

DECEMBER 2019

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



Home for the Holidays: Celebrating Reunification and Children Remaining Safely at Home

CROSSING THE OCEAN TO REUNIFY ERIC

How far do you go for a nine-year-old boy who needs the father he never met?

For three professionals at the Department of Children and Families' Manchester office, the answer is at least 3,600 miles. That's the distance between Connecticut and the European country that the father now calls home.

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[STORY CONTINUES HERE](#)



The "Man of the Hour" at the Torrington FASU Christmas Party

Returning Home – The Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time Program

The young mother from Hamden knew all about being in foster care. She grew up in foster care herself until she was adopted. As an adult, she struggled with unaddressed mental health issues and traumatic experiences in her own home. These factors resulted in her son requiring protection, and placement into foster care, eventually finding permanency with his maternal grandmother.

Tragically, the grandmother died when the boy was eight, leaving him without a legal guardian and resulting in his placement back into state custody. At the time of the death, this young boy's mother had a four-month old and a two-year-old. She was not capable of caring for another child. It was highly questionable as to whether or not she could ever reunify with her older son.

[STORY CONTINUES HERE](#)

Youth at the Capitol Day – December 11, 2019



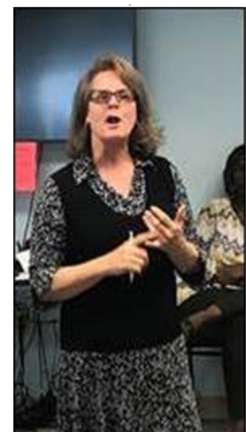
Emily Byrne, Executive Director of CT Voices for Children, speaking at Youth at the Capitol Day. Thank you for supporting our youth!



Representative Toni Walker speaking at the Youth at the Capitol Day supporting DCF youth!



Commissioner Dorantes providing opening remarks at the annual Youth at the Capitol Day event



Thank You Representative Kathleen Kennedy for attending the Milford Office listening tour

“Commissioner Dorantes attending the 4th Women’s Circle Holiday Celebration at the St. Joseph’s Parenting Center in Stamford.”



As luck would have it, a cancelled meeting with Department of Children and Families Commissioner Dorantes due to snow turned into an opportunity for her to visit Saint Joseph Parenting Center (SJPC) two days later. Excited to discuss ways SJPC strengthens families throughout Fairfield County, Rhonda Neal, Executive Director invited Commissioner Dorantes to see for herself. It just so happened that SJPC’s Women Circle Support Group was celebrating its 4th graduation class. SJPC Women’s Circle Support Group aims to bring women together in an intimate setting

to provide guidance and support in order to empower women. This offering allows our mothers to safely express their emotions, connect with other women on a deeper level, and build their support network. Providing onsite childcare, enables more mothers to participate in the program.

Yuldelka Cleto, a mom shared with Commissioner Dorantes that she was grateful for the classes and staff who listened to her challenges, helped create a path for success, and treated her with respect. She went on to explain how community learning helped her to realize that she was not alone and that she was part of a support group that was willing to share their struggles and successes. As the festivities continued, Commissioner Dorantes chatted with other women before wishing them a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. We share a common vision that all children live in a world free from abuse and neglect. Working together we are committed to finding ways to strengthening families throughout the state of CT.



Commissioner Dorantes with our community partners; Susan Reilly from Casey, Miranda Lynch from Chapin Hall and David Collins from The Children’s Village.

Community Care, with love from the Girls of Solnit South

The Girls of the Solnit South PRTF program decided to create a special community-based opportunity to address the food needs of local families for this upcoming holiday season.

These young ladies made decorative posters and donation boxes to place around campus seeking to collect numerous non-perishables for the local food banks and shelters. Some of the items they have collected so far have been canned goods, condiments, soups, and many other helpful items



[STORY CONTINUES HERE](#)

Supportive Housing for Families: Changing Lives for Children and Parents

“Janice” (not her real name to protect her privacy) knows her life could have turned out very differently. The fathers of her two oldest children died years ago—one from a heroin overdose and the other from alcohol poisoning. The children, now ages 12 and 21, are living with Janice’s parents in Litchfield County. This is where Janice left them after being overwhelmed by her substance abuse.

