



Department of Children and Families
Spotlight On What's Right



COMMISSIONER'S QUARTERLY MESSAGE



Welcome to the Spring 2026 Quarterly "Spotlight on What's Right Newsletter!"

So much has happened since the beginning of the year!

Warm weather is around the corner after we all braved Winter storms Benjamin and Calvin that literally shut down the state!

A huge THANK YOU for our 24/7 operations -

The Child Abuse and Neglect Careline staff along with the employees at Solnit Hospital and the PRTFs. They did a great job once again serving our children and families during these extremely difficult weather conditions under the leadership of Lisa Daymonde, Heidi Pugliese and Mike Rulnick.

During February, we celebrated Black History Month with the 2026 theme of "A Century of Black History Commemorations". Events during the month paid tribute across the state to efforts to foster pride, advance equity and shaping identity.



We had beautiful celebrations in Central Office and at Solnit North PRTF!

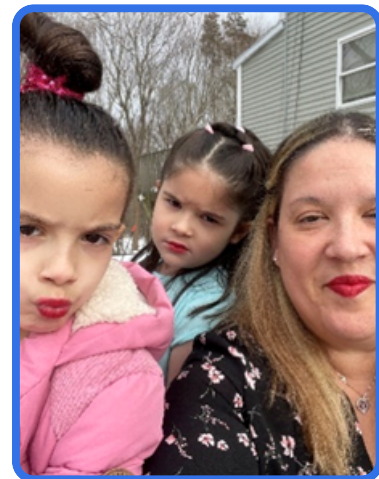


We still have much work to do in addressing disproportionality and disparate treatment of those in the Black and Brown communities as they remain overrepresented in our systems. Racial Justice has been a long-standing strategic goal of DCF and continues to be integrated into every aspect of our work.

March is Social Worker Appreciation Month with the 2026 theme, "Social Workers: Uplift. Defend. Transform." Social Work is a "calling" as we devote our lives to support and empower children and families. Hope you all received our small token of appreciation. Thank you for being an "essential piece of our team!"

Inspiring stories are all around us demonstrating the impact of Social Workers on the lives of those we serve. Our newsletter this month highlights a number of them.

Deborah Franklin has a story to tell about recovery, resilience and a "different DCF" that she experienced from the first time she was involved with us. Read "I'm healthy, I'm strong, I'm thriving" in this month's Spotlight to hear her incredible story and how she refers to the DCF staff as her "family" and the belief they had in her leading to life impacting change.



After more than 20 years in corporate sales, Brandon Bedard traded quotas for casework and found his true calling. A December employee of the month, and now a steady force in the DCF's Torrington office, he's known for answering every phone call, focusing on "baby steps," and reminding youth and families that hope is never out of reach. Read more about him in the story entitled, "From Sales to Second Chances: Brandon Bedard Named DCF Employee of the Month."

Congratulations to Social Worker Teariz Atunbi for winning the Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award. Given annually, this honors a Black/African American DCF staff member who has shown exceptional passion and commitment to children and families, particularly in the Black and Brown communities. Teariz "has gone beyond his professional role to ensure young people, especially those facing systemic and personal barriers, are seen, supported, and empowered."



UConn graduate and DCF Social Worker Ilene Garcia was one of four speakers who participated in a "Careers for Change: Pathways through Social Work" panel in the Travelers Collaborative Lounge on the UConn Hartford campus. Ilene discussed her work in the Department and the children and families she serves. You made us proud!

Each March, National Women's History Month honors the leadership and impact of women. The 2026 theme, "Leading the Change: Women Shaping a Sustainable Future," highlights their role in strengthening communities and advancing lasting solutions, especially through social work.

During Women's History Month, we recognize the vital role women in social work and DCF play in building stronger families and communities. When we invest in women, especially those leading in social work, we strengthen entire families and communities. Their leadership, compassion, and commitment are essential to building a child welfare system that supports lasting, positive outcomes.



Deputy Commissioner Tina Jefferson spoke to the youth at the Solnit South PRTF "Women in Herstory" event. She provided inspiring and empowering messages to our young ladies about reaching their full potential!



The Legislative session is underway! Thank you to the countless Legislators I have met with to discuss our work and priorities for this session. We are grateful to the Chief Administrator of Governmental Affairs and Policy Vinny Russo and Legislative Program Director Mike Carone for their long hours on behalf of our Agency!

Foster Care Program Directors Jenny Johnson, Dr. John Lachack and Eduardo Rivera, along with Program Supervisor Jenny Heny and parent advocate Lena Esposito, accompanied Chief Administrator of External Affairs Ken Mysogland and me to the New England Kinship Collaborative. We had the opportunity to learn about best case practice related to kinship practices and to discuss Connecticut's enhancements in this area of work.



Recruiting and supporting kinship, foster and adoptive families is everyone's job so let's also celebrate them! Moving forward, we are going to highlight a "Licensed Caregiver of the Month" in our Spotlight. Do you have a special person or family that embodies the spirit and values of our kinship, foster or adoptive families? If so, please forward their information to Jonathan.Jacarus@ct.gov



What does it take to become a foster parent? Please read [Learn the Basics](#) and review the [Foster Care Myths and Facts](#). Those interested can call 1-888-KIDHERO or begin the process electronically: [Foster Care and Adoption Information Request](#).

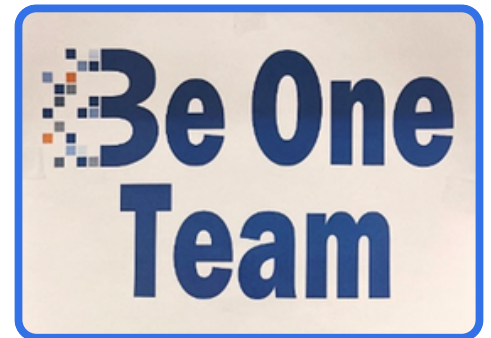
Thank you to our Statewide Advisory Council (SAC) Co-Chairs Sarah Lockery and Myke Halpin for leading the great conversation about the children's behavioral health system during a recent SAC meeting. We appreciate your partnership!

