



Department of Children and Families *Spotlight On What's Right*



COMMISSIONER'S QUARTERLY MESSAGE



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

We have been a busy Agency over the past three months across Divisions and in collaboration with community partners! Your tireless efforts and commitment to the children and families we serve are greatly appreciated as we work together to enhance our safety practice and improve outcomes.

Our efforts have not gone unnoticed, and we thank Governor Ned Lamont for visiting Central Office and

speaking with staff about our critical work and for his ongoing support.

The past three months have seen us celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day and the vital role loving and supportive mothers, fathers and parental figures play in the life of a child! Special thanks to all the DCF parents, grandparents and role models for the long days and nights put into serving children and families - often at the expense of spending time with your own families.



**HAPPY
NURSES
WEEK!**



Our appreciation was also extended to Nurses and Teachers who were also acknowledged on special days. Teachers are influencing and shaping lives for the future while Nurses work 24/7 in our facilities & other settings to ensure

each child and family receives sensitive and optimal care.

Foster Care Appreciation events took place around the state in May and June highlighting this year's Foster Care Awareness month theme, "Engaging Youth. Building Supports. Strengthening Opportunities." There are no words to express how much we appreciate our incredible foster, kinship and adoptive families who embrace not only our children - but also their families - during an incredibly difficult time in their lives.





Precious Hands is an organization comprised of Medically Complex Foster Parents. At a recent event at Jordan's Furniture, they came together to speak about the joys and rewards of caring for some of Connecticut's most vulnerable children. "You Think my Hands are full, You should See My Heart," is their motto! They are amazing to say the least!

Thank you to Mayor Paul Pernerewski Jr. and Mayor Caroline Simmons along with Deb Kelleher from the Annie E. Courtney Foundation and Family and Children's Aide in Waterbury for hosting Foster Care Awareness events in Waterbury and Stamford.

The 5th annual "Best Dad by Par" event took place in Hamden. Hosted by CT DCF's Foster Care Division, it brought together dozens of foster, kin, and birth fathers and their families to hit a few golf balls while recognizing the unique impact a positive male role model has on the life of a child whether in the role of foster, adoptive, kin or biological caretaker.



Speaking of adoptive fathers, watch Program Supervisor Danny Reyes from the Foster Care Division speak about the need for more families! [Danny Reyes on WFSB](#)

Additionally, we honored Pride Month, commemorating the 1969 Stonewall Uprising and the LGBTQIA+ community's culture, history, and visibility. Primarily celebrated in June, the month functions as both a joyful celebration and reinforces the need for continued advocacy for equal rights throughout our communities.



A monumental day in our history is Juneteenth, honoring the day in 1865 when news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached enslaved people in Galveston, Texas. It remains a powerful reminder of freedom and reflection.

Health Month also took place. They both remind us that seeking support is a sign of strength. We all must continue to reduce stigma around asking for help and highlight the essential role families, partners, friends, and communities play in supporting men's emotional and physical well-being.



"Beautifully You...Because Every Girl Deserves Her Red Carpet Moment", was the theme for a special night out for the youth from the Solnit South PRTE. Due to generous donations, over 10 young ladies pick out their own evening gowns, shoes and other accessories. Volunteer hairdressers and makeup provided individualized attention to each young lady as they prepared to walk down the red

carpet in front of family, friends and staff. A beautiful evening!

Connecticut prides itself on having approximately 93% of our children and youth in care placed with families. This work was on display during the Ending the Need for Group Care "Bringing our Children Home" even sponsored by the YWCA Hartford, DCF, Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs. We are grateful for the significant community partnerships that support the goal of serving children in the least restrictive placement possible while also recognizing that some children do need a higher level of care to address specific treatment needs.

Thank you to the Cheshire High School MechaRAMS Robotics team who are providing sensory boards to each of the 14 area offices to encourage early engagement with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) among young children. These innovative sensory boards are specifically crafted to transform playtime into opportunities for hands-on learning and early engineering exploration. Thank you for your generosity!



We now have our Quarterly Employee Recognition. Who has been nominated for the Summer 2026 Award? Read to see who is described as having a "knack for capturing complexities," "integral," and "unwaveringly supportive."



Exceptional staff are all around us. For DCF's 2026 Dr. Janet E. Williams Award recipient, Teairez Atunbi, community service is driven by a commitment to empowering young people through authenticity, trust, and unwavering support. As Teairez puts it, "The power's in your hands. We're not going to worry about where you are... we're going to work on where you're going." Read more about him in this month's Spotlight

Read also about the DCF Honor Guard, a meaningful new tradition that honors the lives and service of current, former, and retired DCF

employees through a special Pinning Ceremony at funerals and memorial services. Created by dedicated staff who recognized the need to celebrate the lasting impact of child protection professionals, the Honor Guard offers families a powerful tribute that reflects the respect, compassion, and sense of community within the agency. As one participant shared, the ceremonies are "a beautiful and powerful reminder that those who dedicate their lives to protecting children leave a legacy that will never be forgotten."

Future leaders continue to develop within the Agency. Over the past couple of months, graduations for the Leadership Academy for Supervisors and Leadership Academy for Middle Managers took place along with the LEAD Mentoring closing ceremony.