“When you do crack, you can’t think right,” she said. “When you are in the midst of addiction, you can’t work, and you can’t function.”

[STORY CONTINUES HERE](#)



Commissioner Dorantes and CAFAF Liaison Jennifer Bellamy



DCF partnering with Children’s Community Programs at the Weekend for a Lifetime Closing Ceremony!



Thank You to our Partners from Casey for your continued insights and support! Pictured are Susan Reilly, Zeinab Chanine, Commissioner Dorantes & Dr. David Sanders.



Lynn Boyle, from Walmart Corporation, feels deeply connected to the child welfare system. Now, an adult with grown children of her own, Lynn remembers her own personal journey through foster care and how difficult that time was in her young life. Together with the support of her employer, the Walmart Corporation and her colleagues, Lynn reached out to Jacqueline Ford to donate duffel bags, filled with toiletries, blankets and stuffed animals for kids transitioning into foster care. There was such a wonderful response from our regional offices that Lynn is continuing her work with the department. Lynn, pictured here, donated 90 stuffed animals for Adoption Day, celebrated on Friday, November 22. Each child adopted was given a stuffed animal in celebration of their own adoption. We are deeply grateful for the support from the Walmart Corporation, and our warrior, Lynn, who bravely shared her personal story with us on "Doors to Hope and Healing".



Doors to Hope and Healing - E036 - Holi...

Watch Lynn's Interview on the Doors To Hope and healing Show at the link above



"Congratulations" to the Connecticut Alliance for Foster and Adoptive Families for being the first agency to have staff receive the Child Welfare League of America 100th Anniversary Promoting Leaders for the Future Award. The staff who are the award recipients are as follows:

- Support: Joseph Montalvo
- Training: Jinnel D'Hereaux
- Advocacy: Debra Candelora
- Recruitment: Raymond Ortiz
- Retention: Jennifer Rivera



STORY CONTINUES HERE



DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS ANNUAL HOLIDAY GIFTING TRADITION

This year, as in years past, there has been a holiday tradition where the Department of Correction (DOC) staff at the different institutions, DOC Central Office, DOC Training Academy and Central Transportation adopt a DCF Area Office and buy gifts for the kids. Area Office staff provides DOC tags with the child's first name, age, wish list items and assigned Social Worker. DOC staff will then take a tag and purchase the gifts for the youth. When the gifts are collected, DOC loads them in a box truck and delivers them to the area offices.

Here is the DOC facilities and Area Office list for this year:

- Hartford Correctional Center and New Britain Area Office
- Garner and Danbury Area Office
- DOC Central Office and Hartford Area Office
- Robinson Correctional Institute and Manchester Area Office
- DOC Training Academy and Meriden Area Office
- Osborn Correctional institute and Middletown Area Office
- Bridgeport Correctional Center and Norwalk Area Office
- York Correctional Institute, Brooklyn Correctional Institute, Corrigan Correctional Institute and Norwich Area Office
- Manson Youth Institute and Waterbury Area Office
- Corrigan Correctional Institute and Willimantic Area Office
- Central Transportation Unit and Bridgeport Area Office
- Northern Correctional institute and Milford Area Office

We are very grateful for this holiday tradition and it's a nice way for the two agencies to support our DCF youth.



Thank You Carters in Westbrook for collecting donated clothes for our families!!!



Thank You Goodwin College

"For partnering with Touchstone in Litchfield to assist in preparing our youth for the future."



Melissa Szczycinski
"Non-Residential staff of the year"

"Our Award Winning Staff"

"Congratulations!" to the winners of the Solnit North Staff of the Year Awards



Jason Vega
"Residential staff of the year"

CROSSING THE OCEAN TO REUNIFY ERIC

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Tanya Cruz, a Department social worker for 4 years, Becky Fournier, her supervisor with 22 years of experience, and Eddie Salinas, a program supervisor who started with the agency in 2007, had a difficult case. There was nothing about the initial report in 2017 to indicate just how complicated it would be.