We now have our Quarterly Employee Recognition. Who has been nominated for the Spring 2026 Award? Read to see who is described as *"the epitome of dependability," "taking a relational approach to work,"* and *"a fierce advocate."*

Prom season is upon us! The Olive Branch "Prom Shop" is here to help by offering FREE prom gowns, suits, and accessories for high school teens who are receiving or have received, DCF support. [REGISTER HERE!](#) For questions, please email: Jacqueline.Ford@ct.gov

In the spirit of partnership, IT professionals, members of the BITS team and Agency leadership came together for an awesome *"Be One Team All Hands Meeting"* to remind ourselves that although we may report to different teams now, we are still one team!

Our Town Halls have continued with great conversation and input from staff at all levels on how to improve all aspects of the Agency. Look for some feedback soon regarding common questions we have been asked and changes that have been made along with more to come. We appreciate the authentic and genuine conversations and thank all of you, as always, for your dedication and commitment to this work.



"I'M HEALTHY, I'M STRONG, I'M THRIVING"



On the same day she had bronchitis and shortness of breath, engaged in EMDR therapy, and was awaiting her energetic 6 year-old-twins to come home from school, Deborah Franklin agreed to talk about sobriety, relapse and her recovery journey.

"I'll push through," she stated. No truer statement fits her personality.

Deborah's early childhood trauma led to substance abuse and unhealthy relationships. "Drugs and alcohol do numb until they don't work anymore and you will do anything to get the next drink or to get high," she stated.

Then came children followed by involvement with the Department of Children and Families. "I was out of control."

On 12/23/21, Deborah's 2.5 year old twins, Allison and Ava, were placed into foster care. Her addiction worsened over the next number of months. "I was so ashamed, I did not want to make contact with anyone," she stated. Alone in her apartment one day, she Googled "women's and children's programs" and found a rehabilitation program in Waterbury. Months of intense rehabilitation and healing took place.

Deborah turned her life around and in November, 2022 the girls were reunified. Deborah's story of strength and resilience was highlighted by DCF as a true success. She was featured in an article published in the "Spotlight on What's Right" newsletter entitled, ["I walked out of Hell barefoot"](#). During her appearance on the WFSB Great Day at 9a show, she told residents across Connecticut her recovery journey.

Life was good, until it wasn't.

Relapse is a part of recovery.



Almost a year after reunification, Deborah again began struggling. DCF again was called. "I thought this was three strikes you're out and you're done and you will never see your kids ever again," she worried.

An Investigator came to the house and "I had 30 seconds to pack everything up and go to a rehab with the girls," Deborah recalls. "I told the girls we are going on a really big sleepover for awhile. No boys allowed."



On the way to the facility, Deborah remembers asking the Social Worker why they are not removing the girls and placing them back into foster care. "We believe in you, but do you believe in you?" she remembers the Worker asking her.

"I don't," Deborah responded and the Worker quickly replied, "We saw what you did to get those girls back, it is in you."

Life has never been the same since.

While in program the day before Thanksgiving, Deborah took part in a large DCF meeting. "All DCF staff took turns and said something good about me," she stated.

One male staff member she remembers vividly telling her, "Don't let us down. We understand relapse is a part of recovery."

"How is this possible they did not take my kids away from me," she thought.

While another recovery program was not easy, don't ever underestimate the strength of Deborah Franklin.

She once again gained sobriety.

"Honestly, I feel like this time is different. I don't have another relapse in me," is her perspective now.

Deborah talks candidly about addiction and the life-long impact it has had on her. "I've had a few rock bottoms," she stated. The disease is "cunning, baffling and powerful," as she describes it. "Imagine dancing with the Devil every single day, knowing you don't want to."



Deborah feels a special bond with those suffering from addiction and the uniqueness of their challenges. "We are cut from a different cloth. We are chosen ones," is how she describes her peers. "That disease is right outside my door. That disease is right on my front porch right now. It's gonna try to get you to come back."



Deborah is now over two years sober. "I'm healthy, I'm strong, I'm thriving."

Allison and Ava will be 7 years old next month. Ava is "blossoming" while receiving extra support for her developmental challenges. She regularly receives awards at school ceremonies including "star reader," "star student," "most improved student," and for "most improved reading." Allison wants to be a kindergarten teacher.

Deborah works in the healthcare field. "I'm a natural born caregiver," she stated. Ironically, her patient is the father of Allison's former preschool teacher. "That's God at work bringing us full circle."

Deborah's oldest son recently moved out of the house into his own apartment and bought a new car, giving her his old one. He recently started the application process to become a State Trooper. His absence from the home is hard on Deborah who insisted they spend one day together during the week. They shop, pay bills, have lunch and Facetime every single day. She cherishes their time. "I am so proud of him," she beamed with joy.

In the upcoming months, Deborah's 15-year-old son, who was raised by his father, will be spending significant time again with Deborah as he is returning from specialized care due to behavioral health issues. He is a straight A student and wishes to eventually go to college in Florida. "What 15 year old knows they want to go to college," Deborah recently asked.

Deborah remains a fierce advocate for her children. "I'm a full blown Mama Bear through and through," is how Deborah describes herself. Her therapist recently told her, "Deborah you are everything your mother is not."



Deborah wants others to know about "this DCF" and the belief the Agency had in her. "I just needed one last chance and you gave it to me," she stated.



The risk paid off - look at her now!