I was honored to attend the ribbon cutting at The Rose Center, a Sub-Acute Crisis Stabilization Center for youth ages 5 to 18 who are experiencing mental health emergencies. It is the first of its kind to open in Eastern Connecticut. Funded by DCF and managed by CHR, The Rose Center was designed to address ongoing mental



health crises among CT children and teens and help alleviate overcrowding in Connecticut hospitals and Emergency Departments. See more about the program here: [Facility for youth facing mental health crises opens in Norwich](#)

"The Link" is a well-documented correlation between animal cruelty, child abuse, and domestic violence. Thank you to Department of Agriculture Commissioner Bryan Hurlburt and other community leaders for coming together once again to highlight the collaborative efforts undertaken to protect children and animals. Read more about them here: [CT Officials Highlight Link Between Child Abuse, Animal Cruelty | CT News Junkie](#)



Since 2001, a total of 59 babies have been given up to hospitals around Connecticut through the Safe Havens Act. Passed in 2000, the law allows a parent, who does not believe they can care for their newborn, to voluntarily give up custody of an infant age 30 days or younger to the staff of an emergency room and remain anonymous. DCF will then place the baby in a pre-approved adoptive home. Read more about the event I attended with Lt. Governor Susan

Bysiewicz along with other state leaders to highlight the successes of the program: [Connecticut Safe Havens Act credited with saving dozens of lives](#)

Lastly, as the hot Summer weather is upon us, this is a good reminder to diligently watch children around pools and other bodies of water, open windows, while riding bikes, walking down the street or in other public places and never leave them in a car unattended.

I look forward to continuing our work together to improve outcomes for the children and families we serve and thank you for your steadfast commitment to that critical goal.

LEADING WITH HERITAGE, ROOTED IN PRIDE: MEET 2026 DR. JANET E. WILLIAMS RECIPIENT TEAIREZ ATUNBI



For DCF's Teairez Atunbi, recipient of the 2026 Dr. Janet E. Williams award, community service is a calling grounded in identity, responsibility, and an unwavering belief in the potential of young people. His work reflects a deep commitment to ensuring that youth, particularly those navigating systemic inequities, are not only supported but truly seen, heard, and empowered.

His path to this line of work was intentional. Originally from St. Louis, Teairez explored a range of roles across the social services field, from working with the elderly to supporting children with autism and youth in school settings, before finding his calling

with adolescents. His ability to listen and connect became the foundation of his approach.

Reflecting on that journey, he explains, "I was a strong listener... I just understood why the kids operate the way they do, because there's reasons behind everything."

At the core of Teairez's work is a deep pride in his Black heritage. It is something he carries into every interaction. Emphasizing authenticity as both a personal value and a professional strength, he explained, "I always told myself I would never change who I am to appease someone else."

For the young people he mentors, many of whom are searching for identity and belonging, that authenticity is powerful. It shows them that success does not require sacrificing who they are.



The "why" that guides Teairez's is rooted in lived experience and a deep sense of passing on the torch. For youth facing instability, often during the most difficult moments of their lives, he strives to be that steady presence.



"I know what it's like to have a strong person in your life who you can depend on... and I know how valuable that is," he shared. "If I was having the worst time of my life, I would want somebody... to be a light in that moment."

That commitment translates into real, measurable impact. While his methods are clear and intentional, he also remains humble. For example, every young person on his caseload has graduated high school, a milestone Teairez said he "didn't even realize" until it was pointed out.

Central to his success is the trust he builds. He focuses on

empowerment, reminding youth that their future is still in their hands: "The power's in your hands. We're not going to worry about where you are... we're going to work on where you're going."

He is transparent and direct in the wisdom he transfers, like his philosophy, "Nothing is promised. Everything is earned." Truth nuggets like that especially resonate with young people who have often experienced inconsistency.



Teairez's leadership extends beyond individual mentorship. As Chair of the Norwich Youth, Family, and Recreation Services Board, he has worked to expand opportunities for youth in the community. Recognizing gaps in access to safe, recreational spaces, he did what he does so well - empowering young people by bringing them directly into the conversation.



He explained that under his leadership, programs have become more active, inclusive, and responsive to real community needs because "I listen to the kids... they're the voices who matter."

This philosophy is deeply tied to his belief in community and unity. Drawing from his own upbringing, he emphasizes the importance of collective care.

“There’s power in unity. Kids need to be raised by community... we’re much stronger as one.”

Yet what distinguishes Teairez most is how he shows up. He invests time, builds relationships, and meets youth where they are often in ways that go far beyond expectations. Understanding that consistency builds trust, his approach to creating safe spaces is both simple and profound.

“This work is easy for me, it’s just getting to know somebody. I’ll go spend hours...just hanging there like we’re best friends. You can easily show people you care by being present.”

“If you can’t do that, you should consider another occupation,” Teairez says candidly.

Despite the challenges of the work, Teairez remains grounded in purpose.



In receiving recognition connected to the legacy of Dr. Janet E. Williams, Teairez views the award as a reflection of the values that guide him. Yet, true to his nature, recognition is not his motivation because after all, the work he does in the community and with DCF-connected youth work is never performative but always purposeful.

“It’s an honor... I know the power of a Black woman, and what that represents. But I don’t do it for [the recognition]... I do it for the kids.”

