is incredibly supportive, and happy to talk about the process behind decisions. Despite her own demands in her job, she always makes time for you. She never forgets to follow up on all issues or questions I bring her. Dan Rather himself could not be happier with the thorough and correct information she supplies. She also keeps the stress level down in a sideways way by just being naturally funny and easy going. Ayanna is a true definition of the word supervisor. The words that come to mind. Her advocacy, her knowledge of the work, support, teaching, prioritizing that your health as #1, the dedication to the work as a strong #2." Further reflecting her peers' respect, Ayanna was recently elected as a union steward by her fellow peers. In November 2024, Ayaa's previous Area Office exceptional work with adolescents was featured on DCF TV: "Doors to Hope and Healing," where a successful young adult, previously in our care, publicly praised her dedication and influence on his life. Ayanna brings a high level of professionalism, pride in her work, and a meticulous approach that elevates our entire team. We are fortunate to have her as part of our Careline family and recommend Ayanna for Employee of the Month.

Elsie Aponte - Bridgeport Area Office

Elsie Aponte is nominated by Jeanette Blackwell for Employee of the Month for her hard work, commitment, and the positive impact she has on our team and the families we serve. Elsie serves as a Social Work Case Aide and consistently goes above and beyond, not only supporting the Intake Staff but also providing invaluable assistance to the Family Services team. Elsie demonstrates an unwavering willingness to accommodate last-minute requests, ensuring that parents receive visitation time with their children whenever possible. Her positive "can-do" attitude makes her a reliable and indispensable member of the team. She often works early mornings and late evenings, going the extra mile to guarantee that children involved in out-of-home cases receive the best possible care. Even with a demanding workload, Elsie always finds time to adjust her schedule and offer help wherever it is needed, never once complaining. Her dedication, dependability, and genuine care have earned her the admiration of both staff and families. Elsie is truly a cornerstone of the Bridgeport Office, providing critical support to social workers, supervisors, and Program Supervisors alike. In addition to her exhaustive efforts to provide high quality and caring attention to the children and families of the Bridgeport area, Elsie has been instrumental in the successful MDE attendance for our children in care. Elsie is directly responsible for getting most of our children who come into care to timely MDE examinations which is extremely important. We could not achieve such a successful MDE rating without Elsie's commitment and hard work.

Joy Gantt - Norwalk Area Office

Joy Gantt Secretary 2 is nominated for Employee of the Month by Yolanda Chapman-Smith. Joy is the heart of the Norwalk office. She is hardworking, dependable, and always willing to step in wherever she is needed. Her welcoming personality brings comfort to those around her, and her

presence creates an atmosphere where people feel safe, supported, and valued. Joy is more than just our Secretary; she is a source of strength for so many of us. Leaders come in many forms and positions, and Joy embodies that truth every single day. She listens without judgment, and staff often turn to her for encouragement when the weight of this work feels heavy. Her ability to care for others in such an authentic way has helped many of us get through difficult days. In previous years, Joy took the lead in organizing meaningful events such as the Black History Month celebration, inspiring colleagues to participate who normally shy away from the spotlight. She has a gift for bringing people together and reminding us of the importance of community and connection. This past year has brought unimaginable challenges for Joy personally, with the loss of both her father and her grandmother. As we know, losing loved ones leaves a lasting ache. Yet, even in her grief, Joy has continued to show up for all of us with grace, dedication, and compassion. Her resilience is a true example of strength, and her ability to give while carrying her own pain is deeply admirable. I regularly receive positive feedback from presenters, Central Office staff, and community partners about Joy's professionalism and responsiveness. But beyond her skills and work ethic, it is her kindness, her steady presence, and her unwavering support that make her truly special. For all of these reasons, I wholeheartedly nominate Joy Gantt as Employee of the Month. She leads not through title, but through action, compassion, and heart. Our Office is stronger, kinder, and better because of her. Through loss, through challenges, and through every demand of this work, Joy has stood tall with dignity, resilience, and heart. She is proof that strength and compassion can live side by side and inspires us all to do the same.