Deborah has spoken at press conferences with Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz, the DCF Commissioner and members of the Connecticut Legislature about DCF's support to her family. She also traveled to Massachusetts and took part in a presentation regarding The Olive Branch's supports to DCF involved families.

Her family was recently pictured in the Hartford Courant.

"Don't be afraid of DCF. Put down the barriers and accept the help. It's not up to DCF what happens. It is up to you what happens. You are in the driver's seat," she tells others.

"Anybody that I have worked with at DCF has shown me more love than my own mother. They were my family."

Deborah Franklin is one of a kind! Congratulation to you on all of your successes!

Your DCF Family is very proud of you!

DECEMBER EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH BRANDON BEDARD'S 'BABY STEPS' FROM SALES TO SECOND CHANCES



Brandon Bedard poses with Comr. Hamilton at the December Employee of the Month ceremony.

After more than 20 years in corporate sales, Brandon Bedard traded quotas for casework and found his true calling. A December 2025 Employee of the Month, and now a steady force in DCF's Torrington office, he is known for answering every phone call, focusing on "baby steps," and reminding youth and families that hope is never out of reach.

In just over two years with DCF, Brandon has become known as a calming presence, a steady advocate for adolescents, and a social worker who approaches every family with determination, empathy, and hope. His path to working with transition age youth, however, was not the traditional social work track.

Before joining the Department, Brandon spent more than two decades in corporate sales, including 20 years with The Coca-Cola Company. His role centered on marketing, account management and, most importantly, relationship building.

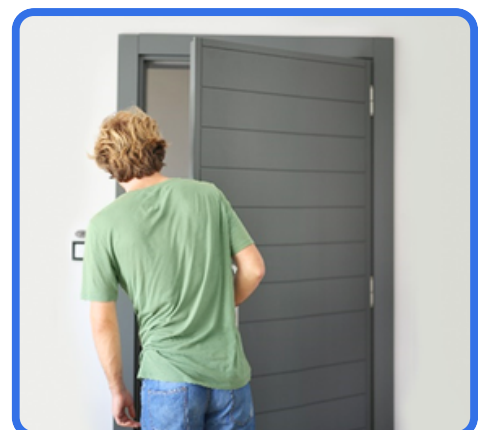
"Ninety percent of my day was building rapport with customers," Brandon recalls. "I'd walk into Pepsi accounts and they despised me at first. I got rejected every single day. But I never accepted 'no' as the final answer. I always asked, 'How am I going to get around that barrier?'"

Honed through years of rejection and perseverance, that resilience became one of the foundations of his social work practice. It especially came in handy when he encountered a family initially hostile about their DCF involvement.

"How many times do we show up at a doorstep and families want nothing to do with us?" he said. "It's the same principle. You keep showing up. You show dedication. Eventually they realize you're not just a DCF worker...you care about them."

He emphasizes partnership rather than authority.

"It's a privilege when a family opens that door and lets you in. They don't have to. That means there's hope there even if it's one percent. Our job is to build that to 100."



Brandon had long felt drawn to service-oriented work. Years earlier, he worked as a juvenile detention officer. Later, while supporting his family through corporate sales, he held onto the desire to return to a helping profession.

“When I decided I wanted this job, I sent out countless resumes to the state,” he said. “DCF was the only place I wanted to work. When I finally got the interview call, I couldn’t sleep that night. I was that excited.”



After joining DCF, Brandon transitioned into the Adolescence (TAY) unit, serving older youth preparing for adulthood. It is a population that faces daily instability – AWOL episodes, housing disruptions, educational setbacks, and backgrounds filled with trauma. The work is fast-paced and crisis-driven.

“There’s days I have kids threatening harm, kids going AWOL, placements breaking down,” Brandon explained. “It’s the hardest job I’ve ever done. But

it’s also the most rewarding job I’ve ever done.”

Although relatively new to the role, he brings and maintains a calming presence when situations escalate. His supervisor, Kevin Barry, described him as an “elder statesman” in the office.

“Brandon has quickly become an invaluable member of our Torrington office. He is dependable, professional, and a true team player, but what truly sets him apart is his ability to build genuine, trusting relationships with the youth and families he serves,” Kevin said.

“In the Adolescence (TAY) unit, he handles daily crises with patience and a calm demeanor, always remaining responsive and supportive. The young people on his caseload trust him, stay connected to him – even in difficult moments – and know he is fully invested in their success.”



As the “elder statesman” of the Torrington office, Brandon often speaks candidly to newer social workers about overcoming rejection and dealing with the tougher aspects of the job.



"Failure is the best teacher you'll ever have," he says. "If you can handle rejection and learn from it, you'll grow. Don't let families 'win' by giving up. Keep showing up."

He draws parallels to sports legends reminding colleagues that greatness is built through repeated attempts, not perfection.

"It's okay to fail. It's okay to be told off. But get up the next day and try again.

That one percent of hope - that should drive you."

The perspective Brandon maintains on his casework has been shaped by life experience. He believes perspective is one of the greatest tools a social worker can have.

"I'm 53. I've raised my kids. I've been through life," he says. "When things get frantic, I try to remind people - we're blessed. Go spend time at Children's Medical and watch a two-year-old fighting cancer. It changes your perspective really fast."

"Every day isn't perfect. But every day we can make a little progress. Hold one extra door. Say one extra thank you. Pick someone up when they're down. Life's going to be okay if we keep moving forward."

