



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How is Connecticut's Department of Children and Families working towards racial justice?

Q&A with Vanessa L. Dorantes, Commissioner, and Jodi Hill-Lilly, Deputy Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Children and Families

The overrepresentation of Black and American Indian children in child welfare systems across the country is not new. Yet most child protection agencies still struggle to effectively address the biases and structural racism that influence institutional practices, and contribute to the disproportionality present at key decision points along the child welfare continuum. Until disparities in outcomes are eliminated when comparisons are made between Black and American Indian children and families and their white counterparts, leaders must commit to long-term strategies. The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) has a long history of seeking solutions to racial inequities. In this Q&A, Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and Deputy Commissioner Jodi Hill-Lilly articulate their focus and share their agency's approaches to ensuring that their commitment toward racial justice does not waver.¹



How is Connecticut's Department of Children and Families working towards racial justice?

Why is racial justice a key component of your work?

Dorantes: Our work related to race is so important, we didn't want to dilute it with the other things that are also important to our decision-making. That is why racial justice is explicitly included as one of our strategic goals. There are many reasons why attention to racial justice is necessary, especially in child welfare, but one of the most critical is because our youth and their families deserve it.

Can you describe your path toward racial justice?

Dorantes: We've been doing this work for a long time. This journey is more like a dimmer, not a light switch where suddenly everything is illuminated. There's no quick on/off button. We may not ever see the finish line, but ultimately you hope people will feel that the work is different because of your efforts.

Hill-Lilly: Fifteen years ago, our approach was to address staff attitudes and biases, so we started with training. We thought that if we trained everyone, we'd fix everything. That did not work. Training got us to a place where we had common language, which was essential, but it didn't move the needle on outcomes

for children and families. So about eight years ago, we established a [statewide Racial Justice Workgroup](#), which includes subcommittees that examine structures across the agency: policy and practice; workforce development; contracts and procurement; and community. We started to really look at all of our agency policies with a racial justice lens, including new proposals, so that we don't inadvertently make decisions that are counter to our values around race equity. We used data on disproportionality to guide the work. Racial justice has also been embedded into [Connecticut's Family First Prevention Plan](#), which was just approved.

How are you using data to further this work?

Hill-Lilly: After gathering the data, we asked questions like: *Why is the data like this? Why are we seeing disproportionality? What factors are contributing to these outcomes?* We sought to understand how the decisions were impacting children and families. In the last two years, we started doing a root-cause analysis, focusing on what is happening in our decision-making and how that impacts outcomes. It's not just the attitude of the individual caseworker; it's the systems in which our children and families are served.

Sharpening the safety focus through prevention across the child welfare system



Source: Connecticut DCF

How is Connecticut's Department of Children and Families working towards racial justice?

Our strategies are based on data and metrics, and we strive to eliminate the disparities at the major decision points. We will know that our efforts are making a difference when these disparities cease to exist. We have aspirational targets for all of our work, which are also disaggregated by race. Our biggest win is when an individual overseeing a project asks if we've disaggregated the data by race. This represents a culture change and not just data-driven practice in and of itself.

Dorantes: For us to get a handle on what we saw in the data, we first had to marry practice and policy. As an example, Considered Removal-Child and Family Team Meetings (CR-CFTM) are supposed to be held when safety factors have been identified and the caseworker is considering removal of the child from their parents, *before* a removal actually takes place. Through our CR-CFTM process, we avert removals 40% of the time by offering more supports to the family to mitigate the safety factor. But when we looked at that same data, disaggregated by race, it told a different story. Black children were more likely to have the CR-CFTM *after* they'd already been removed. We questioned how it is possible for CR-CFTMs to take place for white families in the prescribed period of time, but not for Black families. We then gave staff concrete data and put in some behavioral firewalls to help. We knew that just telling staff to look at the data would just be overwhelming, and then nothing would change, so the behavioral firewall was essential. It became another tool that leadership could use to reinforce specific areas of practice.

We also looked at whether we should carve out racial justice work as its own focus area because it's so

important to measure separately, or whether we should infuse these metrics through the fabric of everything we do. There is a good argument for both.