A school in East Hartford reported to the Department that Eric (not his real name) frequently missed school and was threatening teachers, throwing objects and engaging in other very difficult behavior when he did attend. The nine-year-old boy lived with his mother and other relatives. But mother would not answer when the Department came to the door to talk with her about the concerns. And she withdrew Eric from school – and from outside eyes.

Also worrisome to the Department team of Ms. Cruz, Ms. Fournier and Mr. Salinas, the school was telling the Department that “something wasn't right,” – although specifics were lacking other than Eric's concerning behavior at school.

Faced with a choice of either closing the case or going to court – the Department went to juvenile court and filed petitions. The court responded by ordering the mother to allow the Department into the home with a court-appointed attorney present. Both the Department and the judge asked mother who the father was, and mother said she did not know.

The judge ordered an evaluation, which resulted in a number of recommendations, including counseling for mother and Eric, an in-home clinical service for the family, and enrolling Eric in an education program. Mother, however, refused to abide by the court orders.

Time stretched on. For a year, the Department continued to visit twice a month with the lawyer present.

Meanwhile, the judge's concern was growing as well. Mother would not provide the Department her phone number, would not say where she worked, and continued to refuse to identify father. Mr. Salinas remembered that the judge said this was one of the most concerning cases she had ever seen.

In response to continued concerns, the judge took the unusual measure to commit Eric to the care of the Department from the bench during a routine hearing and he went to live with relatives.

Meanwhile Tanya Cruz, the social worker, refused to give up on finding father. This was no accident as she plays an important role in the Manchester office's efforts to improve its work with fathers. For a number of years now, the Department has focused on improving how it engages with fathers through a multi-pronged effort that includes staff training, community awareness, and specialized services. Living up to the ideal of fatherhood engagement, however, often requires persistence and can be difficult.

“I was asking questions of the aunt at every visit,” Ms. Cruz said, but only received vague responses.

A number of months later, she hit pay dirt. Ms. Cruz turned the case upside down by searching a specialized database that connected the name of a man with Eric's mother at around the time of Eric's birth.

“I was so excited that I had found a guy,” Ms. Cruz said, “because up until then, we had nothing.” That led Ms. Cruz to conduct another data base search, known as Lexus Nexus, and she came upon a maternal aunt. When Ms. Cruz called the aunt, “She told me I would have trouble locating him” because he was in Europe!

Ms. Cruz would not let trouble interfere with securing a permanent home for Eric – especially now that she may have located his father. She called him internationally and had a two-hour conversation with Colin (also not his real name) and his wife. During that conversation, Ms. Cruz recalls father saying, “I always thought I had a son.”

Eric's court-appointed attorney, Stein Helmrich, said Ms. Cruz tried many ways to find the father until finally coming upon him through the data base. “That was one of the more amazing things I have seen,” Attorney Helmrich said, adding that the name Ms. Cruz found allowed him to contact the father on Facebook at about the same time that she was speaking with him on the phone.

After connecting with father, the first task was to establish paternity through DNA testing. That testing confirmed paternity and provided the breakthrough the team sought. “Tanya came into the office and said there was hope,” Mr. Salinas recalls. “Those results were the moment when we knew what should happen. We knew there was the chance to obtain the permanency Eric deserved.”

The establishment of paternity set off a series of events, some required by the legal process and some at the insistence of lawyers and the court. For example, father had to be added to the court filings, which raised concerns for Eric's safety. He needed to be moved to a different foster home.

Ms. Cruz wanted Eric to maintain the connections he made with friends, schoolmates, his clinician and the school in the town where he used to live. So, she drove him from the new foster home, in a completely different town, back and forth daily to his original school to ensure continuity. Her work also encompassed driving him to day camp once summer vacation began, and to counseling.

"We want these children to feel connected," Ms. Fournier said, "to feel some continued familiarity."

Perhaps most sensitive of all was the need to "introduce" Eric to even the concept – let alone the reality -- of having a father.

"Eric never met this man," Ms. Fournier noted. "We didn't know what was in Eric's mind about this man" that mother may have established along the way.