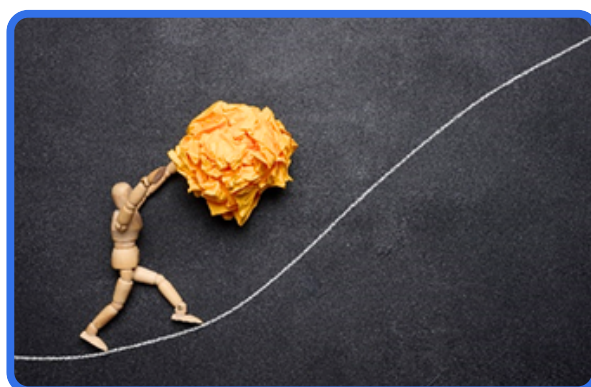
Another trait that sets Brandon apart is his accessibility. He makes it a priority to return calls promptly and consistently.

"I think one of the biggest parts of this job is answering your phone," he says without hesitation. "These kids are calling you for a reason. If you just pick up, that tells them someone in this world cares about them."

"I tell them, 'I have a meeting at one. I'll call you right after.' And they know I will," he says. "I don't let phone calls go days without getting back to my kids. Even when they go AWOL, they'll call me and say, 'I'm safe.' That means something."

"A lot of my kids don't have consistent adults in their lives. If we can give them a little love, a little hope, that one phone call—it goes a long way."

Brandon rejects a purely deficit-based approach to social work. Instead, his philosophy centers on incremental progress.



"We point out the negative, it's part of our job," he says. "But how about we focus on the baby steps? If it's the first day they went to school after 40 absences, let's dwell on that. That gives families hope. Without hope, we're all in trouble."



"These kids have been told what's wrong with them for years," he explains. "How about we talk about what they're doing right? They play basketball. They passed a class. They showed up. Let's build from there."

That shift in lens, looking for strengths rather than solely deficits, often changes the tone of his cases.

In describing that approach, Brandon says he "comes to work as a dad." He is the father of two adult children, one a business owner and the other a college student, and draws heavily from his parenting experience.

"I don't have the clinical background some therapists have," he says. "I come in and ask: What do you want out of life? Where do you want to be in five years? What obstacles do you see? How can I help?"

When youth succeed, he ensures they own the victory. On one of his cases, consistent conversations about trade careers led a young man to enroll in Porter and Chester Institute. Today, that youth is nearing graduation.

"It was just conversations in the car over coffee. No one had ever sat with him like that before. Sometimes it's just twenty minutes and a cup of coffee that changes direction."

Coming to work as a "dad" also means that Brandon balances encouragement with accountability.



"When they mess up, I call them out on it," he says. "But it's not all negative. I'll reward good behavior too. We're in this together. I'm going to tell you what I need from you—but you tell me what you need from me."

In his previous career in sales, Brandon earned bonuses and travel incentives. Yet his definition of success has changed.

"Success isn't monetary. It's not what you drive or what you live in. It's how you treat people."

“When I can help one family see a different outlook, when a kid says, ‘I came here because of my social worker’, that means more to me than any corporate trip I ever won.”



When asked, Brandon is quick to credit his colleagues. The team culture in the Torrington office sustains him through difficult days.

“I love this office. These are good-hearted people and we rely on each other,” he says. “Family and friends – that’s what life’s about. It’s not about money. It’s about lifting each other up.”

In just over two years, Brandon has become more than a caseworker. He is a steady voice in chaos, a trusted contact for adolescents who feel disconnected, and a professional who sees possibility where others might see only risk.

“I truly enjoy what I do,” he says. “It’s not perfect. No job is. But 99.9% of the time, I love coming here. If you have it in you to help people, this is the job for you.”

“Baby steps will get you somewhere. Just keep putting your feet on the ground and keep moving forward. Never give up hope.”

For the youth and families of Torrington, and for the colleagues who work beside him, Brandon’s steady optimism is more than inspiring. It is transformational.

point of contact for record requests with Family Relations, building a beneficial relationship with their staff. Ben prepares records for prompt disclosure, ensuring confidential information is appropriately redacted. He is quick to offer assistance to his colleagues and frequently works overtime to help others reduce backlogs. He recently participated in a hiring panel to refill a vacant Legal Division position, providing valuable insight into the qualities required for employment with the Department. Ben is the coordinator for Emergency Placement and Barrier Reviews, assigning and completing these requests within one to five days so there are no gaps in the Department's ability to place children with family and fictive kin, or to utilize these individuals as family resources. When completing these reviews, Ben must examine every aspect of the Department's involvement with an individual, determining whether or not there is legal sufficiency to uphold substantiations and placement on the Central Registry. Ben conducts each review fairly and judiciously, applying policy and statutory criteria to each finding and decision. Ben also ensures that the Legal Division remains focused on the Department's goals for Racial Justice. He is one of the Legal Division's representatives on the Statewide Racial Justice Committee as well as a member of the Legal Division's committee. Ben even participated in the production of a video in 2023 highlighting the Department's Racial Justice Change Initiatives! Ben has been instrumental in developing updated Racial Justice Training as well as identifying relevant data for Legal Division staff to track as they complete substantiation and Central Registry reviews. The Legal Division honors Ben, not only for representing the Legal Division in a professional, respectful manner, but for helping the entire Department move the needle forward in terms of its racial justice practice. Ben is definitely a valued and appreciated member of our team!!



Dr. Lamirra Hood-Stewart - PRTF (South)

Solnit South PRTF's Employee of the Quarter is Assistant Superintendent Dr. Lamirra Hood-Stewart. Lamirra will be leaving us in April for a position with DOC and we are pleased to honor her with this recognition as an acknowledgment of her significant contributions to our program. Dr. Hood-Stewart leaves behind an impressive record of achievements. On her watch, South PRTF reopened the Lakota unit, opened the operations office, established nine 40-hour CSW positions and a 40-hour Children Services Specialist. Lamirra's relational approach to the work coupled with her extensive background working with at-risk girls contributed greatly to improved success outcomes for the program which achieved 90% occupancy and 83% planned discharges in 2025. Those who work closely with her know that her "curious questions" are a way to drill down to the substance of an issue, always arriving at the right solution for the improvement of the program. Lamirra's belief in the value and rights of all people to share their thoughts and feelings creates a culture of inquiry, accountability, and respect where youth and staff can tell supervisors and managers what they need to know, not what they want to hear. Lamirra gives 100% of herself to the youth and staff and never gives "lip service". She has a gift for synthesizing large amounts of information and data and developing achievable plans for improving systems. Dr. Hood Stewart's fingerprints are all over the program in the best possible way. We wish our leader all the best in her new endeavor and in all aspects of life.