It's also important not to get caught in *analysis paralysis*. In equity work, you can always find data that will take you down a rabbit hole, which will deflect you from the overall goal. The overall goal is better outcomes for everyone served by the system. But when outcomes don't change quickly, that can be discouraging to folks. Sometimes systems beat themselves up by not seeing the small victories. That is why **our focus is on creating an infrastructure and a culture in which people of all races consistently raise issues of equity.**

What does culture change look like within a racial justice framework?

Hill-Lilly: In addition to having a [common language and common goals](#), culture change requires being *comfortable with discomfort* in this space. The Racial Justice Workgroup has also been intentional about using implementation science to involve people at all levels. One of the foundations of implementation science is adaptive leadership, which requires input from the people doing the work in order to create meaningful solutions. We are very purposeful about who we include in the workgroup. In addition to involving staff from all levels of the agency, we also involve youth and families. We've set the expectation that it's not the leader dictating what happens. Adaptive leadership requires being open and holistic about what voices you listen to.

We recognize that this begins with the staff we hire. We looked at our recruitment process to ensure we

To assume that only people of color should carry this mantle is problematic and woefully wrong. Everyone is on the journey, every voice matters. This is not a people of color issue to advance — all of us have to work together to move our society forward.

— JODI HILL-LILLY,

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

How is Connecticut's Department of Children and Families working towards racial justice?

had diverse panels and were asking interview questions regarding candidates' values related to issues such as poverty and race. We also looked at our contracts with providers to make sure that they were attentive to racial justice within their hiring process as well. Once staff are hired, we realize training on race equity isn't enough, so we also incorporated coaching.

Dorantes: Along with the Racial Justice Workgroup, we recently stood up our safety culture framework, which we call *Safe and Sound*. The focus of *Safe and Sound* is to create space for staff to talk openly about things that make them uncomfortable, and we have been very intentional that [racial justice would be tied to our safety culture work](#).

Hill-Lilly: A tenet of safety culture is creating an environment where staff will tell you the truth about when they are not meeting standards. We know from the research that when you create a learning environment and a safety culture, errors are reduced, as individuals aren't afraid of being honest. What better umbrella for racial justice than one where people can be honest about how they feel? We had to include Human Resources in the process because when people are honest about mistakes, we didn't want the first reaction

to be a slap on the hand, which ultimately shuts them down. Of course, there is still disciplinary action when necessary, but we realized that being overly punitive does not foster the learning environment we were trying to create.

Dorantes: One example of this was an anonymous email we received from an employee during the racial unrest in the summer of 2020. The email revealed that the staff member knew they had biases, but did not feel safe talking about them or their perspective of our work. Even though we didn't like or agree with many of their sentiments, we knew our work wasn't about rooting out one person, but about recognizing that the system is made up of individuals who have their own worldviews and are making decisions about children and families, and we, as a system, are accountable for those decisions every day.

Hill-Lilly: We realized we did not need to spend a lot of energy trying to change one person's mind. Instead, we needed to focus on the decisions that are made on behalf of children and families, to ensure that they are aligned with our values and how we want children and families to be treated.

Connecticut DCF's work is grounded in a Safe and Sound culture



Source: Connecticut DCF

How does racial justice show up in your leadership?

Hill-Lilly: Representation by people of color matters. It makes you feel proud when you see people that look like you in key positions. In order to move our whole agency forward, regardless of biases (and we all have them), we try to be strategic in our communication and in our actions to make sure people can hear what we are trying to say.

Dorantes: Both of my deputy commissioners are people of color and, as commissioner, I had to consider whether people would push back harder if they saw that the three people at the top of our hierarchy all were Black. I venture to guess that's not a question anyone would ask if the three people at the top were white. I picked the best people for the job but it is a constant balancing act. And it comes at a cost.

We have been intentional about being able to *reach to teach*, and include people of all races and genders to move this work forward. It is also important to understand that people of color can perpetuate structural and systemic racism without knowing it because of internalized racial oppression.

Leadership development will be the legacy for this administration. In the past, there were champions identified across the department to participate in the Racial Justice Workgroup, but if that champion didn't have positional authority over their area, then they weren't able to advance outcomes. Often the people who feel most comfortable working toward racial justice are those who raise their hand and step forward, but they may not have positional authority to match their proficiency and enthusiasm. We gave senior leadership the tools to partner with those champions, to provide both the positional authority and the value-base for moving forward.

