

ACCENT_{on}KIDS

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A work created by Destiny, a youth in FCCS's Therapeutic Arts Program

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Protecting Children by Strengthening Families

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Summer 2021 Issue

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Making Organizational Health an Agency Priority

By Marion Thompson

Children Services is focusing on improving the health of the agency by promoting well-being as well as diversity, equity and inclusion for staff and those they serve. This work will be led by the newly created Organizational Health department, headed by Director **Kelly Knight**. It starts with giving staff the support they need to do their work effectively and outlets to express themselves. According to Knight, "We have to focus on how we support and treat one another, because at the core, people are our most valuable assets. How can we serve our community and support the well-being of children and their families, if we aren't healthy?" The team's work extends to finding ways to create positive outcomes for youth and families. "We need to concurrently focus on how we improve services, connect more with the community and bring the voices of people we serve to our work," said Knight.

The team will focus on four core areas of practice: culture and climate; strategy and alignment; research and analysis; and diversity, equity and inclusion. Their work will be conducted through three overlapping pathways: employee, family and youth, including an emphasis on education (headed by Associate Director **Jessica Foster**); internal education and awareness (headed by Associate Director **Eboni Partlow**); and community and employee engagement (headed by Associate Director **Daryle Cobb**).

"We are setting the standard for others to follow in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion work as a child protection agency."

Foster's work will include analyzing data concerning staff, youth and families to learn how each can best be served by the agency using a diversity, equity and inclusion lens. That extends to ensuring that youth involved with the agency have the educational services that they need to be successful. Foster was drawn to this position because of her love for analyzing data and a desire to "give kids the support they need and make sure they don't fall through the cracks."

The work led by Partlow will focus on providing safe spaces for staff to share their experiences and find support from a network of their peers and leaders. "I want to stand up and be a voice for people, especially within the agency," she said. Partlow is also an enthusiastic voice for fighting racial inequality and looks forward to being part of efforts to address racial disproportionality in child welfare. "I want to contribute to the work of addressing racial disparity, which I feel Black people have suffered too long," she said.

An additional focus will be building strong relationships with individuals and groups within the agency and community to build trust. Cobb, who will play a leading role in this area, is excited about "empowering staff and providing tools for the agency to look at things fairly and to acknowledge and address ills."

While organizational health is not a new concept, the team is breaking new ground in creating this department within a child welfare agency and they seek support. "We are setting the standard for others to follow in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion work as a child protection agency," said Cobb. Knight asks for the help of staff and

Organizational Health continued

the community to achieve positive change. “We need opportunities for employees to share their voices and become empowered as well as strong community partnerships,” she said. “I see us as the leaders of this work, but we’d be foolish to think that our success doesn’t require the investment, support and involvement of everyone.”

Helping Kids Get Back Home with Youth Villages

By Cynthia Greenleaf

Children do best in a supportive, nurturing environment that feels like home. This is why Franklin County Children Services is committed to serving youth in family-like settings within their community with the awareness that, at times, a higher level of care is needed to ensure safety and well-being. To better achieve this goal, FCCS has partnered with the national nonprofit organization Youth Villages to provide “permanency coordination” for select youth currently in FCCS custody.

This innovative program, which is tailored to the specific, individual needs of each child, works like this: FCCS’s Provider Services department identifies youth who have been placed in congregate care for an extended period of time and might be appropriate for a permanency coordination referral. Once a youth has been identified, a Youth Villages permanency coordinator takes an in-depth look at the youth’s history, placement, past clinical interventions and behaviors to evaluate the efficiency and appropriateness of the current level of care, according to Teyana Jones, FCCS community referral and coordination supervisor.

“Youth Villages staff then collaborates with the youth, family, service providers, and FCCS staff to identify necessary interventions and provide expert guidance to successfully transition and maintain the youth into a less-restrictive environment,” Jones says, adding that these youth have either returned home to their prior custodian or have stepped down to a foster home or kinship placement.

According to Jones, the program has seen positive results since it began at FCCS in late 2020. Eleven youth so far have been able to leave out-of-state residential programs and transition into lower levels of care back home in Ohio. More than 40 youth overall have been referred for permanency coordination and those numbers will continue to grow, Jones says.

For more on how Youth Villages’ innovative programs help children and families, visit youthvillages.org.