Tracy Mello - CT-KIND

Tracy Mello of CT-Kind was nominated by two Directors in the CQI Bureau for her assistance with new reporting. Tracy has been so helpful to CQI, especially for the case reviews. The transition over from LINK to CT-Kind has been challenging and Tracy's easy demeanor, quick response, and patient approach has made the transition so much easier. At times when we have had to review an urgent situation, Tracy has made herself immediately available to assist in locating pertinent information. Tracy has guided us, taught us, she has sent issues forward and she remains just a call away at any given time for assistance. We are so appreciative of her efforts to help us, she is truly a team player!

Zipporah Lewis - Fiscal

Child Welfare Accounting has nominated Zipporah Lewis, Fiscal Administrative Supervisor, as Employee of the Quarter. Since Zipporah's start in November 2023, she has shown her commitment to the department and her unit through her hard work, tenacity and positive attitude. Zipporah was new to

DCF when she entered CWA and quickly got to work on learning the roles of the staff, policies of the department, listening to how workflow could be improved and creating new processes to make the unit more successful. In the face of many payment and process challenges during CT-Kind implementation, Zipporah has shown strong leadership. She has listened to concerns and quickly helped to address them, taken the lead on training, been innovative in how to improve the workload of staff, and kept a smile and sense of humor that was needed on tough days. Zipporah has made a mark on every one of the staff in CWA, as well as forming positive relationships with our providers to ease frustrations that may arise with payment issues. We are so grateful to have Zipporah in Child Welfare Accounting, she has improved our department immensely with her attitude and efforts!



Dr. Ingrid Aarons - Bureau of Continuous Quality Improvement

I'd like to nominate Dr. Ingrid Aarons for Employee of the Quarter. Each day, Dr. Aarons exemplifies true dedication to our agency, the ACR, and most importantly, to the staff she leads. She is a consistent advocate for her team, always going the extra mile to support them and embodying the principles of servant leadership. Dr. Aarons fosters an environment that encourages continual growth and learning, motivating her staff to pursue new challenges and opportunities. By consistently demonstrating what it means to go above and beyond, she inspires her team to do the same and create a culture of excellence. Thank you for considering Dr. Aarons for this recognition. I believe her ongoing commitment and leadership make her truly deserving of this honor.

John Cherubino - Foster Care Division

John Cherubino has been a major asset to the Hartford Kinship Unit within the Foster Care Division (Region 4) for years in several capacities. John has gone above and beyond to help his unit mates, the agency, and the families he serves. He is instrumental in teaching new staff how to navigate fingerprinting and background checks. Also, John is always the first person a colleague will call if they are not able to fingerprint someone. For years, he has uploaded fingerprint results and interstate compact documents in addition to having a full caseload. John has demonstrated leadership by helping everyone navigate CT Kind by developing written guides (with a splash of humor) on foster care

related tasks. In addition to his day-to-day work, John volunteered to do testing for CT Kind developers and be the liaison for the state police with background checks. He has historically assisted in developing a statewide kinship training curriculum while consistently stepping up when the unit needed a kinship trainer. John received positive feedback from the families about his knowledge and style of training. When it comes to helping families become licensed or approved for placement, John has assisted families with finding homes for cats on his own time, helping families move, executing light handy work, assembling supplies for children, and driving relatives to the doctor. Given the intensity this job often brings, John brings the needed balance with his smile, sense of humor, and laughter while ensuring children can safely stay in kinship care, whether by blood or bond.

Kelly Bronk - Clinical and Community Consultation and Support Division

The children and families in DCF Region 5 are served by several competent RRG mental health consultants who are passionate about connecting clients with the clinical services needed. Kelly Bronk has been nominated for exemplary work over the past 24 years at Waterbury DCF.



She began in 2002 as a CPS social worker and then transitioned to the RRG. Kelly is passionate in maintaining permanent connections for children whether it be maintaining a connection to a former foster parent or a sibling. When there was a major shift in delivery of therapeutic foster care, Kelly was a strong advocate for quality implementation of the new FFT model with a new contracted agency. Kelly works collaboratively with social workers to identify alternatives to treatment when there are waitlists, making calls and checking in with contacts to find openings. She follows recommendations to ensure delivery of services. On a recent case where a child experienced several foster care disruptions, Kelly asserted the need for family therapy with an understanding of how trauma and insecure attachment can impact development. Overall, she does not hesitate to be a fierce advocate for our children when systemic factors can be a challenge and bringing people together is the solution. Kelly performs all this while maintaining a positive attitude and good humor.

Alison Giuliano - Unified School District 2

Alison Giuliano is being nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Her competence, professionalism, and attention to detail are qualities that consistently set her apart. What stands out even more is how her dedication extends far beyond the expected scope of her duties. Alison always goes the extra mile, whether that means researching complex statutes, coordinating with the State Department of Education, supporting colleagues or collaborating across the many school districts we serve. Her integrity is evident in every aspect of her work, and her passion for our mission is unwavering. She approaches her role with a team-oriented mindset, grounded in cooperation, communication, and genuine collaboration. Alison not only completes tasks but actively strengthens the systems and relationships around her. Alison is deeply committed to serving the children and families of our state. She consistently demonstrates a level of dedication that goes above and beyond expectations. Her contributions, consistency, and character reflect the very best of what this honor represents. Thank you, Alison!!!