A LASTING TRIBUTE TO SERVICE: INTRODUCING CT DCF'S HONOR GUARD



The Department is proud to introduce a new tradition - the DCF Honor Guard - which provides a special Pinning Ceremony at funeral or memorial services to honor current, former, and retired DCF staff.

The ceremony includes a brief reading delivered by five volunteer staff members, known as Honor Guards, who stand together at the front of the service. Each carries a white rose wrapped in a blue ribbon, with blue symbolizing child abuse and neglect prevention, and wears a blue ribbon as well. Attendees are also invited to wear blue in recognition of the individual's life and service. At the conclusion, the Honor Guards present the family with the roses, the reading, and a blue ribbon with a State of Connecticut DCF pin.

The idea for the Honor Guard began in spring 2024 at the Willimantic office after staff connected with the Connecticut Nurses Honor Guard. Seeing there was no similar recognition for child protection workers, Norwich Social Work Supervisor Karina Klemm worked with Hartford Office Director Melanie Mercado to create one

for DCF. The program was officially approved in spring 2025, with Willimantic Program Supervisor Yvette O'Brien joining the effort, alongside support from Chief of Staff Karrol-Ann Brown.

In its first year, the DCF Honor Guard has honored ten employees. The ceremonies have been deeply meaningful for staff and families alike, offering a powerful way to recognize the lasting impact of those who dedicated their careers to protecting children.

One of the most powerful moments comes when DCF staff in attendance are asked to stand. For many families, it's the first time they realize just how many people their loved one impacted often filling half or more of the room. Even in a time of loss, it's a deeply moving show of respect and community.

Highlighting the respect, appreciation, and sense of family within the agency, staff who have attended shared that the ceremonies are “beautiful,” “powerful,” and a “proud moment” for the DCF community.



At DCF, colleagues often become like family. We are there for each other

through some of the most challenging moments. Our own families share in that journey too, offering support through long hours and difficult days, even if they do not always see the full scope of our work.

The DCF Pinning Ceremony brings that connection full circle. Families have shared how meaningful it is to see their loved one’s work recognized and honored by the agency and the state.



Melanie, Yvette, and Karina extend their heartfelt thanks to all staff who have volunteered with the Honor Guard and supported these ceremonies.

If you are interested in volunteering for the DCF Honor Guard or have any questions

please don’t hesitate to reach out to Karina at Karina.klemm@ct.gov.

Jonathan Gottesman - Office of Legal Affairs

Attorney Jonathan Gottesman is the Office of Legal Affairs Employee of the Quarter! As the Area Office Attorney for Waterbury, Attorney Gottesman demonstrates a strong commitment to providing high quality legal support. He is instrumental in maintaining the day-to-day legal operations in the Waterbury Office including supervision of two Paralegals. Attorney Gottesman approaches legal consultations, representation of the Department at Administrative Hearings, and the many other aspects of his role with professionalism. He is a great active listener who takes the time to hear and consider all sides of a situation before responding or providing his legal analysis. He has a positive, "can-do" attitude and whenever he is able while managing his own workload, he lends a helping hand. He doesn't just point out a problem; he takes an active role in achieving a resolution. Attorney Gottesman regularly participates as a co-trainer at the Academy for Workforce Development where he presents on legal topics and court-related issues. His dedication to this work does not go unnoticed, and we're happy for this opportunity to celebrate him in this way. Thank you for all that you do, Jonathan!

Jane MacFarlane - Division of Health Management and Oversight Division

The Division of Health Management and Oversight (HMO) stands tall in nominating Jane MacFarlane as Employee of the Quarter. Jane has been with the Department of Children and Families for 34 years and is the Director of Nursing 2 for the Health Management and Oversight Division at Central Office. She provides unwavering support, guidance and oversight to a Division of 35 staff, maintaining supervision over the Supervising Nursing Consultants



at the Area Offices and Central Office as well as the supervisor of the Health Advocates and the Multidisciplinary Evaluation Coordinator. She demonstrates exceptional expertise and is highly valued and well respected by all the HMO staff and Administrators that she collaborates with. Jane ensures that the Nurses are provided with the professional development needed to maintain the highest of care and knowledge in their case management. She has assisted in the coordination of oversight of Medically Complex youth cases and has organized meetings with Central Office and Regional Staff in the planning of the needs in these challenging cases. She is always dedicated and willing to assist and lead, whether it is to cover Solnit Center while recruiting for Nurses or attending partnerships with leaders in other Divisions to assist with the placement of complicated cases or social admissions. Jane created a nursing process for every aspect of the work being done at Central Office and across the Regions which will leave a legacy that will enable staff to provide the highest standards in maintaining the wellbeing and health of children in care. Jane is an integral part of the Health Management and Oversight Division, and we are privileged to have her as a leader on our team.