Lisa Doran - Waterbury Area Office

Considered Removal Meeting (CRM) Facilitator Lisa Doran is nominated by Jeanette Blackwell for Employee of the Month. Lisa began her career with DCF in the Torrington Area office in 2007; she transitioned to the Waterbury office upon her promotion to supervisor in 2016 where she supervised the High Risk 0-3 unit. Lisa then transitioned to her current role as CRM facilitator in October 2022. In her current role as CRM facilitator, Lisa goes above and beyond to render support to the staff. She will always make herself available to attend legal consultants, MDTMs, MDCs, in hopes to avoid extra work/meetings for staff. Lisa is always prepared with her thorough review of the case and ready to offer her years of experience, truly being part of the team. During the CRMs she facilitates, Lisa presents with the calm and respectful demeanor necessary to hold productive and successful CRMs. You will always see Lisa stay behind to offer support to the families or staff who may need it after her meetings. Lisa is also an active member of our Racial Justice Team and provides ongoing support with pulling data and reinforcing our office change initiative. Lisa is very loved and respected amongst her peers and staff. Lisa is a true asset to this Agency!

Niki Mikolinski - Torrington Area Office

Niki Mikolinski is nominated for Employee of the Month by Jeanette Blackwell. Niki is well deserving of this nomination. Niki has been with the Agency for approximately five years. Niki consistently demonstrates professionalism, compassion, and dedication to her work. She currently works in Family Services and has a mixed caseload of In-Home, Out-of-Home and Permanency cases. Prior to this, Niki spent some time in Intake. She has built strong, positive relationships with the families she serves, and she works well especially with the 0-5 population. She is safety driven and goes above and beyond with this population to ensure she is attentive, collaborative and a solid partner to both the families and providers. Niki works hard to ensure children are safe and thriving. She is solution focused and has a balanced approach when engaging challenging parents. She is not just a support to her families; she is also an advocate for the children on her caseload especially when it comes to navigating other systems and external partners. Niki is an asset to our Torrington team, and we thank her for her hard work!

Tyreese Myers - New Haven Area Office

Tyreese Myers, who has been with the Department for well over 21 years, is nominated by Martine Ulysse for Employee of the Month. Tyreese has done a great job working with our Transitional Aged Youth (TAY). Tyreese is passionate about his work and strives to do better every day. Finding a placement for our TAY youth can be very challenging and discouraging at times but Tyreese shows up every day and ready to face these challenges. Tyreese has a youth on his caseload who has a significant substance abuse history and continues to struggle with substances. Tyreese has been out looking for this youth at different times of the day and has had to drop whatever he's doing to attend to emergencies on this case. Tyreese has done a great job with his efforts to engage the father of this youth who also has a significant substance abuse history. Tyreese continues to be very positive and encouraging with this youth. Tyreese also carried a caseload of 150% for over a month and just kept pushing forward. We are very grateful to have Tyreese as part of our TAY Team.

Jennifer Auger - Milford Area Office

Jennifer Auger is nominated by Amy Pack for Employee of the Month as she is someone to emulate and celebrate for her great social work. Jennifer has been employed with the Department of Children and Families for over a decade. She is our permanency "guru" as a Social Worker exhausting all efforts to have children remain in their home when possible and securing permanency for several children. This year alone she has secured eight adoptions and transfers of guardianship for seven children, and the year is not over. One child was successfully adopted the day before her 18th birthday. She supports other Social Workers who are pursuing permanency for their families offering her knowledge and guidance along the way. Jennifer

thrives on families and children being successful and achieving permanency. Her calm and measured approach has been reassuring to families leading to trusting working relationships. She was able to close one particular case that was open for over three years. Despite the many challenges working with the family, after finally closing the case, the mother sent a text message noting the following, "I want to sincerely thank you for your support and guidance throughout this process. Although I did not want DCF to be involved in my life at first, I can now appreciate the role you played in helping me reach this point. Your efforts have made a difference for me and my family, and I am truly grateful to be moving forward with this chapter closed. Thank you so much". This mother stayed in touch with Jennifer after the case ended sharing pictures of the children on their first day of school. Jennifer approaches challenges with humility and optimism. She understands that change is inevitable working at DCF and exhibits an optimistic attitude during transitions. She recently transitioned to a new unit and is already being praised for the "positive vibes" she brings and is "just what the unit needed". She is a support to her colleagues, a wealth of knowledge to newly hired trainees and an asset to the Department of Children and Families.