Heather Hicinbothem - Careline

Heather Hicinbothem is being nominated as an outstanding Employee of the Quarter in 2026 by her Social Work Supervisor, Gregory Hudson. Heather

Hicinbothem has served as an Investigations Social Worker with the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) since 2018. Over the years, she has investigated some of the most challenging and emotionally complex cases involving child abuse and neglect. As the second longest-tenured investigator within the unit, Ms. Hicinbothem brings both experience and institutional knowledge that greatly benefits the unit. Over time, Ms. Hicinbothem has naturally grown into



a leadership role, serving as a mentor, role model, and trusted resource for newer investigators. Her guidance, candor, and unwavering standards set the tone for professionalism within the team. Ms. Hicinbothem is a highly skilled investigator who consistently treats families with dignity, respect, and transparency. Her communication style is direct and honest—there is never any doubt about where she stands on an issue or how she feels about a particular situation. She has maintained a standard of excellence in her professional responsibilities. Her resilience speaks to her strength of character and commitment to service. This authenticity, combined with her integrity, has earned her respect among colleagues and families alike. Outside of her professional work, she has a deep affection for animals, reflecting her compassionate nature and big heart. In addition to her investigative duties, Ms. Hicinbothem serves as a Cross Reporting/DOAG-DCF Liaison between SIU and EPIU, further demonstrating her dedication and leadership within the organization. Ms. Hicinbothem's dedication, honesty, leadership, and compassion make her an invaluable member of SIU.

Dana Webb - Norwalk Area Office

This month, the Norwalk Office would like to nominate an exceptional employee for Employee of the Quarter: Social Worker Supervisor Dana Webb who demonstrates a strong commitment to her role as a leader and to the Department. As a supervisor for one year, Dana excels in communication and fosters a positive work environment by consistently motivating her team to achieve performance measures. For example, she implements fun strategies to meet timely monthly visitation in which her unit steps up to the challenge. Dana consistently goes above and beyond to support her unit by active listening to their perspectives and promptly addressing any concerns to build trust within her team. Dana supervised a challenging caseload this past year including the death of a child, demonstrating her ability to exceed expectations of responding with empathy and being strength-based for families and staff who face tragedy. Dana is hands on when supporting her team through effective communication and always strategic in her ways of approaching challenges and resolving barriers for the families we serve. Despite her fear of speaking before a live camera, Dana participated in a television program facilitated by Jacqueline Ford to strongly advocate for a child with complex needs who requires special recruitment for permanency. Dana consistently leads weekly Large Permanency Meetings to find a placement for this particular child. Furthermore, Dana maintains a demeanor of professionalism in high pressured situations. Dana's leadership and willingness to provide emotional support to her peers exemplifies the true meaning of teamwork and elevating the success of others. Her peers and unit members describe Dana as "wonderful, dedicated, organized, hardworking,

and genuinely caring about the work and her unit." Social Worker Aaron Bailey stated, "Dana's leadership truly sets an example for the team, and we appreciate all the efforts she puts in to make all of us successful." Social Worker Jude Lalanne stated, "Dana is a wonderful team player who goes above and beyond while keeping her cool." Dana has been with the Department for 7 years and was promoted to Supervisor for the Norwalk Office in November 2024. Dana's program supervisor is deeply grateful for her exceptional dedication, commitment to cohesive team building, and strong work ethic. We are proud to have Dana as a valued member of the Norwalk office team.



Johana Ciprietti - Bridgeport Area Office

Johana Ciprietti is being nominated for Employee of the Quarter. She has been with the Department for 7 months and in that short time, she has made such a noticeable and positive impression on each and every family she has come into contact with. There is no task at DCF too monumental for Johana to willingly take on. She displays a skilled balance of accountability and empathy that allows her to easily and effectively engage and move families forward with their goals. Johana approaches every situation with a brand-new solution-focused mindset and an old-school "boots on the ground" action plan that continues to serve the families and children on her caseload seamlessly. Johana puts emphasis on family involvement, often supporting her families to build up their own support networks, both familial and professional ones, to wrap the family around in hope that it will prevent further DCF involvement. Johana has received numerous accolades from her peers in both On-Going services and Intake for her assistance with field work. Johana is affectionately known as the unofficial "best dressed" trainee, with her best fashion accessory being her unwavering smile.

Sebastian Kudzia - Waterbury Area Office

It's with great pleasure that we honor Sebastian, our outstanding Social Work Case Aide, for his remarkable contributions. Since 2014, Sebastian consistently goes above and beyond, always willing to jump in and help, and bringing a warm smile and positive energy to every interaction and task. His friendly and personable demeanor creates genuine connections with the children and families he serves, ensuring a safe and welcoming environment. Sebastian truly exemplifies what it means to be an outstanding team member. Sebastian has built strong, trusting relationships with both families and staff. His thoughtful support and guidance are valued, and he plays a pivotal role in fostering a safe environment for children and parents to connect. Sebastian has built relationships with the youth he serves and plays a reliable and consistent role for children, navigating big changes. Although he may not love the recognition, he certainly deserves it. Thank you, Sebastian, for who you are and for all you do!

Molly Baldwin - Torrington Area Office

Molly Baldwin has been with the agency for the past 4 years and is nominated as Employee of the Quarter! Molly upon completion in the Training Unit went directly to Intake. Molly was initially nervous to be assigned to Intake; however, she has become one of the hardest working employees. Molly comes into the office every

day and she works diligently to ensure her work is up to date. She strives to not have any cases overdue or late. Molly has been instrumental in helping her peers navigate CT KIND. Molly has become the "Unit Ambassador" in that she helps new unit members acclimate to Intake. Molly has a nice way about her, she presents as soft spoken, though she is able to articulate and make assessments for the best interest of children. Molly has come a long way from that brand new Trainee 4 years ago. Side note, Molly always assists with moving the state vehicles in bad weather. And though this might not seem like a big thing it is and is appreciated. She is one of our snow angels!