"We had to do this in a therapeutic way," she added.

So while the identification of father was a huge breakthrough – a tremendous amount of intensive, painstaking work remained.

"It wasn't as easy as sending a child to Florida," Mr. Salinas said. "We would be sending him to another country. We were meeting every day – multiple times a day – to plan this case. We had an agenda, and then the next day (something would happen and) we had to change it.

"We wanted the best for Eric, but it was so hard," Mr. Salinas added.

Ms. Cruz talked to father and his wife on a daily basis. Much of the conversation was about how they best could inform Evan of the monumental news that his dad was found and wanted to meet and get to know him.

Ms. Cruz had on numerous occasions asked Eric about having a father, but Eric did not have much to share on that subject.

One day, Ms. Cruz had just taken Eric to a therapy appointment, and the two were sitting in a state car at a gas station. It was that moment; Eric was told about his father.

"Eric, I have something to tell you . . . I actually found your dad," Ms. Cruz recalled. "He was shocked. He said, 'You did?'"

Ms. Cruz had brought with her a map that showed where Eric's dad was in relation to Connecticut. And she also had a video on her phone from his dad, which she played for Eric.

"Hi Eric, my name is Colin, and I am your father," he says into the camera with a warm and meaningful smile. "I just want to let you know that I am very excited to meet you, and I hope you are excited to meet me. I know you like Star Wars -- so do I. Maybe if you come down here, we can watch the Star Wars flick together and talk about it. I can't wait. I am excited to meet you."

In the hours of phone calls, Ms. Cruz shared with dad that Eric was a big Star Wars fan. Dad smartly incorporated that inside information in his very first message to his son.

"He was so happy," Ms. Cruz said of how Eric responded to the video. "He was shocked, but he was so happy. I told him his dad is Puerto Rican and that he is half Puerto Rican."

The next day, Eric made this video to send to his dad:

"Hi Dad. I am excited to see you too," says Eric, scratching his leg and wearing a colorful tee shirt featuring some funny/scary monster on the front. "I've never seen you before, and I am excited to do some fun stuff with you. I've heard some information that you have a reptile shop or something like that. And I'm very excited to see it, and maybe I could see you and do so some pretty cool stuff with you."

It is a video exchange that would melt any heart. And, yes, dad does own a reptile shop, said Ms. Cruz.

Ms. Cruz facilitated daily phone calls for the next two weeks, and shortly after the video exchange, in late June 2019, father flew to Connecticut to meet his son.

"It was amazing." Ms. Cruz recalled of the first meeting, which occurred in the Middletown office of Eric's therapist. "They first saw each other in the waiting room. They hugged and dad brought him a gift. Dad teared up and was very nurturing. I don't think Eric ever experienced that before."

There was also a sense of relief. Understandably, both dad and Eric were nervous - so when the pair felt so comfortable together, it was like they "took a breath of fresh air," Ms. Cruz said.

Mr. Salinas said they wanted to make the following visits between father and son as normal as possible. Dad was staying in Connecticut with his sister, brother-in-law and their children. So that home became the site for Eric to visit dad where he also met and played with the cousins he never knew he had. "We became creative and gave them the opportunity to get to know each other without the Department being there. We needed to normalize it," Mr. Salinas said.

While the team now clearly saw the right course, they still had to ensure that father could provide a safe and loving home. The Department's interstate compact unit – which facilitates placements to other states – suggested that the team consider using a private

agency to conduct the home assessment in the father's country. But when the organization said it would take six to 12 months to get it done, the team decided another approach was required given the need to unite Eric and father without undue delays. "When we told the judge, it would take 12 months, we knew we had to send Eddie." Ms. Fournier said of her boss Mr. Salinas.

Mr. Salinas crossed the Atlantic to assess the home for three days where he witnessed a cohesive and loving family that included three of their own boys and that was well suited for Eric. When Ms. Cruz explained to Eric earlier that he had brothers, he seemed to not even understand the concept. That soon would change.