Milca Vargas - Central Office Clinical and Community Consultation and Supports Division

Milca Vargas has been nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Milca has been employed with DCF since January 2005 in various roles and transitioned to her current position as Program Supervisor of Performance and Quality for CCCSD in January of 2024. Since her time with the Division, Milca has shared her knowledge and expertise and has been of great support in improving the overall

quality of work within the Division through data evaluation, case reviews, and sharing of her experiences throughout her time with the Department. Milca is always willing to support others within the Division and brainstorm intentional and grounded solutions and is motivated to enhance collaboration both within the Division and with other Division partners. Milca brings to this role not only an analytical perspective, but the knowledge of the Area Office experience. Her passion for the families drives her to continually ask the difficult questions and not settle for basic answers. It forces the conversation to the why to include the story behind the data. Milca is well respected and trusted by her peers. She continually exudes a strong ethical, responsible approach to her work and is continually open to being of assistance. Anthony Gay, Director of Fatherhood Services, shared: "I am pleased to support the nomination of Milca in recognition of her outstanding contributions, dedication, and unwavering support of the Statewide Fatherhood Initiative. Milca has played an instrumental role in maintaining and organizing critical fatherhood data, helping to ensure accuracy and accountability across multiple initiatives. Her attention to detail and commitment to quality have significantly enhanced our ability to track progress and make informed decisions. Beyond data management, Milca has been a valued thought partner in the work of father engagement, consistently offering ideas, feedback, and support to strengthen our efforts to engage fathers more effectively. In addition, Milca has been an integral member of the planning team for the Fatherhood: The Next Level Conference, assisting with the organization and coordination of this important statewide event." Milca's professionalism, reliability, and willingness to go above and beyond make her an invaluable asset to our work and a highly deserving candidate for Employee of the Month.



Ruth Brown – Foster Care Division

It is with great pleasure that Ruth Brown is nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Ruth presently serves as a Social Work Supervisor in the Waterbury Office licensing Kinship homes. She has been working for DCF for nearly 30 years. Ruth has the highest workload of Emergency Home Assessments in Region 5 but is still able to maintain a high standard of excellence in her work. She embodies exceptional leadership, adaptability, and a strong commitment to her team and to the families that she services. Ruth has been instrumental in supporting her unit while providing structure and consistency. She is always willing to help her peers and maintains a positive attitude, collaborative approach and unwavering commitment to the children and families that we serve.

Alyson Harrison – Careline

The Careline Educational Professionals Investigations Unit (EPIU) team would like to recognize Alyson Harrison as the exemplary Employee for the Quarter for her outstanding dedication, professionalism, and commitment to her work as an Investigator in the EPIU. Alyson has been a valued member of the Unit since its inception six years ago. Throughout that time, she has done a wonderful job building and maintaining strong working relationships with our counterparts at the Office of Early Childhood, the Board of Education, and Connecticut Education Association. Her collaborative approach and professionalism have strengthened partnerships that are essential to the success of our work. In the past 10 months, she has taken a great deal of time in getting to understand and learn how to complete work through our new CT Kind system. She has

offered new suggestions and feedback in the process. She is also an active member of a statewide CT Kind Intake committee working through our current challenges and offering solutions. Alyson goes above and beyond her role of an EPIU Social Worker by serving as a liaison with local churches, community groups, and charitable organizations in the Waterbury area to secure donations and other resources for children and families in need. Through her strong community relationships and proactive outreach, she has helped obtain essential items such as clothing, diapers, formula, school supplies, holiday gifts, household necessities, and other supports to make a meaningful difference in the lives of vulnerable children and families. It is not uncommon to walk by Alyson's desk, and she will have piles of supplies caving her in. Alyson will regularly take time out of her day, including using her own personal time on weeknights and weekends, to pick up supplies from the donors and deliver them to where they are needed. Alyson is a great asset to our team at EPIU as well as to DCF. Her dedication in all aspects of her job extends far beyond her daily responsibilities. She embodies the value of our organization and is truly deserving of this recognition.



Brian Smith - Bridgeport Area Office

The Bridgeport Office would like to nominate Brian Smith, Social Work Supervisor, for Employee of the Quarter. Brian has been employed by the Department since 8/6/93. He was an Adolescent Social Worker for many years and has been a Supervisor for well over 20 years now as an Adolescent Services Supervisor. Brian is kind, compassionate, and a true father figure to many of the youth assigned to his staff. He knows each of them well, their strengths, their needs, who they identify as their supports, and what they hope to achieve in their future. Brian gets to know their families, provides support and encouragement for those youth who are able to reunify and works hard to ensure that for those youth remaining in care to accept services Post Majority that they have the tools they need to find success. During Summit Meetings held for transitioning youth, everyone who participates offers heartfelt thanks to Brian for all of the guidance and care he has shown them over the years. With such longevity in Adolescent Services, the youth working with Brian have been assigned to him for many years. He is the supervisory lead for the Youth Advisory Board and takes a keen interest in helping youth find their voice, learn to advocate for themselves, and become responsible adults. Recently, during the Commissioner's meeting with the statewide YAB, a young man came and spoke to the group and shared his experiences of being an adolescent in care in the early 2000's. He was a former Bridgeport youth who under Brian's supervision completed Cosmetology school and has run his own shop for many years now. He credited the support he received from the Department, and Brian and Laura Hudson in particular, with reaching his goals. He has always maintained contact, which is not at all rare for youth Brian and his staff have worked with. If you were to ask Brian how any of his former youth are doing, he will have an answer for you, because they always come back to him. For some of our youth, the young men and women alike, Brian has been one of their few positive male role models growing up. We are very fortunate to have Brian as Supervisor in the Bridgeport Office. He continues to lead his staff and the youth toward the future. If you have a question about adolescent services, don't hesitate to ask him, he's the expert!!