Lucinda "Cindy" Norwich Area Office

Social Worder Case Aide Lucinda “Cindy” McPherson is nominated for Employee of the Month by Blandina Kelly. Cindy consistently goes above and beyond her job responsibilities, and her dedication, compassion, and professionalism are truly inspiring. Cindy brings care and consistency to every aspect of her role, particularly in her work providing supervised visitation services. She takes the time to build rapport with the children, youth, and families she supports, offering not just supervision but also coaching and guidance to parents. Cindy helps families understand the visitation process, supports children during transitions—whether reunification or final visits—and shows empathy and strength even in emotionally difficult situations. One example of her dedication occurred during a medical emergency involving a child she was supervising. Without hesitation, Cindy transported the child to the hospital, ensuring their safety and well-being. On another occasion, she noticed a parent exhibiting signs of substance misuse just days before a scheduled reunification. Cindy responded with compassion, taking immediate action to ensure the parent received help. Because of her keen assessment and timely intervention, the reunification was postponed, and the parent later expressed gratitude for her support. Cindy also holds families accountable in a respectful and professional manner. When parents miss scheduled visits, she reinforces expectations while maintaining a supportive tone, earning their respect for her fairness and consistency. Beyond her direct work with families, Cindy plays a key role in maintaining a safe, welcoming, and child-friendly environment in our office visitation rooms. She identified the need to replace worn-out rugs and furniture, worked with the Office Director to select appropriate items, and personally took the initiative to install new, family-friendly rugs and sofa covers. She regularly inspects all five visitation rooms, removing unsafe toys and ensuring that the environment is clean and safe for every family who walks through our doors. Cindy also contributes significantly to the morale and cohesion of her unit. She remembers birthdays,

celebrates milestones, and brings a positive energy that uplifts the entire team, especially during difficult times. It has been a true pleasure working alongside Cindy. Her work ethic, empathy, and commitment to excellence make her an invaluable member of our team and a standout choice for Employee of the Month.

Maura Harding - Middletown Area Office

Maura Harding is nominated by Katie Silano. As noted in her recommendation, "When I first started at the Department many years ago, Maura's friendly smile was one of the first to greet me in New Haven and similarly, when I arrived at the Middletown office, she was again one of the first welcoming faces I encountered. Maura's overall friendly and engaging demeanor is instrumental in making her a highly effective facilitator for Considered Removal Meetings. Having participated in many meetings led by Maura, I am consistently impressed by her poised leadership and ability to guide team conversations. In September, we addressed a particularly difficult case with numerous challenges, and the CRM was no exception. Although I questioned the meeting's feasibility, Maura's skillful management and command of the group resulted in a lengthy and productive discussion. Her mastery of the meeting was evident, and I was not the only one to acknowledge her expertise. Maura is an invaluable resource to the Department and plays a crucial role in the success of the CRM model."

Kristy Borders - Willimantic Area Office

Kristy Borders is nominated by Jennifer Davis in recognition of her outstanding dedication and invaluable contributions to teaching colleagues about the CT Kind system. She has consistently gone above and beyond to strengthen her knowledge of the system, identify solutions, and passes her knowledge along to staff. Kristy demonstrates an extraordinary commitment to everything that involves technology, often putting in long hours and staying late to make sure issues are addressed and her colleagues are supported. She never hesitates to lend a helping hand, no matter the time, and her reliability has made a difference in how our team learned to negotiate CT KIND. In the week following the transition from LINK to CT KIND, Kristy fielded 137 phone calls from Office staff, with questions that she was able to answer. Equally important, she invests in the growth of her coworkers. Kristy patiently shares her knowledge, takes the time to guide others through challenges, and provides encouragement that builds confidence and skills across the team. Her mentorship not only improves efficiency but also fosters a stronger, more capable workforce. For her leadership, generosity of spirit, and the many hours she has poured into helping her colleagues, Kristy is strongly recommended as Employee of the Month.