The team went before the judge again in July so Mr. Salinas could report his home assessment to the court. The judge then ordered the Department to transition Eric to live with father and his family.

While the Atlantic Ocean -- as measured in miles -- presented the largest crossing that would be required to unite Eric with his dad, there were many other complicated and time consuming challenges that would need to be met. Most involved coaxing slow-moving bureaucracies to move faster in the interest of allowing Eric and his father to be together without a long wait. Eric would need a passport. Eric would need a new birth certificate with the name of his father. Eric's education records had to be secured. And all the documentation required a special level of legal notarization to gain the recognition of the international authorities.

"It took a lot of time for Tanya," Mr. Salinas said of the social worker who also had to balance the demands of all her other 15 or so cases. "But she made it happen. She got it all done."

Attorney Helmrich said it was an impressive example of the Department acting on the principle of keeping families together to avoid a prolonged and difficult stint in foster care. "So much was done in a very short time to make sure he didn't have to be bounced around in a number of foster homes," he said. "Then to get father here and introduce him (to Eric) and make sure it was okay was another example of going above and beyond."

After Eric asked Attorney Helmrich if he would come with him and Ms. Cruz to his new home, the three of them embarked on the trip to a new country for the 9-year-old boy. Understandably, Eric was nervous and neither he nor Ms. Cruz slept.

Ms. Cruz and Attorney Helmrich spent three days with Eric in Europe. On the last day before the planned departure, Ms. Cruz asked Eric if he wanted to come back to Connecticut. "No, I want to stay, and I feel safe here," Eric told Ms. Cruz. "I never saw him so happy as the day we left," she remembers.

Ms. Cruz maintains contact with the family through phone calls. She said Eric has shown off some of his newly learned language skills - - as different dialects are spoken in his country. The family is responding appropriately to some of the expected behavior issues that Eric brought along with him from Connecticut, Ms. Cruz said. "He is doing good and learning the language," she said. "He said school is good and he's going to therapy." She notes that Eric calls his step-mother "Mom."

This work with Eric brought the three team members to a new relationship as professionals.

"Some cases connect with you on a different level, and this is one of those cases where we all said this needs to happen, and we worked together toward a goal that we put in place," Mr. Salinas said.

"He is with the person he needs to be with," Mr. Salinas added.

"Eric is in a good place," Ms. Cruz said. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity -- it was an amazing experience. I'm just happy for Eric. He had a very sad life and taking him out of that environment changed his life. He was so happy to be with his dad. I hadn't seen him like that in three years."

The team was certain that the monumental effort was well worth it.

"Look at all the resources, all the time that this took," Ms. Fournier said. "Now he is with blood, and this is his forever home.

"We do a lot of good work here at the Department," she continued. "But it does not get a lot of credit. This is a success story with all the work that went into it. You just figure out what needs to happen, and you just get it done.

"This little boy didn't know his dad existed, and now he's with him."

With him for the holidays!

Returning Home – The Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time Program

The young mother from Hamden knew all about being in foster care. She grew up in foster care herself until she was adopted. As an adult, she struggled with unaddressed mental health issues and traumatic experiences in her own home. These factors resulted in her son requiring protection, and placement into foster care, eventually finding permanency with his maternal grandmother.

Tragically, the grandmother died when the boy was eight, leaving him without a legal guardian and resulting in his placement back into state custody. At the time of the death, this young boy's mother had a four-month old and a two-year-old. She was not capable of caring for another child. It was highly questionable as to whether or not she could ever reunify with her older son. What would it take for the siblings to live together? Could reunification occur? How would this happen? This is where the collaboration between the state and community partners came into play.

The Department of Children and Families had arranged for mother to visit with the boy at the 'r kids Family Center in New Haven through a program known as "Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time." Randi Rubin Rodriguez, the executive director and co-founder of 'r kids Family Center, said the adoptive grandmother's death hit mother hard. "She was dealing with her own loss and grief." The plan for the boy was complicated. However, the therapeutic family visitation – which unfolds over 12 weeks and is called "Therapeutic Family Time" -- opened up a different perspective of mother and her capabilities.