Thomas Knox – Waterbury Area Office

Thomas is the epitome of a team player and a shining example of what it means to be a Social Worker in Child Protective Services. A few months ago, when our workgroup was struggling with extensive transportation needs, Thomas stepped in without hesitation. He became what we often, affectionately, called the “DCF bus company,” ensuring children were picked up and dropped off safely across the state – during and after regular work hours. His willingness to shoulder this responsibility was both selfless and extraordinary. Then came an unimaginable tragedy. In May 2026, one of Thomas’ youths was unexpectedly hospitalized. Over the course of this youth’s eight week battle, Thomas spent every moment he could at the youth’s bedside. He read him Harry Potter books, played his favorite Ed Sheeran songs, watched TV with him, and simply existed with him, ensuring this young man was never alone. Thomas remained with this young man until his peaceful passing on June 23, 2026. His unwavering presence, strength, and compassion during this time exemplify the very core of our mission. This is who Thomas is – someone who always shows up, fiercely and wholeheartedly, for the children and families he serves. Just last week, one of the children on his caseload graduated from Elementary school. Her parents abandoned her over a year ago, and Thomas made sure she had someone in the audience cheering her on. To him, showing up is not an exception; it is his practice. Thomas’ dedication extends beyond the families he serves to his peers as well. His ferocity, faith, and compassion shine through every day in Waterbury. His commitment is unwavering, and his impact is undeniable. For these reasons and many more, we wholeheartedly recommend Thomas for Employee of the Quarter. This recognition is not only deserved; it is a reflection of the work and heart he brings to this Agency every single day.



Vincent Espino – Danbury Area Office

Vincent’s life story exemplifies resilience, determination, and the transformative power of dedication. Vincent’s journey began with unimaginable challenges as an adolescent. He experienced homelessness (navigating life while couch surfing, sleeping in local parks, and on rooftops), all while striving to succeed in school. His hardships helped him develop a profound empathy and insight regarding the challenges of vulnerable youth, a perspective he now brings to his role as an Adolescent Social Worker, YAB Coordinator and NEYC Adult Support. It is widely known that Vincent is a staunch advocate for adolescents to participate with statewide YAB activities and events to improve policy that determines support for adolescents in DCF’s care. Thanks to Vincent’s advocacy, the Department was able to create policies and pass Legislative Statutes such as DCF “Siblings Bill of Rights,” as well as “Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standards” for foster parents. Through his advocacy and work, Vincent has been recognized nationally. He has been recognized via awards and has continued to gain expertise as a Services Post Majority Specialist. Vincent actively mentors’ colleagues, is supportive of his community, and continues to advocate for policies that benefit vulnerable youth. Day to day, Vincent channels his lived experience into compassionate, skillful practice. He excels at building trust with the adolescent



population by identifying strengths and establishing meaningful relationships that foster lifelong connections. Vincent Espino's resilience, professional excellence, and commitment to making a difference make him an exemplary candidate for Employee of the Quarter. His story inspires hope, demonstrates the impact of perseverance, and embodies the very best of the Department's mission. It is with great honor that we recommend Vincent for this employee recognition.

Jennifer Block - Torrington Area Office

The Torrington office would like to take a moment to nominate Jennifer Block for Employee of the Quarter. Jen has worked at DCF for over 20 years and has been a consistent advocate for our children and families. Jen is also a Wellness Lead for the Office and really deserves recognition for the work she puts into that role! Jen is a huge support to our staff. She goes above and beyond to ensure everyone feels supported, valued and refreshed. She does much of this on her own time and with her own resources. Over the Winter months, Jen brings soup in every Monday for staff to enjoy. In Summer months, she brings cut flowers and offers staff to bring in a vase so they can bring some home. Her heartfelt, thoughtful gestures truly mean a lot to our staff, who are often overwhelmed and always on the go. Jen is also a true team player, she is always willing to help with supervisory coverage, she supports her Workers, even helps transport and supervise children if needed and really just does whatever she can to alleviate the everyday stressors for so many of our staff. For these reasons, Jen should be recognized as Employee of the Quarter!

Vincent Falcone - New Haven Area Office

We would like to nominate Social Worker Vincent Falcone for Employee of the Quarter. He has been with DCF for 28 years, 26 of which have been with the Transitional Aged Youth group. Vinny identified this age group as his passion. When asked what has kept him here, Vinny told stories of the strong relationships he built with his youth and young adults. He talked about experiencing the unfortunate loss of some young adults while also seeing the rewards that being present has had in young people's lives. This is what keeps him going. Vinny shows a great passion for the work he does and wants to give the most to help achieve positive outcomes. Vinny connects with relatives to stay in contact with his youth and build their support. They are happy to see him and grateful for his work. Providers have noted his strong relationship and commitment to his youth. Vinny is a historian when it comes to how the Agency has grown and changed over the many years. He's also not afraid to say what's on his mind, making him a strong advocate.

Calian Redmond - Milford Area Office

It is with great honor to nominate Calian Redmond for the Employee of the Quarter recognition award. Calian has been at DCF since 2014 and has a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from Salve Regina. She has always been a proud member of the Milford office. Calian has served as a traditional Social Worker, Permanency, & Investigations.