Alexis Williams - Hartford Area Office

Social Worker Alexis Williams is nominated for Employee of the Month by Maritza Velez. It was noted that as ever since she has come down to Intake years back, she has truly been an asset to the Intake team. Alexis initially came down hesitant to become an Investigator, but soon grew into a confident, dependable, dedicated social worker who is always willing to be a team player

and strives to show up as her best self on a daily basis. She is a quick learner and always has her heart in the right place in ensuring she is doing her best work advocating for children and families. Alexis is a strong advocate for keeping families together safely and truly diligent in her engagement skills. She has worked on several complex cases which truly highlight how valuable her skillset is to Intake. Alexis over the years has become a leader among her peers as she is always willing to lend a helping hand and guide some of our new staff along the way. She goes above and beyond for her clients, for her peers and never turns down an opportunity to help others. Alexis maintains a positive attitude and her professionalism continues to shine through her work not just within her own responsibilities but ensuring she contributes to the success of others as well. Alexis is outposted at Windsor Police Department and has worked collaboratively within the community to continue to grow relationships and partner with the community. We are lucky to have Alexis on our team!

Sabrina Cherry - Manchester Area Office

Sabrina Chery is nominated for Employee of the Month by Maritza Velez. Sabrina is the very embodiment of what it means to be a Social Worker—compassionate, tireless, and deeply committed to the well-being of her clients. Her talent for Permanency work is nothing short of remarkable. Last year, she took on the case of a young girl who had been in DCF care since the age of four, with no permanent home in sight. From the moment Sabrina was assigned, she sprang into action—collaborating seamlessly with The Village and the Department. Within months, she helped place the 12-year-old with a loving couple—first-time foster parents—who soon adopted her. The adoption day was a celebration, filled with social workers and supporters, and the youth's story was even featured in The Village's 2024 report, a testament to Sabrina's dedication. Sabrina's commitment doesn't stop at permanency. She ensures every child on her caseload feels included and empowered. Whether it's signing them up for basketball or cheerleading, ensuring they have enough clothes and school supplies, or arranging transportation across town, Sabrina makes it happen. When some youth hesitated to join a basketball team due to their foster status, Sabrina stepped in—advocating with directors and community members to remove barriers and open doors. In her Building Stronger Families/Family Based Recovery Unit, Sabrina also excels at safety planning. Recently, she located a father just in time to avoid an OTC, demonstrating her resourcefulness and quick thinking. Even clients labeled as "difficult" seek her out regularly—because they know she genuinely cares and shows up for them, every single day. Sabrina makes the impossible feel possible. Her presence uplifts our unit, and her work changes lives. We are truly grateful to work alongside such a passionate and inspiring Social Worker.

Eric Breau - New Britain Area Office

Eric Breau has been a Social Worker at the agency since June 2008. He is nominated for Employee of the Month by Maritza Velez. Eric served several years as an Intake Social Worker until he moved to the Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) Unit in July 2024, and as he did within

Intake, he is a strong advocate for the young people and the families that he works with. Eric also works well with his peers and is willing to help others to ensure that the job gets done. His Social Work Supervisor Christine Wagner-Morella received this letter from a landlord which is one example of his commitment to assisting our youth transition successfully from the Department's care: "Dear Christine, I'm writing to share something that is worthy of celebration and praise. In January I received a call from Eric Breau regarding an apartment we were offering for rent. Eric said it could be a good fit for a client. Fast forward to today, that client is thriving and making life changes that are setting themselves up for a happy and successful life. The youth has been an excellent resident and neighbor in our small community. From my perspective, the work of Eric and your office as a whole has been exemplary. A situation here has been created that is a win all the way around. I imagine your profession is a bit of a thankless endeavor, so I wanted to share some words of gratitude and encouragement."

