



JJPOC Meeting Minutes

July 20th, 2023
2:00pm-3:30pm
Legislative Office Bldg, Rm 1D
Zoom Option Available

Attendance:

Toni Walker
Maurice Reaves
Marc Pelka
Iliana Pujols
Christina Quaranta
Erica Bromley
Thea Montanez
Macklin Roman
Hector Glynn
Jillian Gilchrest
Martha Stone
Anthony Nolan
Judge Elizabeth Bozzuto

Gary Roberge
Tais Ericson
Susan Hamilton
Michael Williams
Vannessa Dorantes
Michael Pierce
John Frassinelli
Amy Marracino
Lisa Sementilli
Veron Beaulieu
Steven Abbagnaro
Sarah Eagan

TYJI Staff

Bill Carbone
Erika Nowakowski
Susan Cusano
Brittany LaMarr
Shauntaye Monroe
Donna Pfrommer
Hunter Clark
Sydney de Lannoy
Paul Klee

Welcome and Introductions:

Co-Chairs Rep. Walker and Marc Pelka gave introductions and welcomed everyone to the meeting. They thanked everyone that was able to attend the JJPOC Orientation Training that occurred on June 29th, 2023.

Acceptance of JJPOC Meeting Minutes

Marc Pelka asked for a motion to accept the June 15th, 2023, meeting minutes. The motion was moved, seconded, and passed.

Overview of Meeting:

Erika Nowakowski gave a quick overview of the meeting for today and introduced the presenters from DCF, Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes, Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams, Administrator Linda Dixon, and Chief Administrator of Gov't Relations & Policy Vincent Russo.

Presentation on Crossover Youth



Commissioner Dorantes began the presentation by giving an overview of the Operating Frame for Practice and Policy within DCF. She noted that the slides have more information than would be presented in person, and that more information can be found on their website. She began by talking about how often the kids that DCF serve get ‘othered’ in comparison to most children. DCF and providers need to recognize the role that child service play in the full continuum of making sure kids in Connecticut get their needs met. It’s important to DCF and their overarching practices to recognize that kids are safest at home with their family, if that is not achievable then with someone, they know such as a relative, and if that is not an option, they need to be in a setting that can nurture them and help them reach their fullest potential. This can be a home such a therapeutic foster home or anywhere that creates a familiar atmosphere for kids, that they can be in a congregate setting for treatment for a brief period of time and with the expectation that they will return back to a family setting. The agency has recognized that it is important for kids to experience permanency.

Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams presented on data on the number of kids that DCF is working with. DCF’s number one priority is keeping kids safe, and they do that through open cases that come from calls from the public when abuse or neglect is happening to a child. They have a 24/7 hotline, that goes to an office that screens these reports for acceptance, and then transferred to field offices for investigation for up to 33 business days where it is decided if report is founded or unfounded. Coming out of the pandemic, the volume of reports made to DCF showed a significant decline, but now DCF is seeing a significant increase. DCF has seen the highest volume of reports on record since 2006, and this is double the amount since 2012.

The department used an “ABCD” practice model in all their work. The “A” stands for adult protective capacity, B stands for “Behaviors that are harmful,” “C” is child vulnerabilities, and “D” is dangerous conditions. The key to this model is that it is not used just within DCF but also by their external providers that work with the families. Commissioner Dorantes noted that the reason they included this model in this discussion is because oftentimes adolescents, and young adults are thought of not being vulnerable to the same things that younger children are. However, they experience significant situations that put them in harmful situations. Williams continued on to show data on the disparity index by race and ethnicity within DCF. There is disproportionality in the rates of reports of neglect by race, the rate by which the reports are accepted and investigated as well as substantiated on as well as how far into the system they go. Black and Latino children are disproportionately represented in the deep end of DCF’s systems.

Nationally and within Connecticut there has been a reduction of the number of youth in foster care. There has been recognition that foster care is not necessarily the right thing to do for children. DCF’s projections show that their practice models will lead to even further decline of children in foster care. In terms of juvenile justice, DCF felt that it was important to show how kids come into foster care in the first place. Between March 2021 and 2023 roughly fifty percent of youth entered DCF through court ordered corridor such as temporary custody in comparison to 42% entering through a 96 hour hold on temporary custody. The ages that come through are relatively even across age brackets.



Every jurisdiction nationally is struggling to find foster care placements, and do not have options. Luckily, this is not a Connecticut issue, and CT has been very fortunate so far. DCF also presented data on the demographics of children that are first time enterers into foster care. In a review of 59 cases from between January 2022 and July 2023, it was found that 19 or 32% of cases came into DCF care due to matters of juvenile delinquency. This is sometimes because parents come into court and say they cannot take the child back and the youth has nowhere else to go. 21 or (35%) of cases came into care for mental health concerns, through psychiatric facility or mental health treatment, where parents would not take the child home after treatment and the provider files this as abandonment. A rising population has been undocumented, unaccompanied minors which account for 29% of these cases or 17 of the 59 cases reviewed here. DCF does their best to implement kinship practice for youth that cannot stay with their parents. DCF does its best to avoid placing children in congregate care, as it has studies have shown that congregate care does not have positive impact generally. By race, generally black and Hispanic youth are more likely to be placed in congregate settings. DCF has been working to reduce the number of youths in congregate settings, but the disparities have stayed generally the same. Williams also spoke about their relationships with their sister agencies.