She's taken advantage of many continued professional development opportunities such as the Zero to Three Court Team conference 2016, Annual Association Adoption Conference in Connecticut, CAFAF where she was honored in 2019, and the International Symposium of Child Abuse and Neglect Conference 2019. Calian has excellent skills to start where the client is at and really tries to engage some families who are most hesitant to partner with our Agency. She has been able to see charm



beyond the disgruntled, tenderness beyond the angry surface and a story beyond the toughest locked doors. In turn, she has been an excellent first impression for families that extends to lasting respectful partnership when cases go beyond Investigations. Calian is extremely organized, which is a very important tool to have working at DCF, she has excellent time management, she is extremely calm and although compassionate and very touched by difficult, sad cases she has never allowed that to interfere with remaining professional and completing her job. Calian is always willing to help a peer and an excellent Unit member. Calian has taken on the role of a mentor for new employees within the Office. This has assisted with developing relationships with those who may have felt they were a fish out of water. Calian has excellent relationships with her local police stations, is a valued member of our region's MDT team and has been a liaison to a local school. These relationships have served very helpful as we together as a community help up lift our most vulnerable families. Calian aspires to continue to grow within the Agency. She takes pride in being an employee at our Agency and sees a continued long career ahead of her. For all these above qualities the Milford Office would like to recognize Calian as a valued member of our office community.

Alexa Gardner - Norwich Area Office

Alexa Gardner is nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Alexa has been with DCF for 4 years, her last two years have been spent in Norwich Intake. Alexa is a solid and dependable Investigator, who does her job with no complaints. Alexa is a go to in our Intake function when other staff need support, or a case needs a place to go. A few months ago, she took a 24 High Risk Newborn (HRNB) even though she was not slotted for it (on one night she was not going to work overtime, which is rare), as it was long weekend and Intake was on skeleton crew. We can always call Alexa when support is needed, she doesn't question why she is being asked, she just says "ok" and gets the job done. She is always willing to take Trainees out and support them in their onboarding process. Alexa is an asset not only to the Agency, but the children and families we work with. Alexa has a strong work ethic, that shows in her work. She produces accurate detailed assessments, while advocating for her families, and ensuring they are connected with appropriate support. Alexa continues to grow in her role as an Investigator and Norwich Intake is thankful to have her!

Brian Mitchell - Middletown Area Office

Brian Mitchell is recognized as Employee of the Quarter for the amazing work he does every day with Foster Care Division and with collaborating with Child Protective Services. After years and years as an Investigator for the Department, Brian Mitchell came to the Foster Care Division ready to jump in and learn something new. Brian has done just that for the year he has been in the Middletown

office. His positive attitude, generous nature and sense of humor have been welcome additions. Brian takes pride in the work he does, the connections he makes with other workers and family resources for children coming into care, always going above and beyond his job description. He's dependable, compassionate, and always goes the extra mile for kids and families. On top of that, he's a true team player—always willing to help with CPS, share ideas, and support anyone who needs it. His steady, positive presence makes our whole Office stronger and we're lucky to have him.



Anne Wakely - Willimantic Area Office

Anne has quickly become an extremely valuable Office Assistant for the Intake Team and is nominated as Employee of the Quarter. She is very positive and friendly. Anne has been a huge support to staff when it comes to processing large

amounts of court work. She works diligently to complete tasks quickly. She never hesitates to help anyone and will drop what she is doing at that moment to complete a task for someone else. Anne has become a mentor to newer staff. She quickly learned the systems, processes, and functions in the Office. Anne has such a kind and supportive disposition. During the brief time she has been here, she has made a tremendous impact and is a very valuable member of the Intake team. Anne's kindness makes her a shining STAR! Thank you, Anne, for all you do, every single day! And.....Anne was just promoted to Secretary 1 from Office Assistant.

Taylor Houghtaling - Hartford Area Office

Taylor is nominated for Employee of the Quarter as she has proven to be a kind, helpful, team player. She is a Social Worker that shows care, consideration, and awareness with her families, and her peers. Her ability to gain trust with families is uncanny. Taylor works hard, pitches in to help wherever she can and most importantly she works really hard to help service her families in a way that really benefits them. Recently, Taylor was assigned a case in which the family from Venezuela were quite hesitant to work with DCF. The mother is an undocumented citizen and only speaks Spanish. This added a layer of more difficulty as an interpreter was necessary for all contact. Taylor demonstrated exceptional dedication, compassion, and professionalism in her work with this mother and her daughter. She recognized immediately the difficulties mother was facing as an undocumented family from Venezuela navigating the complexities of the system during a politically sensitive time. Since January 2026, Taylor has built trust with the family despite their legitimate fears of ICE and deportation, guiding them through Court processes and initiating comprehensive case management to address immediate and long-term needs. Taylor has gone above and beyond to stabilize the family, assisting with health insurance, school and daycare enrollment, transportation, and housing, all while navigating barriers unique to undocumented families. Taylor's approach reflects not only thoroughness but also genuine empathy and cultural sensitivity. She ensured that court documents were translated into Spanish, transported the mother to essential appointments, and collaborated closely with mental health providers to support her engagement in therapy and psychiatric care despite financial and immigration-related obstacles. Taylor carefully navigated complex barriers related to childcare, employment schedules, and financial limitations, always prioritizing the family's safety and stability. Her impact extends beyond logistics—Taylor has thoughtfully navigated childcare challenges, collaborated with extended family, foster parents, and community resources, and maintained consistent follow-up to ensure the child's safety, stability, and emotional well-being. Her culturally informed, trauma-sensitive advocacy empowered the family to engage in services confidently despite fear of deportation. Taylor exemplifies the highest qualities of a Social Worker: dedication, compassion, resilience, and advocacy for vulnerable families. Her unwavering commitment to this family, and all the families she serves, despite facing systemic and political barriers, makes her highly deserving of Social Worker of the Quarter.