David Mongrain - Meriden Area Office

It is our great honor to recognize and celebrate Social Work Supervisor David Mongrain as Meriden Employee of the Month. He is nominated by Martiza Velez. David has dedicated 31 years of service to the Department of which, 30 have been in Investigations. Throughout more than three decades, David has exemplified what it means to lead with commitment, integrity and heart. His unwavering dedication to his Unit, the Agency and the community we serve has left an enduring mark on all of us. He has been the constant source of support, guidance and strength - always present, always ready to lend his experience, and always working to ensure the mission of this Department remains at the forefront of all we do. His leadership has not only advanced the goals of our Agency but has also inspired those around him to give their very best. David was with the agency when we first transitioned from CMS to LINK, and now during our CT KIND implementation. He has worked countless hours and walked countless flights of stairs to ensure to get 1 on 1 time with the CTK support staff. At a time when many staff felt uncertain and frustrated, David has stepped forward as a point person for support and reassurance. He works tirelessly and across disciplines, helping colleagues and staff navigate the challenges, answers questions and ensuring no one felt left behind. This effort not only smoothed a difficult transition but also demonstrated his ability to lead through change with patience, understanding and strength. David Mongrain, your career stands as a testament to the values we uphold, and your service has impacted countless lives both within your team and across the community. We are deeply grateful to have you as part of the Meriden family.

Steve Smith - Transitional Supports and Success

Steven "Steve" Smith is nominated by Latosha Johnson for Employee of the Month. Steve began his career with DCF in 1996 as a Treatment Social Worker. His journey has led him to Investigations and becoming a Supervisor in 2003 and a Program Supervisor having oversight of Investigations and Treatment. In 2006, he took on a new role as Program Manager of Parole at

CJTS immersing himself in the skill and development of Juvenile Justice work and eventually continued this work when he transitioned to Central office in 2011 with then Juvenile Services, which changed to Adolescent and Juvenile Services, presently known as Transitional Supports and Success (TSS). His work involved contract management of Juvenile Review Boards and Youth Service Bureaus and Fatherhood. In July 2023, Steve stepped up to take on the responsibility of navigating DCF's collaborative partnership with Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee in the development and efforts for diversion work until June 2025. Presently, Steve continues to lead our efforts in Juvenile Justice, diversion efforts. He is a staunch advocate for community connectivity and partnership in addressing these in need of young people in this specialized population. He is a team leader and brings wit and humor to our team.

Reggie McDaniel - PRTF (South)

Solnit South PRTF's Employee of the Month is Reggie McDaniel, a dedicated Children Services Unit Supervisor (CSUS) who has been a remarkable asset to the state for over 32 years. He is nominated by Mike Rulnick. Reggie's journey with public service began when he served as a National Guardsman for seven years, demonstrating his commitment to his community and country. In 1994, he transitioned to the Department of Children and Family (DCF), where he began his career as a Children's Services Worker. Reggie's passion and dedication quickly led to a series of well-earned promotions, including positions as a Lead Children Services Worker and ultimately a Children's Services Worker Unit Supervisor. In 2010, Reggie transferred to Solnit South Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility, where he has continued to excel in his supervisory role, making an impact on both staff and the youth we serve. With over 20 years of supervisory experience within DCF, Reggie has become known not only for his leadership but also for his unwavering willingness to support his team. Reggie embodies a spirit of collaboration and commitment, always ready to lend a hand, step into the trenches, and ensure that the work gets done. His attitude is infectious, as he tackles almost any assignment with a smile and brings a can-do attitude to every challenge. Whether he's supporting staff or engaging with difficult conversations to improve services, Reggie's focus is always on the betterment of the work done with the youth at Solnit South. His leadership and open communication have contributed to a positive and productive environment for both staff and the young people they serve. At Solnit South, we are grateful to have Reggie as part of our team. His dedication, work ethic, and ability to foster meaningful, courageous conversations set him apart as an exceptional leader. Reggie's approach to his work and his team is a testament to his commitment to making a lasting difference in the lives of the youth at Solnit South and beyond. We're proud to honor Reggie McDaniel as this month's Employee of the Month and look forward to his continued contributions to our mission.