Kinship Caseworker Connects with Families

By Bruce Cadwallader

When families are separated due to abuse or neglect, kinship caseworkers are often called in first to assist with placement of the children now at risk. **Karen Bell**, an FCCS caseworker for more than seven years, is on the front lines, caring for kinship caregivers and the children they willingly take into their homes.

“Grandparents are stepping up. Aunts and some uncles are stepping up,” Bell said. Kinship care refers to cases in which relatives or family friends take on the care of children who must leave home. Children in kinship care have the comfort and safety of being with people they know and love. “If we can locate a loving family who will comfort them during this transition, it’s a win,” Bell continued.

Caseworkers work to ensure that kids and caregivers have what they need to be successful. In addition to providing support and



Karen Bell supports kinship families.

guidance, they link families to resources for medical coverage, rental assistance, fees for camps and sports, food, counseling and more.

Recently, a tough case involved a single grandmother trying to raise four children, all with behavioral issues, and one struggling through an identity crisis. Bell stepped in to help the family. A mother of five and grandmother to two children herself, Bell says she has used her own life experiences to empathize with the families and just be “a listening ear for them.”

Teresa Collins, Bell’s supervisor, nominated her for the Nancy Fitzgivens Child Protection Award, given annually to outstanding caseworkers who have made a difference for the families they serve. In her nomination, Collins wrote: “Karen Bell is an experienced worker who consistently demonstrates an understanding of family connectedness.”

While working a heavy case load and meeting with families even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bell has remained focused on being there for those who are struggling. “You have to put the needs of others ahead of yours, meet people where they are and accept them,” she said.

Recognizing Volunteers of the Year

By Marion Thompson

In 2020, Children Services volunteers and mentors continued to show up for the youth and families we serve throughout a year filled with challenges. Mentors maintained strong bonds with youth despite COVID-19 restrictions and volunteers stood by to help in any way they could. The agency celebrated them during a virtual volunteer reception in April.

Friendship mentors build one-on-one relationships with youth. **Ming Yi, Mike Finck and Rachel Brooks** were recognized as Friendship Program Volunteers of the Year. Yi was commended for her relationship with her mentee Kiersten. According to Kiersten's mother, "Ming has helped Kiersten improve her social skills and step out of her comfort zone. She has taught [Kiersten] life skills and the importance of doing good things and being a good person."

Friendship Volunteer Coordinator **Melisa Anania** said, "Mike Finck has been an exceptional volunteer since he joined our team." He has been lauded for always showing up for his mentee Kenneth.

Brooks has been described as dedicated. "Everything she does is with 100% effort," said former Friendship Volunteer Coordinator **Joy Xaybandith**. She calls Brooks relationship with her mentee Addison "purposeful with a lot of thought and love."

College-Bound mentors help youth involved with the agency plan for their future. **Michael Paessun** was named College-Bound Mentor of the Year. Michael is a tireless advocate for his mentee Chris who values their relationship. Chris said, "Michael is the main reason I graduated from high school. I did not want to let him down."

The Simba Mentoring Program matches African-American males with African-American boys in one-on-one mentorships. Simba's Volunteer of the Year is **Fredwood Lockhart**. Over the past several years Lockhart has mentored two young men. According to former Simba Program Director **Daryle Cobb**, "Fred provided many opportunities for success for both of his mentees. With his consistent presence and encouragement, the young men turned their lives around."

The Malaika Mentoring Program matches African-American women with African-American girls in one-on-one mentorships. **Shaunti Quals** was recognized as the Malaika Mentor of the Year. She found creative ways to stay in touch with her mentee Jailynn during the pandemic and built a relationship with her mentee's whole family. "Shaunti is THE best. I love her," said Jailynn's mom. Quals has even become a licensed foster parent.

The Sharon Burkes SOAR award was presented to the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc. Central Ohio Chapter. Their Paint and Inspire collaboration with the Malaika Program created positive experiences for girls served by FCCS.

While Crisis Center volunteers couldn't serve in-person at the agency, due to COVID-19, these caring people stayed in touch with FCCS and offered their help in other ways. **Cathy Senalik, Carla Williams and Savannah Laurel-Zerr** volunteered for special clerical projects, while **Toy Cook** created fun virtual activities for mentors and mentees to use during lock down.

FCCS is grateful for the continued support of all of its volunteers and mentors.