Celeste Lewis - Manchester Area Office

Celeste Lewis comes through every day for our Office in multiple ways and is being nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Celeste often will try to arrange help for Workers on the fly regularly, reach out to Supervisors to assist where possible (even at a last-minute request). Celeste would never leave any of us hanging at the last minute to scramble, and she is always right there scrambling with us all and offering her help the best she can. This says so much about who she is and the type

of person she is. This job is chaotic, and Celeste remains a constant help, and has been for all the years we have worked with her. Celeste's ability to always think outside the box and be creative to suffice Office needs is regularly appreciated. Knowing we have her as a support in this Office is immeasurable. Celeste will find any answer anyone needs, if she doesn't know it- she will figure out where to send you! Celeste is more than a wealth of knowledge at the Manchester Office and is appreciated every day. Celeste also has gone above and beyond her job title on many occasions to be a fantastic team player, and her dedication to this Office is above and beyond the title of Employee of the Quarter.

Eileen Barnes - New Britain Area Office

Eileen Barnes, Intake Social Work Supervisor in the New Britain Office, is nominated for Employee of the Quarter. She has been with the agency for about 17 years and on a daily basis shows her commitment to working with the families we serve and providing support for her team and peers. Each member of her team took a moment to express their appreciation for her. They shared the following: "For the last few months, Intake has been overwhelmed with the volume of reports



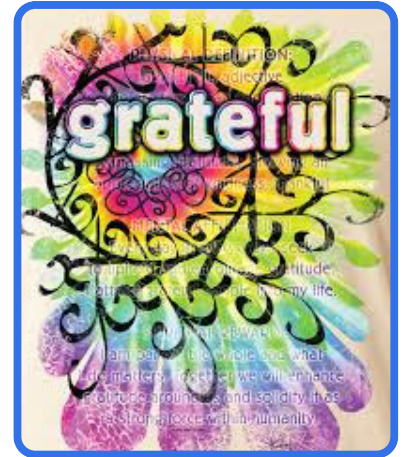
coming in. Throughout this time, Eileen manages five workers with different personalities, which can be challenging on their own. Despite this, Eileen continues to show up for her team every single day. - Janelle Williams and Latoya Holt. "I'd like to recognize my Supervisor for her amazing support, hard work and dedication to our unit. She consistently goes above and beyond, always helping with cases and making sure we're supported. Her positive attitude and understanding nature make a big difference and it's truly appreciated." - Brittany Fleeting. "Eileen has been an extreme help for me, she remains an open ear, always positive, puts in ample number of hours despite the heavy workload which has been an amazing help. I am very happy to have her as a Supervisor, and she doesn't get enough credit. Thank you for supporting me and everything you do, you are much appreciated." - Monalisa Levy. "Eileen is the Supervisor that is not only supportive and understanding but goes the extra mile. In this difficult field, having a safe space to speak is crucial. No matter the issue, Eileen is collaborating with us and not against. I couldn't be more thankful for having her as my Supervisor. Thank you for all the late nights to ensure our cases are in." - Monica Sanchez.

Mikayla Mejias - Meriden Area Office

The Meriden Office would like to recommend Mikayla Mejias for the Employee of the Quarter for her outstanding performance and dedication since joining our unit as a Trainee. In a remarkably short time, Mikayla has demonstrated professionalism, resilience, and a strong commitment to the children and families we serve. Since becoming part of the team, she has successfully completed an adoption—an accomplishment that reflects both her attention to detail and her compassionate approach to casework. In addition, Mikayla was assigned a particularly challenging case that had been transferred from another worker. Despite the complexity and urgency, she quickly familiarized herself with the case. Impressively, the trial for the TPR was held just one month after she assumed responsibility for the case. Mikayla testified in court with confidence and clarity, demonstrating a strong command of the case details despite the limited preparation time. Recently, the judge granted the TPR, ensuring that the child will now have the opportunity for a safe and permanent forever home. This outcome is a direct reflection of Mikayla's hard work, determination, and unwavering focus on achieving the best possible outcome for the child. We are incredibly proud to have Mikayla as part of the Meriden team. Her dedication, work ethic, and ability to rise to challenging situations make her highly deserving of this recognition.