Justin Perkins - PRTF (North)

Justin Perkins is nominated for Employee of the Month by Gregory Green Sr. and the Oak Cottage team in recognition of his outstanding work and dedication. In addition, Justin was

recently promoted to Lead Children Services Worker at Solnit North. Justin is, first and foremost, a selfless individual who brings unwavering enthusiasm and a consistently positive spirit to both the youth and his colleagues each day. His ability to meet youth where they are emotionally, behaviorally, and developmentally, is one of his greatest strengths. He never gives up on the youth in his care and remains present and supportive through even the most challenging interactions and behaviors. Affectionately known as "Perk" by both youth and staff, Justin has a lasting and positive impact on everyone he encounters. With over 10 years of dedicated State service, he has contributed meaningfully at both Solnit North and Solnit South. We are truly fortunate to have Justin as part of the Solnit North team. He embodies the values, compassion, and commitment we strive for in every member of our staff.

Dr. Jennifer Moniz - Solnit South Hospital

Dr. Jennifer Moniz is nominated for Employee of the Month by Heidi Pugliese. In her time at Solnit, Dr. Moniz has contributed to programing, procedure, social justice, documentation standards, and transitioning of Supervisors and Units. She began with us as a Post Doc Fellow working towards licensing. At that time, we had a void in Psychologists, and she had periods of time with limited to no oversight of her psychology testing. Additionally, she moved across several Units having at least four different Supervisors including her current Supervisor. At times it may have seemed like rather than a case load of youth she had a caseload of rotating Supervisors across Units and Departments. She has served as a public advocate spearheading social justice for LGBTQ youth and understanding in a building with a long and difficult history around LGBTQ topics. For an extended period of time, she served as the sole Trainer of the pronoun training to support Solnit staff understanding around gender identity. Dr. Moniz did not stumble or faulter as the leader of the LGBTQ education and advocacy at Solnit. In fact, she progressed the cause as evidenced by the development of the procedure, approved by adolescent health and administration, for trans youth to use binders in the building. For years she has been the facilitator of the hospital wide PRIDE group for LGBTQ youth across units. Most recently she obtained an AffirmPro grant, an evidenced based coaching program for LGBTQ+ health equity and has begun implementing the program in the Solnit system. Furthermore, she supported the AffirmPro proposal making it through IRB so pre/post data collection can be completed as part of the program implementation. Dr. Moniz has created mechanisms to organize work in the clinical department such as form, folders, and documents to organize clinician workflow. She has identified and suggested form changes to medical record documents that increase the quality of our documentation and how it reflects our clinical work. Whenever asked she would go above and beyond, such as staying late nights to support youth and families, going into the count when floor staffing has been short, coming in on weekends to support youth visits, and transporting youth herself to support operational needs. On one occasion, she supported and facilitated a Solnit youth participating in their high school graduation. It is clear that if the Unit is in need or has an unusual circumstance, she will work outside of expectations to meet an unusual circumstance. Her clinical work is outstanding. Her clinical interventions both best practice and are individually tailored to needs of the youth. If she is stuck, she actively seeks

supervision and support to determine how to best meet youth needs. When families have the need she has made herself available for access to family treatment. In one case she was meeting with a family 4-5 times a week to ensure treatment across the family system. In multiple cases her family work has supported possible reunification between a parent and youth, when the youth were committed, and reunification seemed many years distant. Her work while moving towards exploration of reunification has provided insight, understanding, and increased faith between Solnit and the Area Offices and DCF guardians for youth. Likewise, her individual work has shifted Solnit youth to increased safety, adolescent identity formation, and personal growth. Her understanding of psychological testing and understanding of formulations has been a point of consultation for any youth on Manhasset. Dr. Moniz has specific talent in using psychological testing to support formulation and inform decision making for the child (clinical course & decisions regarding transition). Furthermore, she excels at creative planning for all youth. Specifically in one case she assured they attend their graduation, enrolled them for online college, helped them in completing their college orientation online, and prompted the re-development of the work program for youth.