David Williams - New Haven Area Office

It is with great enthusiasm that David Williams, our CQI Manager, is nominated for Employee of the Quarter. David has been instrumental in advancing the work of the New Haven Area Office. His leadership in Continuous Quality Improvement has strengthened our practice, sharpened our focus on outcomes, and ensured that our work remains data-informed and mission-driven. He does not simply analyze data; he translates it in a way that makes it meaningful and understandable to staff at every level. What distinguishes David most is his unwavering availability and unselfish commitment to others. He consistently makes himself accessible to both leadership and the entire staff, offering thoughtful insight, practical guidance, and steady support. We deeply trust his professional judgment and value his input as a trusted member of our leadership team. David approaches his work with humility and a genuine desire to do what is best for our staff and, most importantly, the clients and families we serve. His integrity, responsiveness, and collaborative spirit make him an invaluable asset to our office. For these reasons, we are proud to nominate David Williams as Employee of the Quarter. His contributions exemplify excellence, dedication, and servant leadership.

Kimberley Jackson - Milford Area Office

Intake Social Worker Kimberley Jackson is being nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Ms. Jackson received a recent fatality case that involved the loss of a child and grandfather in a house fire. Ms. Jackson's strength is family engagement; especially during a difficult time in supporting a family through their grief. Ms. Jackson also provided support to the extended family that resided in the home. Ms. Jackson took calls after hours, shared tears with the family and spent hours just sitting in silence at home visits with a listening ear. The following is from an email received by a family she serves: "I write to share with you the high esteem in which I hold Ms. Kimberley Jackson, whom I had occasion to meet during the investigation into the tragic fire that took the precious life of my little boy and my stepfather on November 3, 2025. As you may be aware, my family has been working with DCF since February 2024 due to the longstanding physical, emotional, and psychological abuse perpetrated by my children's father against them. I have come to know, thus, how your case workers manage interviews and handle the information presented to them. What struck me from the beginning



about Kim, as I came to know her, was how extraordinarily invested she was in our case. From the first day she was assigned to our case, she assured me that she would always be available to speak to me, and indeed she was, fielding my phone calls and concerns after hours many times and truly putting her heart into this tragedy. She offered my family and me sound counsel, worked closely with my surviving children and their school officers and health care providers, and afforded me the space in which to discuss with her at length my serious concerns about the fire. I hope that your agency recognizes Kim for the remarkably valuable employee she is. Here is someone who understands that the work at hand merits full attention and focus, and though the circumstances that brought us together were dire, we also realized how fortunate we were to have Kim be our advocate at this time."

Daniel Alfred - Norwich Area Office

Daniel Alfred has been with DCF for almost 2 years and with the State of Connecticut for 7 years. He has had a difficult case that he has handled extremely well, so many participants are involved due to the child's trauma and significant medical issues, and the Child Advocate is also involved. Initially, the plan was for the child to reunify with her brother in FL on an ICPC request; however, the plan failed and the child returned to CT. On any given day, Daniel must respond to questions about the child and complete an abundance of paperwork on this case. Oftentimes, meetings are tenuous, as the child has refused to complete her schoolwork and the surrogate parent and child's Attorney and Guardian Ad Litem are not pleased with some of the Department's decisions. Mr. Alfred has remained professional. He is always well prepared during the meetings and takes the initiative to complete pertinent paperwork timely. In addition to this case, Mr. Alfred has a great rapport with the children and parents on his caseload; he treats each family member with the utmost respect, shows up for work with a positive attitude, and brings trainees and interns in the field on a continual basis. He recently volunteered to mentor a new Trainee after being mentored himself and finding the experience to be positive. Mr. Alfred has a good grasp of permanency and recently reunified a father with his son after the father was able to maintain his sobriety for over one year. The father participated in the January 2026 FELT meeting to discuss why his experience with the Department has been positive and has cited his relationship with Mr. Alfred as one of the reasons for his success.

Bree'Ana Shaw- Willimantic Area Office

Bree'Ana Shaw is being recognized as Employee of the Quarter from the Willimantic Office. Bree'Ana's professionalism, reliability, and positive demeanor during a challenging



and high-demand situation, reflect very well on her and the Department. She recently received the following accolades: "I am writing to Bree'Ana's chain of command to formally recognize her excellent work this past weekend. As you know, we experienced a significant storm; however, we were still required to respond and ensure the commencement of cases while the Area Office was closed. I supervised Bree'Ana on Saturday, and she was consistently on point and maintained a positive, professional attitude throughout the day. On Sunday evening, I contacted her to advise of the potential need for her to respond to cases on Monday due to continued Area Office closures. Once again, she presented with a great attitude and a clear willingness to do whatever was needed to support the team and our mission. This was truly refreshing and

appreciated. I supervised Bree'Ana again on Monday when she responded to a 72-hour intake. She conducted interviews with all household members, which resulted in the development of a safety plan and an ACA. Throughout the process, she was thorough in her work, detailed and timely in her reporting back to me and diligent in addressing all identified safety concerns."