"The Department has become very creative in finding ways to achieve permanency," said 'r kids program director Enna Garcia. "The mom did very well in the visits." That gave the Department the opportunity to reconsider the permanency plan for the 8-year-old as they witnessed that mother actually could care for her son with some support and help provided by the program.

That led to a formal assessment and reunification services that culminated with the boy being brought back home to mother just last month – just in time for the holidays!

"Mother needed to feel that people were really rooting for her, and she needed to know who her supports were and realize that she didn't have to do it all on her own," Ms. Rodriguez said. Melanie Vitelli, a senior social work case manager who worked most closely with mother, said the careful assessment proved that mother was ready. The assessment includes interviews with professionals and natural supports like friends and family, a home assessment, a budget plan, and a gradually-increasing level of visitation.

"She was very engaged in the boy's school life and his therapy," Ms. Vitelli said. "Everything went very smoothly." And Ms. Vitelli was a real support as well -- even responding on a weekend to a medical emergency involving the baby that required someone step in with the older boy to transport and secure care for him when mother was with the baby at the hospital.

"Melanie became a fixture for this family," said Ms. Rodriguez. This family is just one of many who have benefitted from the Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time program, which started statewide in early 2015 and has the capacity to serve as many as 914 families annually.

The focus of the program is children who have been placed into state care and for whom the Department's plan is to return them home. But it also serves children with a variety of activities including supporting visitation and improving parenting in a variety of different circumstances. The service can be started immediately upon removal or subsequently at any time after a child is in foster care.

Jenny Vesco, a program supervisor with the Department who oversees the program, said the program consists of three service types – the reunification readiness assessment, reunification services, and "therapeutic family time," which uses coaching to improve parenting skills. (Therapeutic family time incorporates the "Visit Coaching" model, which represents a promising practice in child welfare.) Families may receive one or more of the services depending on their needs. The permanency goals of the children referred to the reunification readiness assessment as well as the reunification services must be reunification. The therapeutic family time service, which lasts up to 12 weeks, is made available for families regardless of whether the plan is reunification or not. All the families receive the "therapeutic family time" as it is embedded as part of each service type.

Department social workers refer a family for the reunification readiness assessment, which takes 30 days and helps to determine if reunification is safely possible. The assessment also recommends what the parent may need to work on in order to have their child reunified. If the assessment recommends reunification, then the families can be referred to the reunification service that includes a case manager whose role it is to connect the family to a variety of community-based assistance to meet identified needs. These services can include counseling, filling basic needs such as housing and food, and anything else the family may need to prepare them to re-integrate the child back in the home. Those resources can be a community organization to help with basic needs or connections to other informal supports that can readily help a parent in times of need, Ms. Vesco said

Visit Coaching focuses the parent on meeting the needs of the child, Ms. Vesco said, and the coach and the parent will talk about strategies and techniques for meeting those needs prior to the visit. The coach then observes how well the parent implements the strategies and may help redirect the parent during the visit. When the visit is done, the coach and the parent will talk about what worked well and what can be improved. "It's about teaching parents to be focused on responding to their child's needs during visitation," Ms. Vesco said.

The reunification service spans a total of four to six months for families whose plan is reunification. Ms. Vesco said the actual reunification – placing the child back with the parent -- typically occurs two or three months after beginning the program. The services can continue for an additional two month period as needed. Overall, a family can receive a total of six months of services under the program.

Ms. Vesco says it is vital to connect the family to community services that will continue to help the family after the program ends. “This way the family has a good foundation when the provider steps out because there are always a variety of challenges that evolve along with the development of the child,” Ms. Vesco said.. “The provider is trying to find those kinds of natural connections and supports within the community so the child doesn’t come back into care when the provider steps out.”

Supportive Housing for Families: Changing Lives for Children and Parents

“Janice” (not her real name to protect her privacy) knows her life could have turned out very differently. The fathers of her two oldest children died years ago—one from a heroin overdose and the other from alcohol poisoning. The children, now ages 12 and 21, are living with Janice’s parents in Litchfield County. This is where Janice left them after being overwhelmed by her substance abuse.