Julissa Rivera - Fiscal

Julissa Rivera has been a pillar of dedication and excellence within the Revenue Enhancement Division since May 1997. She is nominated for Employee of the Month by Steve Francis. Beginning her career as a Processing Technician, she has steadily advanced through the roles of Eligibility Services Worker and now Eligibility Services Specialist—each step marked by her unwavering commitment to quality and growth. Her journey has taken her through the New Britain Office, Meriden MCOS, and Central Office, where she has consistently demonstrated adaptability, initiative, and a deep understanding of the work. Julissa is a quick learner who embraces special projects and challenges with enthusiasm. She is always willing to share her knowledge and has facilitated training in Area Offices as well as assisted in training new IV-E staff. Her contributions to the Subsidy Unit are especially noteworthy: for over two decades, she has expertly handled all IV-E eligibility work for Adoptions and Sub-Guardian transfers, ensuring accuracy and efficiency in every case. Julissa's passion for her work is deeply personal. As a mother of five and grandmother of five, she brings the same love and dedication to her role at DCF that she does to her family. Her lived experience as both a foster and adoptive parent within the Agency adds a profound layer of empathy and insight into her professional contributions. She is a vocal advocate for what matters, never hesitating to speak up in support of improvements and clarity. Her involvement in the development of CT KIND—through countless meetings, demos, and testing sessions—has been vital regarding the eligibility section of the system. Colleagues regularly seek her out for guidance, knowing she will provide thoughtful, informed support. On a personal note, she is an amazing cook (we have also benefited from these skills) and would do well to open her own catering business. Julissa Rivera exemplifies the values of DCF: integrity, compassion, and excellence. Her decades of service, her tireless advocacy, and her unwavering support of both her team and the families we serve make

her a truly deserving nominee for Employee of the Month. Julissa doesn't just meet expectations, she elevates them.

Ines Eaton - Central Office Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

Ines Eaton is a Program Director in the Clinical and Community Consultation and Support Division. She is nominated for Employee of the Month by Dr. Stephney Springer. In her prior role as a Program Supervisor with Program Lead responsibilities for Intensive In-Home Substance Use programs, people would often comment how much they enjoyed working with her. She was collaborative and inclusive. Ines has brought that same energy, dedication and passion into her oversight of the Early Childhood and Family Support Programs. She brings an excitement for the work that is unmatched. Ines is often thinking about how she can improve processes for providers and thereby, improving access and outcomes for children and families. She works tirelessly with Regional and Central Office staff. Currently, Ines is leading NEST Hub which is a contract with ABH (Advanced Behavioral Health). This is an effort to support retention of CORE foster parents of children 0-6 years by offering them support via a tiered consultation, wraparound approach. There is a shared value that children being maintained in a home can only increase Permanency outcomes. Given that, Ines has been meeting with leadership and the Foster Care Divisions in Regions 1 and 4 to ensure the word gets out. These efforts will soon be extending to other regions. Most recently, Ines is in the thralls of developing best practices for providers in the areas of housing instability, intimate partner violence and provider response to critical incidents just to name a few. She taps into the expertise of colleagues in other Divisions to provide reliable, critical information. Ines 'collaboration extends to other sister agencies such as OEC, Office of Early Childhood, because she understands the importance of partnership and creating villages for our families.