Charmaine Marsh - Middletown Area Office

Charmaine Marsh is nominated for Employee of the Quarter. She has excellent engagement skills, which have really turned a few of her cases around. In particular, she has made great strides in her S.B. and the A.E. cases. Her ability to have hard conversations and meet her families where they are at has really helped her families progress forward. Charmaine's work on the E. case prevented what was likely a removal of the child a couple weeks ago. She was able to get critical info from family members that allowed us to advocate for the child to be hospitalized to address his mental health, as the hospital was trying to discharge him. Charmaine worked hard with mother to get her into individual counseling, which she has been resistant to for the length of the case, while the child was in the hospital. She worked with mother on the importance of taking her mental health medication and taking them timely. She also worked with the fathers on how they could best support their children and mother. The follow-up meeting after the Considered Removal Meeting showed the great progress the family made over a week.

Garfield Walker - Hartford Area Office

Garfield has shown his true commitment to this job, particularly in our 3 Intake workgroups. Garfield was the backbone of Intake during a critical time when we were short Clerical staff during our daily operations. Garfield has been able to multitask and served as our primary Intake Screener and completed all background checks for Intake, assisted in ensuring all checks were completed for Foster Care licensing, completed legal forms and any other last-minute needs in which he is tasked. Garfield's clerical support has ensured that everything in Intake has run smoothly behind the scenes. Garfield goes above and beyond his clerical duties and what truly sets him apart is his unwavering support of the social work staff at all levels, the Social Workers, the Social Work Supervisors as well as the Program Supervisors. Garfield takes the time to form important relationships with staff at all levels to build an atmosphere where staff feel comfortable seeking their support. His assistance does not go unnoticed at all levels whether it is doing his secretarial duties or even just offering a listening ear, a moment of encouragement, or just bringing his positive presence to the office. Regardless of whether it is just a quick chat with staff during a challenging day or stepping in to work late night hours to ensure staff are receiving clerical support beyond the normal working hours, Garfield is appreciated. Intake is truly grateful for Garfield's continued dedication and reliability. The recognition of Garfield being Employee of the Quarter is well deserved!



Shannon Kiss - Manchester Area Office

Shannon Kiss is a Social Work Supervisor in Intake who is our donation guru. In

addition to leading and managing her unit in Intake, she also manages our Kids Closet and our donations. She was nominated by two staff in the office who said this about Shannon: "This December she has gone above and beyond ensuring families have Christmas Trees, and gifts, etc.... Shannon truly went above and beyond and seeing all that work (all while supervising Intake effectively) was inspiring. I took my daughter to an entire event she arranged in Glastonbury, and it was amazing to see how much people donated. So many families are incredibly lucky due to this ELF of a supervisor! I think she should definitely be acknowledged for all of this and for being an awesome supervisor." Another staff member commented, "Shannon Kiss is being nominated for all the work she does this time of year by collecting gift lists and coordinating with all the elves she knows to help Christmas happen for our children and families. In addition, her hard work all year round maintaining the chaos of the Kids Closet, sending emails for various donations, etc. is above and beyond her role as a social work supervisor and it benefits all of us in the office, and most importantly the families in our community.

Jessica Boughton - Meriden Area Office

Jessica Boughton is the Meriden Employee of the Quarter. Two write-ups were received for her great work. The first one stated, "I wanted to take a moment to recognize the outstanding work and compassion that Jessica Boughton demonstrated while helping to place a child yesterday. Jessica went above and

beyond to ensure his safety, comfort, and emotional well-being during an incredibly difficult time for him. Jessica worked late into the night to secure a placement and made this little boy feel so comfortable that he was finally able to open up about the loss of his grandmother. He even shared a personal story about the "Elf on the Shelf" tradition his grandmother did with him every year. He told Jessica, since her passing on Friday, the elf hasn't moved, and this detail brought up a lot of emotion for him. Jessica comforted him while he cried, and today this child asked me specifically to thank her for being so kind to him. Jessica also took the initiative to notify the school yesterday, and they expressed their gratitude for being informed. She followed up with the relative caregiver and requested that they retrieve special items the child asked for, including his grandmother's glasses and the elf. These small but meaningful actions brought him comfort during a moment of grief and transition. I felt emotional even writing this, but I wanted to make sure Jessica's compassion and commitment did not go unrecognized. Her work made a real difference for this little boy during one of the hardest moments of his life. Thank you for taking the time to acknowledge her exceptional efforts." Furthermore, Jessica's Supervisor wanted to share his thoughts on Jessica and her work after learning about her nomination: "Jessica is a very highly skilled, well respected and a valued member of the Meriden Intake team. She demonstrates the ability to critically think and has sound judgment in her work, is very dependable and reliable and can be counted on by her supervisor. Jessica has strong engagement skills, effectively engages very difficult clients and can deescalate very hostile people and situations, all while maintaining a level of compassion for the families she serves. Jessica is very transparent and up front with the families she serves. She's able to assess and ensure the safety and well-being



of children. She will go above and beyond to ensure the needs of the children and families are met and can think outside the box and be creative to meet their needs. Over the years, Jessica has exemplified being a team player and is well respected by her peers, who often reach out to Jessica for guidance and assistance with CT KIND and Intake processes and procedures."

Mandy Isbister - New Britain

Mandy Isbister, Intake Social Worker, was nominated by the New Britain Transitional Aged Youth Unit for Employee of the Quarter. The holiday gift drive that Mandy facilitates is so impactful for our office, but especially

our adolescents. Many of our adolescents are not living with family and feel lonely and forgotten during the holidays so the gifts were definitely appreciated. From tablets to bikes, many of our youth received their number one gift this holiday season. With each gift, we're able to witness our adolescents let down their guard and feel like kids again. Mandy has quietly dedicated so much time and energy outside of work to make this gift drive a success, each year, and it is so appreciated. THANK YOU, MANDY !! This is certainly something the entire office appreciates, and Mandy balanced it along with a very challenging caseload. Mandy's contributions to the New Britain office are widespread. She is a strong advocate on the Intake team and also coordinates mentors for new intake staff to assist with a smooth transition.



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