“When you do crack, you can’t think right,” she said. “When you are in the midst of addiction, you can’t work, and you can’t function.”

Years later, she gave birth to her third child. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) eventually received allegations that Janice was using substances while her daughter was present. The cycle of neglect was now continuing with another child. Janice tested positive for illegal drugs. This factor, combined with her long history of substance use, the loss of her other two children and Janice’s unwillingness to seek help, resulted in her daughter being assessed as unsafe and immediate interventions were necessary. The Department gave Janice a choice: “enter a substance use treatment program or your daughter will be removed.”

“A change had to come,” Janice said. Now the urgent hunt was on for a treatment program that would let her keep her daughter with her while she worked towards her recovery.

Janice eventually arrived at the APT Foundation, a residential substance use treatment program in New Haven. “They admitted me that night,” Janice said. During the day, while Janice was participating in the program, her daughter went to daycare. “For the first 60 days, I got a chance to clear my head and get to know my child.”

Janice remained in the New Haven program for 10 months. Then came the difficult transition to the “real world.” The APT Foundation continued to provide clinical support to Janice after she left the residential program.

Now she needed a place to live.

Janice’s DCF social worker reached out to the Supportive Housing for Families (SHF) program. SHF is one of many programs at The Connection, a Middletown-based non-profit agency. SHF is a DCF-funded family reunification and preservation program that provides intensive home-based case management, housing assistance, vocational services, temporary housing subsidy and other needed resources for families at risk of having their children placed in foster care due to unstable housing. Case Managers work with each family to develop individualized service plans including connecting families to substance use and mental health treatment, child day care and parenting support services.

Debra Struzinski, one of the program’s directors, said, “The program uses motivational interviewing and family teaming to engage and empower families. Home-based intensive case management and housing as an intervention help families stabilize and support change.”

In 2012, the Department of Children and Families was one of five jurisdictions awarded a competitive five-year, \$5 million dollar grant from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. Building on the strong history of SHF’s demonstrated evidence of favorable outcomes since 1998, when SHF was first implemented, this project allowed SHF to conduct a randomized control trial. The study compared child-welfare involved families who received services in the SHF program to “business as usual” with DCF. Strikingly, over a two-year period of follow-up, 91% of the children in the SHF program remained with their families compared to only 60% of the children with DCF “business as usual.” Of the children in foster care, 30% in the SHF program were reunified versus only 9% of the children with DCF “business as usual.”

Janice started her new life when she moved into an apartment secured for her by Supportive Housing for Families (SHF). She received the stable housing she needed while continuing with her substance use and behavioral health counseling.

Janice said that while the residential program was essential, as it gave her the time to make progress in her recovery, the continuation of treatment services was equally important for sustaining her success. “I encourage people to go to aftercare,” she said. “Stress will happen. But what I learned is that you can’t use drugs as a coping skill.”

Commissioner’s Perspective

“Housing is one of the stark realities that can challenge our families to the degree that they can’t stay together unless we help,” Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes said. “So if we can provide a stable place for families to live, this will be one of the most important ways to fulfill our mission of empowering families to raise resilient children who thrive.”

Shortly after moving into her apartment, Janice was assigned a new DCF social worker, Nate Moore, a 19-year veteran at the Department. He said the stable housing is so important because without it, other services to address substance use, mental health or employment are not going to be as effective. "When a client is transient, they can't focus on their other needs," Moore said. "In terms of engaging a client with other services that they need, everything is put on hold until housing stabilizes."

Or as Struzinski said, "It's hard to move forward without housing. A family's basic needs have to be met before focusing on recovery and other needed supports."

Social Worker Moore said that "Janice was an ideal client in many ways. She was really motivated and she made the most out of what she was getting."

Janice made a point to say that families involved with DCF should see the experience as an opportunity to improve their lives. "I could have ended up in the streets," Janice said. "Now, my child has everything she needs, including attending a magnet school. Her needs are met."

"DCF has been nothing but a blessing," Janice added, "without them, who knows where my child would be or where I would be. I tell people to use the program – use DCF – tell them what your needs are and, eventually, it's going to come through."

