



How did Connecticut's Department of Children and Families and the state Legislature **advance a strong relationship to the benefit of children and families?**

Partnerships among the [three branches of government](#) are critical to a state's ability to create policies and practices that effectively support families and keep children safe. State legislatures provide a policy framework, oversight, and funding for child protection agency services. As such, **a strong partnership between a child protection agency and a legislature is essential for meaningful and lasting systems change.** Legislators can help advocate for the budget and policy alignment necessary to build a [21st century child and family well-being system](#), in which child protection agencies work seamlessly and effectively with other human services systems to prioritize the needs of children and families and strengthen communities. In the nearer term, state legislators are key partners in developing a comprehensive Family First prevention strategy.

Leadership at the [Connecticut State Department of Children and Families](#) (DCF) has actively worked to build effective partnerships with its state Legislature over



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the last year. DCF serves the state's child welfare and child behavioral health needs, overseeing the work of 14 field offices and 3,200 staff. Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and her team began conducting proactive outreach to legislators immediately following her appointment in early 2019. This has enabled the agency to establish and maintain open and constructive relationships with key policymakers — even during the COVID-19 crisis — and create a platform to share important context and key stories behind the data DCF reports on a routine basis.¹

Intentional partnership

Dorantes' leadership demonstrates how proactive action by child welfare leaders can build productive, collaborative relationships with policymakers. In the early weeks of her administration, staff arranged meetings with as many legislators as possible during which the commissioner could share her beliefs, values, and vision for DCF and to hear the legislators' views and concerns about child welfare. Early on, the commissioner was able to engage with chairs of key committees, and connect with some of the previous administration's biggest detractors to establish a clean slate. The newly formed administration also laid a foundation for responsive relationships with other key policymakers, including members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, and the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity. Dorantes also co-chairs the Alcohol and Drug Policy Council and a subcommittee of the Governor's Council on Women and Girls.

Legislative leadership routinely reaches out to and seeks input from DCF on a wide array of issues related to the needs of children and families across the state, not just those who come to the attention of the agency.

The DCF executive team responds to all questions as transparently as possible to establish trust, “up to and including information on cases, good, bad, or indifferent,” says Ken Mysogland, DCF's bureau chief of external affairs. For case-specific questions, Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams assesses the concerns with staff before responding.

All questions are viewed as an opportunity to build understanding. “When legislators ask a question, we respond quickly with the information that they requested, but we also take the time to educate them on the issue so they understand the greater context,” Mysogland says.

The form of communication varies depending on the information that needs to be conveyed — sometimes an email or a quick call is sufficient. Other times, staff spend hours putting together memos and materials so that legislators are provided with a comprehensive overview on a critical issue. If the question warrants a face-to-face conversation with the commissioner, or if a legislator requests a meeting, Mysogland says, “the commissioner's response is always yes.”

Credible staff

When DCF's legislative liaison retired, the previous administration recruited a seasoned legislative liaison with the judicial branch to consider applying for the position. This outreach proved to be the perfect match as the transition to a new administration was taking place. An experienced legislative program director, Vincent Russo, became the agency's formal point of contact with the legislature, leveraging more than a decade of established relationships with state legislators and respect from policymakers on both sides

It is critical to engage all stakeholders in the work of strengthening children and families before there is a crisis. We had a deliberate strategy for engaging legislators from the beginning. When I come to them now, they are more likely to believe me and trust what I say.

— VANESSA DORANTES,
COMMISSIONER, CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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of the aisle. His appointment sent a clear message that Dorantes and her team value their relationship with the Legislature and are committed to working together effectively.

DCF's legislative program director provides daily updates to a distribution list composed of legislative leaders and their staff, reaching all key leaders, Republican and Democrat, in both the House and Senate. As interest in the emails has spread, the list has grown significantly.

The legislative program director also takes frequent opportunities to talk with legislators one on one about DCF's work. "We cannot underestimate the value of strengthening individual relationships with legislators proactively, before issues arise," Russo notes. "Those connections are built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect that leads to support and advocacy in the Legislature."

Regular, proactive communication pays off in a crisis

The ongoing and regular communication established by DCF paid dividends when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. When the chair of the state's Appropriations Committee requested regular updates on how DCF was managing the crisis, agency leaders quickly invited their legislative colleagues to weekly calls with Dorantes and other DCF executives.

During these calls, Dorantes provides updates on the activities of the department and the legislators relay concerns and questions they are hearing from constituents. It is critically important for these conversations to be transparent and honest. That

INVESTING IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS PAYS OFF FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

As a result of the strong relationship between DCF leadership and key legislators, the Legislature accepted requests by DCF to fund new models of intervention for families, including Voluntary Case Management and Intensive Family Care and Support Program. These new programs allow families to receive services through a community agency instead of the department.

The Legislature also decided to enhance the role of DCF to strengthen families, transferring oversight of the statewide Youth Services Bureaus and Juvenile Review Boards back to DCF.

includes DCF acknowledging not knowing something, or is in the middle of analyzing an issue or brainstorming potential solutions. Rather than respond to concerns raised on the spot, questions are brought back to the attention of a deputy commissioner, who then reviews them with staff and composes a timely and thoughtful response.

"On the first call, we were peppered with lots of questions," Dorantes says. "Subsequent calls were much more complimentary, as we had followed up with the concerns they raised in between the update calls." Legislators expressed appreciation for the consistent check-ins.

From the moment Commissioner Dorantes was nominated, she immediately outreached to legislators and described her vision for the department. It was refreshing to hear from someone who wanted to be a partner with us and collaborate on policy and budget initiatives. She has continued these efforts well into her second year.

— CONNECTICUT STATE REP. CATHERINE ABERCROMBIE,

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The legislative work has to be done 12 months out of the year. You cannot be satisfied with engaging your local legislators only during the legislative sessions, when you want something. You have to invite folks in, let them walk with you.

— **KEN MYSOGLAND,**
DCF BUREAU CHIEF OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Local and regional connections

Together, Mysogland and Russo have worked to build and strengthen connections between the DCF and the Legislature that extend well beyond the agency's central office. They also recognize the value of agency leadership investing in the relationship with legislators directly to both emphasize priorities and establish a shared commitment to achieving specific goals. This, too, began right from the start. When the newly appointed commissioner conducted a listening tour of all regional offices, her team invited legislators to the meetings within their respective legislative districts. Senators and House members had the opportunity to hear directly from Dorantes and her staff about what was going well, and to

witness the commissioner communicating informally with staff, sharing her perspectives on DCF's mission, and responding to tough questions. Conversely, legislators were able to meet with agency staff in local DCF offices and share their thoughts with executive staff. "It allowed legislators to see us in a much more natural, everyday light," Mysogland says.

Since then, the team has encouraged regional offices to continue to invite local policymakers to events such as program graduations, in-service trainings, and more. Pictures from these appearances are frequently featured in DCF newsletters and social media posts, thanking the legislators for their support and building good will year round.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

1. Information from this brief (unless otherwise noted) is derived from interviews in Spring 2020 with Vannesa Dorantes, Commissioner, and Ken Mysogland, Bureau Chief of External Affairs, Connecticut State Department of Children and Families (DCF); and email communication with Mysogland, Vincent Russo, DCF's Legislative Liaison, and Connecticut State Rep. Catherine Abercrombie.

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