Kamara Amaker - Transitional Supports and Success

It is our pleasure to recommend Kamara Amaker for Employee of the Quarter. Kamara has dedicated approximately 20 years of service to the DCF, consistently demonstrating professionalism, commitment, and compassion in her role as a Department Of Corrections (DOC) Liaison. Kamara has worked in numerous DOC facilities, building strong relationships and earning the respect of both colleagues and community partners. Her extensive experience and knowledge have made her an invaluable resource to our team and the populations we serve. Kamara is a strong advocate for incarcerated fathers, working tirelessly to support programs and services that strengthen family connections and promote positive outcomes. She is also instrumental in bringing essential services into Correctional facilities, particularly for our unsentenced population, ensuring that individuals have access to resources that support rehabilitation and successful reintegration. In addition to her advocacy and service coordination efforts, Kamara is always a team player. She willingly assists colleagues, shares her expertise, and approaches every challenge with a positive attitude and collaborative spirit. Her dedication to the Agency's mission and her unwavering commitment to serving others make her highly deserving of this recognition. For her exceptional service, leadership, and continued dedication over the past two decades, we wholeheartedly recommend Kamara Amaker for Employee of the Quarter.



Lisette "Lisa" Malave PRTF (South).

Lisa is a great employee who is a collaborative team member, an advocate for every youth and is always looking to improve every youth's experience while they are here at the Solnit South Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF). This is why she is nominated as Employee of the Quarter. Lisa's ability to meet the youth in our care where they are at is a skill she demonstrates time and time again. Lisa is not only the cornerstone to the Quinnipiac team, but she is also an asset to the entire PRTF program.

Kewanda Lanham – PRTF (North)

We would like to nominate Kewanda Lanham, Nurse Supervisor, for Employee of the Quarter. Since joining Solnit North nearly a year ago, Kewanda has consistently demonstrated strong supervisory knowledge, genuine compassion for the youth we serve, and a commitment to supporting the professional development of our Nursing staff. She is an excellent team player, communicates effectively, and readily steps into leadership when needed. Kewanda collaborates seamlessly with the other Supervisors at Solnit North and has often been the sole Nurse Supervisor on the grounds, covering all three shifts. She manages these responsibilities with confidence, dedication, and grace. It has been a pleasure having Kewanda as part of the Solnit team. Her hard work, commitment, and contributions do not go unnoticed. Thank you, Kewanda, for all that you do.

Luziana "Ana" Laze Fiscal

Ana Laze currently serves as an Accountant in the Budget Unit and is being nominated for Employee of the Quarter. Ana started her career at DCF in Grants and Accounting in January 2025. From her first day at DCF, Ana was eager to assist and a rapid learner. She mastered Grants, Accounting, Reconciliations and the School Nutrition program in record time. Ana's background in the private sector provided her with a wealth of knowledge that she has graciously shared with her colleagues here at DCF.

Sean Tenney - Academy for Workforce Development

It is with great honor that we nominate Sean Tenney for Employee of the Quarter. He is a tremendous asset to the Academy. As the Workforce Development Manager, Sean is responsible for all elements related to the agency's Learning Management System. On any given day, he can be found providing technical support to staff from Central office, the Area Offices and the Facilities. Thank you, Sean, for all you do!

Willis Powell - Norwalk Area Office

It is a true privilege to recognize social worker Willis Powell of the Norwalk Office for Employee of the Quarter.

For 21 years, Willis has been a constant for the children and families he serves, his coworkers, and our internal and external partners. His kindness, steady presence, and unwavering commitment make a difference every day. If

I had to describe Willis in one word, it would be constant. That one word captures who Willis is. He consistently shows up, builds trusting relationships, advocates for children, and supports those around him. Whether working with youth, assisting a coworker during a crisis, or partnering with others to meet a child's needs, Willis brings the same calm, dependable presence every day. That consistency is one of the reasons he has earned the trust and respect of both the youth we serve and those who work alongside him.



Over the past several months, Willis has been a constant for a 17-year-old youth who has been unable to secure a permanent placement and has experienced repeated feelings of rejection. Through each disappointment and challenge, Willis has remained present. He has continued to advocate for this young man, encourage him, listen to him, and provide the stability and support he needed during an incredibly difficult time. When it was time for the youth to be transported to an out-of-state facility, there were understandable concerns about how the transition would go. Willis never wavered. He simply said, "He'll be fine with me." That confidence was not because the situation was easy it came from the relationship and trust he had built with this young man. It was a reminder that while we may view situations from the outside, the social workers who consistently show up for our children often have a perspective that comes from truly knowing them. Willis had earned that young man's trust, and it showed.

Willis also shows up for his coworkers. When there is a crisis or someone needs additional support, he is one of the first people willing to step in and help. He never hesitates to help or be another set of hands when needed. He is calm under pressure, dependable, and someone others know they can count on. He does not seek recognition or attention he simply sees what needs to be done and does it.

What I appreciate most about Willis is that he is the same person every day. Even during challenging moments, he remains respectful, positive, and grounded. His calm spirit has a way of putting others at ease, and his consistency creates a sense of trust for both the youth we serve and the staff who work alongside him.

There is a gospel song that says, "May the work I've done speak for me." Every time I hear those words, I think of Willis. He does not seek recognition or praise. He simply does the work with compassion, integrity, and consistency. The relationships he has built, the youth he has never given up on, and the respect he has earned from his coworkers all reflect the kind of person and social worker he is. After 21 years of service, his work truly does speak for him, and it speaks volumes.

Willis Powell is truly deserving of this recognition, and I am honored to recommend him for Employee of the Quarter.



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