



A New Day: Fostering the Future

By Joette Katz

Editor's note: The following article was written by Commissioner Katz for an upcoming CAFAP newsletter.

Before starting in my new role as commissioner in January, I took the opportunity to think, learn and speak about the "New Day" at the Department of Children and Families. Beginning in November and continuing throughout this snowy winter, I have been meeting with many stakeholders outside the Department to discuss necessary improvements. No one has taught me more in these past months than our foster parents.

What have I learned?

I learned that the Department needs to share information with foster parents more effectively, to treat foster parents with greater respect, and to listen to foster parents more closely. After speaking with a number of foster and adoptive parents, it became perfectly obvious that Connecticut's foster parents are the most knowledgeable experts on the children for whom they care.

I learned that the special people who become foster parents take on this responsibility because of their love for children and because the resulting relationships make for a rewarding experience. But I also learned that the Department can be a less than ideal partner.

Too often important information about a child is not shared. Phone calls are not returned promptly. Foster parents feel that they are not an important member of our team. That has to change.

Building a better day for foster parents and the children that they serve is among many changes you will see at the Department. You may have heard that I am restructuring the Department by re-organizing it into five "mini-DCFs." Each of these community-based, regional systems will have a full array of services at its disposal. No longer will the Department work be characterized by silos that erect walls families must scale to obtain needed services.

The restructured regional offices will be responsible for helping families regardless of the door through which their child enters. With our foster and adoptive parents, agency staff and our community partners will communicate and coordinate activities and services to meet the individualized needs of children. And, we will work much more effectively to support families in this vital work.

This means implementing a stronger practice model anchored in real family engagement. It means working with foster families to intervene earlier when challenges arise, as they will. It means that together, we must focus on how to best assure that our children achieve age-appropriate growth and development and that they are healthy, safe and learning.

Starting today, I invite all foster families to join me and the staff of the Department of Children and Families in a new and much more respectful partnership that I will call "Fostering the Future." More children and youth need strong, caring, knowledgeable foster families that help them to find and develop their special talents, engage in behaviors that support their communities, and to find and sustain academic and life success. Together, we can do just that.