Fredwood Lockhart (right) and his former mentee Mark

Ming Yi and her mentee Kiersten



Shaunti Quals and her mentee Jailynn



Michael Paessun and his mentee Chris



Rachel Brooks and her mentee Addison



Mike Finck and his mentee Kenneth

Virtual Event Celebrates Achievements

By Valancia Turner

Franklin County Children Services and the Citizens Advisory Committee honored the successes and achievements of families, children, community advocates, and caseworkers on Wednesday, April 14, during the 2021 Virtual Child Abuse Prevention Event. This year's theme was "Celebrate Youth, Family, and Community Achievements," and participants were encouraged to wear blue to support child abuse prevention. The event was hosted by WCMH NBC 4 anchor **Darlene Hill** and attended by community partners, political leaders, volunteers, FCCS board members, FCCS employees, the Citizen's Advisory Committee, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and the community.

The event opened with the **Columbus Children's Choir** singing, "You Raise Me Up" by **Josh Grobin**. Guest speaker **Jamole Callahan** of the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare kicked off the event with a powerful and inspiring speech.

The first awards were presented to **Kristian Carter** and **Alexys Madero**, winners of the Jack Donahue 4-year and 2-year scholarships. The \$4,000 and \$2,000 renewable awards will assist these young women, who have overcome many challenges, with college this fall. In addition, **Aayona Austin** received The Alvin R. Hadley UNCF Scholarship, and the CME Credit Union Scholarship was given to **Mandione Ngaya**. Merit Scholarships were awarded to **India Hector**, **Makayla Drake**, **Megan Duty**, **Jasada Lewis**, **Malika Khadka**, **Marcus Veillard**, and **Mehkiyah Johnson**. Congratulations to all of the scholarship recipients!

Each year two awards are given to youth who have overcome many obstacles to achieve success. Our Rising Up and Moving On winners this year were **Mandione Ngaya** and **Karissa Monroe**.

The Family Achievement Award was presented to **Bridget Herron**, who suffered a tremendous loss, but overcame severe challenges to strengthen her family.

The Kinship Appreciation Award honors relatives and family friends who step in as caregivers for children when parents cannot care for them. This year's award was given to **Jennifer**

Montgomery, who is providing a safe and stable home for three siblings.

Community Advocates **Lynn Johnson** and **Teri Polzin** received awards for their participation in the Holiday Wish program and more.

The Nancy Fitzgives Child Protection Awards were given to caseworkers **Rae Damron** and **Amy Holt-Emerson**.



Alexys Madero



Kristian Carter



Aayona Austin



Mandione Ngaya



Rae Damron



Karissa Monroe



Bridget Herron and Family



Jennifer Montgomery and Family



Amy Holt-Emerson



Teri Polzin (left) and Lynn Johnson



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Lock Up Guns to Keep Kids Safe

By Bruce Cadwallader

Recently, caseworkers and local law enforcement agencies have noted a dramatic increase in the number of accidental shootings that have wounded or killed small children. In that vein, FCCS wanted to remind responsible gun owners to follow some basic safety guidelines.

Don't become a news headline. The life you save may be your child's!

Follow these tips from Safe Kids Worldwide and learn more at <https://www.safekids.org/tip/gun-safety-tips>:

- Keep guns out of the reach and out of sight of children by storing them securely. Do not leave guns unsecured on a night stand, table, or other place where a child can gain access to avoid injuries and fatalities.
- Store guns unloaded and secured with effective, child-resistant gun locks in a locked container out of the reach and sight of children.
- Store ammunition in a separate locked container out of the reach and sight of children.
- Use combination locks and safes, or safes that use fingerprint recognition locks. Keep the combinations carefully hidden.
- When a gun is not being stored, keep it in your immediate possession and control at all times. Otherwise, store the gun unloaded, locked and separate from ammunition.
- If you carry a gun in your car, make sure to outfit your vehicle with a lockable container, so you can securely store the gun when you exit the vehicle.
- If a visitor has a gun in a backpack, briefcase, handbag or an unlocked car, provide them with a place to store it securely (locked, unloaded, and separate from ammunition) while they are in your home.
- If a family member or loved one is in crisis and may be a risk to themselves or others, consider temporarily removing firearms from your home. Such crises can involve people who are depressed, suicidal, or abusing drugs or alcohol.