The data that DCF has about kids involved in juvenile justice, is that there are 34 youth that are in foster care that are in correctional facility. There is a detention protocol, whenever child is arrested DCF get a report to see if they are involved with DCF, if child is detected, a liaison makes contact and acts as their representative. This is an active protocol that was developed in conjunction with CSSD. There has been a decline of youth aging out of DCF, either because they were able to be placed in a more permanent place such as with a parent or a kinship home. Youth are staying in foster care for shorter amounts of time which is a good thing.

Dr. Dixon continued the presentation, speaking on DCF's goal to integrate safety, permanency, and wellbeing for youth. DCF does this in many ways, that can range from providing resources to parents, preparing young adults, and providing them with opportunities and skill building activities. There is also a push to continue to build a robust behavioral health system and increase access for all youth. Youth that are unable to attain mental health support may be inappropriately referred to the justice system or a system that is focused on family removal, which can have broader behavioral health impacts on youth's future. DCF is working on expanding services across the state with various partners. Their early trauma initiative is just one example and their work on enhancing youth's skills to manage emotions on their own wellbeing. This process works in conjunction with diversion, as contact with the justice system can generate behavioral health issues and trauma in youth. DCF has three specialty populations relevant to this group which include transitional age youth, those that are 16 years or up, LGBTQ youth, and incarcerated youth. To support transitional age youth, DCF has implemented expansive efforts to help transitional needs youth. With staff working with this age group, DCF has seen upticks in staff reporting community involvement and engagement with school and getting jobs. DCF has created materials like a housing screener, a discharge planning inventory, and a website of resources to support youth. They have been trying their best to follow youth's interests in building programs.



Another specialty population is LGBTQ youth as risks are elevated for this population. Data shows that LGBTQ youth are more likely to end up in the judicial system. Once in foster care, they are more likely to be placed in institutions than other youth. In a survey this year, DCF found that at least 25% of youth identified as LGBTQ+ and they believe this is an underestimate, 85% of these youth also were children of color, pointing to the intersectional needs that this population likely faces. DCF has expanded the reach of their mentoring groups and created a second wilderness school specifically for LGBTQ youth and their allies.

Rep. Walker opened the floor to questions. It was asked if the presenters could explain some of the data points that were presented. Commissioner Dorantes explained that a difficulty for DCF is that some of their data systems are qualitative, for example how youth came into care, and then DCF reads through these reports and extrapolates based on this. The questioner asked if that means that the number of youths that have become dually involved with juvenile justice is difficult to tell? It was expressed that the committee wanted this presentation to understand what CT is doing right and what they are doing wrong and what the state is doing to address these issues. Commissioner Dorantes responded that there was a slide that talks about how DCF represents youth that are involved in the juvenile justice system, so they do have some documentation. Sometimes people expect the foster care system to be the catch basin for all children because DCF is mandated to serve all children regardless of their entry point into the system. As they update their computer system and log in data, she wants to clarify that they will soon have that type of information. The lack of transmission and communication of data between agencies is a real issue. It's bigger than just DCF modernizing and updating, it's also cross agency collaboration. There was a follow up to clarify what the government can do to get DCF the data they need from other agencies. They cited the fact that they had read something from 1999, citing similar issues with cross-agency data sharing, so this has been an issue for a while. The response was that when the juvenile justice mandate was with DCF they could track dual commitment into systems, but after it was switched over to CSSD they lost access and they only have data on youth entering foster care. DCF would have to work with CSSD for this information. DCF also pointed out that there are two definitions to cross-over youth, one is any child on an open case with DCF, and those that have had past involvement with DCF or reports of abuse or neglect. Currently DCF only looks at kids actively involved in foster care. There was discussion on DCF's cross data sharing with other state agencies such as CSDE. There are limitations to DCF's data system especially since the mandate for justice involved youth has been shifted to judicial. CSDE voluntarily sends data to DCF every month on kids in foster care, this agreement would need to be worked out with CSSD.

Another committee member voiced concerns on what they had heard from youth coming out of therapeutic care, of which the presentation said 43% of arrested youth are in. The observations have been that the quality of staff in some of these group homes have been subpar, to which DCF responded that this is something that they are working on. There have been multiple efforts to train staff in restorative justice and using best practices. The other issue is that often DCF cannot find placements for youth that they will stay in. Some kids continue to run away even if their parents, foster families, etc. give their best effort to support them. There needs to be a way to keep youth in their communities and support them from there, but the reality is that sometimes



no matter where DCF puts them, the child is going to run. This tends to be more of a challenge for older youth.

Another participant asked who families should contact for kids that are getting in trouble. Often, parents don't know what to do, and are looking for resources but don't want to go to DCF because they do not want to lose their connection to their child. Is DCF a resource for them? The response was these families should call DCF. DCF has taken great strides to make services open to all communities not just for those that are involved. Not all DCF resources require a report.

TYJI Announcements

Erika Nowakowski gave a quick update that all JJPOC members should have received a draft of the orientation manual and asked if members could review and send feedback to TYJI by August 31st. After this date, TYJI will be meeting with leadership to finalize the manual for the September 15th meeting.

Next Meeting: Thursday, September 21st, 2:00 PM-3:30PM