Janice and her daughter are home, together, for the holidays!

Community Care, with love from the Girl's of Solnit South



The Girls of the Solnit South PRTF program decided to create a special community-based opportunity to address the food needs of local families for this upcoming holiday season. These young ladies made decorative posters and donation boxes to place around campus seeking to collect numerous non-perishables for the local food banks and shelters. Some of the items they have collected so far have been canned goods, condiments, soups, and many other helpful items. Although the girls are earning community service hours for their participation in this drive, most are more interested in participating for the greater good; giving back to the local community in need. As we are all aware, youths with so many needs as ours sometimes struggle to put aside their personal needs to think of

the needs of others, especially around the holidays when their personal issues are compounded. Seeing the joy and passion these girls are showing as they sponsor this special food drive has brought an air of refreshment and renewed holiday anticipation to the Solnit South Campus.

Special recognition also should be given too Tiffany Bacote, a new educational staff to the Solnit South family, and Eric Grant, a veteran CSW and extremely active activity planner and supporter for residents, who has been putting in the oversight, time, and energy to make this drive possible.



Connecticut Alliance for Foster and Adoptive Families



"Congratulations to the Connecticut Alliance for Foster and Adoptive Families for being the first agency to have staff receive the Child Welfare League of America 100th Anniversary Promoting Leaders for the Future Award. The staff who are the award recipients are as follows:

Support: Joseph Montalvo
Training: Jinnel D'Hereaux
Advocacy: Debra Candelora
Recruitment: Raymond Ortiz
Retention: Jennifer Rivera

Raymond Ortiz: The Book I selected is *Saying Goodbye to a Baby* by Patricia Roles, here are a few reasons why. A lot of people don't take into consideration how the parent who had to give a child away feels or what kind of mental effects it may have caused them. Whether it be because of money, drugs or wanting that child to have a better life. I feel I could connect with the book not only because I am a parent but I also am a

former Foster child. The cover of the book alone attracts the reader, due to the dark colors, the water, and the woman sitting staring out causes a sense of mystery and a form of suspense that makes you want to read.

Debra Candelora: Working with Children and Trauma is close to my heart. I have 7 adopted children with their own ways to deal with trauma. This has been such a growing experience for our family in understanding how to better support all of their needs. I take every opportunity to educate day care providers, teachers and especially foster and adoptive parents on this subject. I am intrigued with the effects on our brains trauma has. Understanding the effects doesn't make this any easier, but it certainly helps us to be more compassionate and not to give up on them.

Jennifer Rivera: The publication that I would be most interested in reading is "Saying Goodbye to a Baby." It would be interesting to read the parents point of view while making the decision to give up their children. We often hear the foster parents and adoptive parents thoughts on the reason why they foster and adopt but, what makes a biological parent say "this child would be better off with someone else"?

Joseph Montalvo: Working With Traumatized Children, Third Edition – Companion Workbook. The book offers insight and competencies for child advocates and professionals but also for the caregivers who live with traumatized children in their homes. It highlights the importance of relationship building, parenting, and the self-awareness needed to promote the healing of these children and their familial system. Fully understanding the unique trauma symptoms that these children's minds and bodies endure is essential to anyone working or living with hurt children.

Jinnel D'Hereaux: *Saying Goodbye to a Baby*, *The Birthparent's Guide to Loss and Grief in Adoption* and *to Adoption Reunion* book could be a life-line to saving a birthparent from unforgiving thoughts and separation anxiety. Surrendering your parental rights does not come easy to some although the focus would be "what's in the best interest of the child" the decision is life changing for both parent(s) and child.

There is no future to fore-tell if the outcome of the decision a birthparent makes are the very best and this could be a great burden of pain throughout their lives. There is grief, pain, anger, anxiety, depression, separation issues, the "not knowing" and then there is shame. This publication could help impact someone who have, and are experiencing, a crisis such as this and change their entire view and experience on saying that final goodbye to their baby.

Please let me know if you need anything further from us! And thank you again to CWLA for the award and the recognition!

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