Deepening our communication strategies has also been critical. We've had town hall meetings and racial justice leadership summits to engage staff directly. We also ask our leadership questions about how they make sure information is shared beyond direct reports, and we make sure we talk about how staff are interfacing with the community and with families. This is necessary for all divisions, not just direct-service staff. People

sometimes get comfortable sitting back and waiting for an initiative to pass or fizzle out, and our families deserve more than someone getting a free pass.

We had an exercise once where we asked senior leaders to tell us how racial injustice shows up in their work. We discussed an example of youth who were getting dysregulated in our psychiatric residential treatment facility. We realized that the intake process was assigning youth with *internalizing* behaviors to one particular cottage, and youth with *externalizing* behaviors, who often had darker skin, to another area of the facility. Youth called this part of the facility "The Hood," as evidenced by a window that had been boarded up and not yet replaced. We had to ask ourselves how the intake screening process impacted where kids were placed within the facility and how they perceived those physical spaces by the buildings' appearance. With 3,200 staff members, we have to make it real so that **everyone understands how racial justice connects to their work.**

What was it like to lead racial justice work during the racial unrest of 2020?

Dorantes: When you think about the evolution of our racial justice work and how long we have been on this journey, you might think we were well poised to respond to the national unrest. It didn't matter who you were or what color your skin was — we were all dysregulated by the racial unrest. We needed to address the dysregulation and identify what we needed to do to make sure we get our work done. Children and families have to be able to count on that.

Jodi's workforce expertise was critical to helping us realize that even though we had been laying the foundation, we had to pause and take the temperature of senior leaders to see if they could lead this work during such an emotionally charged time. We have extremely competent subject matter experts, but people were paralyzed in thinking about whether they could or even should be doing this, and what kind of tools they needed to advance it. Some people were ready to go and some wanted to keep their personal life separate from their professional leadership responsibilities. We established a framework and gave senior leaders the support they needed, and then

How is Connecticut's Department of Children and Families working towards racial justice?

the process that we took with senior leaders had to be mirrored with staff. Discussions were happening organically, but some structure and guardrails were needed to create that environment of safety.

Hill-Lilly: We are all here to preserve families and keep kids safe, so we leveraged that — we know **we must take care of staff in order to take care of families.**

We have a common purpose in child welfare, and getting the conversation back to that common purpose helped us get back on the same page, regardless of overt dysregulation. We knew we had to get it together because there were kids and families who needed us.

How have you used legislation to advance this work?

Hill-Lilly: It was all about implementation science. We know that training in and of itself doesn't change culture, so we looked at all the organizational drivers that could operate counter to the mission — **if you don't pay attention to policies, laws, and funding, you might as well forget the practice strategies.** We knew that the racial justice work had to be something that would outlive any single administration. What

better way to do that than the law? The agency is now [required by law to identify racial and ethnic disparities](#) within child welfare and to work to eliminate them, and we provide an [annual report](#) to update the Legislature regarding our efforts.

What advice would you give another leader?

Hill-Lilly: We had a lot of starts and stops, and we had some colossal failures. It has not been perfect — grievances and lawsuits have been filed. But it has been tremendously successful in spite of all of that. So I would say: *Don't give up in the middle. It does get better.*

Dorantes: Keep children and families at the center of the work, and make sure you have an infrastructure that is aligned with your racial justice framework. Give yourself grace and work with others because if you're going to make the shift, everyone has to make the shift with you, regardless of where they sit or the color of their skin. It has to be an investment from everyone. It will sometimes feel like trying to "boil the ocean," but deliberate initiatives that are incremental and measurable are most sustainable for the long haul.

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

1 Adapted from an interview with Vanessa L. Dorantes, commissioner, and Jodi Hill-Lilly, deputy commissioner, Connecticut Department of Children and Families, on Feb. 4, 2021.

P 800.228.3559
P 206.282.7300
F 206.282.3555

[casey.org](#) | KMResources@casey.org