Crystal Algea - Area Office Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

Norwalk Area Office Intimate Partner Violence Specialist Crystal Algea is nominated as Employee of the Month by Natalie Smith and Lindsey Miller. Crystal is a great asset to the Region 1 RRG Team, Norwalk Area Office and the Region. She consistently demonstrates a positive attitude that uplifts the entire team. No matter the challenge, Crystal approached every task with dedication, professionalism and a genuine willingness to help. Crystal is not only hardworking but also supportive of colleagues across Divisions, she is always ready to lend a hand or share knowledge to ensure every family's needs are met and in a respectful way. She is very bright and is particularly skilled at assessing individuals from a family system and intergenerational perspective, being trauma-informed and takes the time to evaluate cultural considerations that families may be present for any given family. Crystal is a very strong advocate and uplifts the Department's Racial Justice's work daily. Her passion and advocacy for equitable access to service delivery for our families of color and undocumented/recent migrant

families is evident and respectable. She also takes an active role each September in the Area Office Hispanic Heritage Month celebration and activities. It is clear that Crystal goes above and beyond every day-not just in her responsibilities, but in fostering teamwork, positivity and excellence within the Norwalk Area Office and beyond. She truly embodies the spirit of this recognition, and we are grateful to have her a part of our team!

Ed Eckert - CT KIND

Program Supervisor Ed Eckert is nominated for Employee of the Month by Julie Flemmig for his exceptional leadership, expertise and dedication to DCF and the implementation of CT-KIND. Ed has been a driving force behind the development and release of CT-KIND and is the ultimate team player! His role as the CT-KIND Implementation Lead is a testament to that. We can always rely on Ed for his calm demeanor and ability to work through issues. Ed coaches sports outside of work and this skillset has been a valuable asset to DCF, as he is always available to assist others with difficult issues and ensures he is transferring his knowledge, so they acquire the skills needed to perform their duties. Ed is a strong leader and is always ready to take on a challenge and is the first one to volunteer. His versatility and leadership style are invaluable to our team as he can discuss both the social work/business and technical aspects of an issue, remains solution-focused and makes informative decisions with the unique understanding of the CT-KIND system and the user experience. We can always count on Ed for his comic relief, treadmill accidents and making up words and phrases on the fly! Ed is a diamond in the rough and we are lucky he is on our team!!

Sonia Rodriguez Engineering/Centralized Transportation Unit

Sonia Rodriguez is nominated by John McCarthy for Employee of the Month. Sonia joined the Centralized Transportation Unit (CTU) in November of 2022. From day one, she has always been willing to come in early or stay late, and she has happily volunteered to assist with weekend requests. Sonia continually builds great working relationships with her clients and their Social Workers, always listens to what they both have to say. She always makes her clients feel welcome and safe, by greeting them with a smile before traveling in her spotless vehicle. She is always prepared for her assignments and as a result, she rarely has any issues with her transports. Sonia is very observant and continually takes notes, which makes her Supervisor's lives easier when reports need to be written. She has been and continues to be a respected member of the CTU Team and more importantly, she always puts her clients first.

Devin Henaghan - Office of Legal Affairs

The Legal Division is excited to nominate Devin Henaghan, Paralegal Specialist in Waterbury Area Office, for Employee of the Month! Devin is being nominated by Zoe Stout and has been working for the agency since August 2023. Devin is an extremely dependable member of the Department's Legal Division. He can always be counted on to see complicated tasks to completion in a timely manner with minimal supervision. Devin follows up with others to

ensure timely completion of projects and compliance with deadlines. He produces high quality work which exemplifies his attention to detail, accuracy, timeliness, and professionalism. He often exceeds standards set by Agency policy and established best practices. Despite his voluminous workload with competing priorities, Devin consistently manages to meet disclosure deadlines. Devin also completes many internal reviews, responds to subpoenas, and prepares ICWA notices in a timely manner. Devin has also represented the Department at Administrative Hearings. Devin is always willing to take on additional projects and lend a helping hand when needed. Devin often anticipates potential issues and resolves them ahead of time. Devin is very approachable, courteous, and willing to assist colleagues and community partners. Devin communicates efficiently with CPS and other staff within the Waterbury and other Area Offices. Devin's cordial personality, easygoingness, and can-do attitude are just some of the reasons that working with Devin is a pleasure. He is an integral part of the Department's Legal Division. Thank you for all you do, Devin!