



## Partnership in a time of crisis

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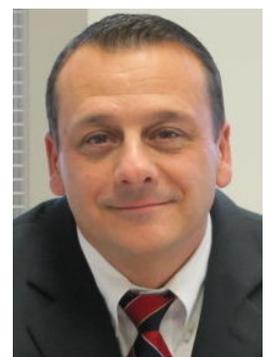


At the end of this third month of a worldwide pandemic that has cost 100,467 American lives, including more than 4,100 deaths in Connecticut, one of the most important and difficult challenges we are facing as a society may well be a test of our collective character. In Connecticut, in order to pass this test and meet this challenge, we must put the most vulnerable at the front of the line.

Nonprofit human services providers, in partnership with the state, have responded with support, care and compassion as together we work to face this unprecedented challenge. It is a model we hope extends well beyond the end of the current crisis.

Quietly, in every community in the state and without much notice, dozens of non-profit children's agencies provide treatment and educational services to children and families faced with behavioral health challenges, intellectual disabilities, Autism and special needs, as well as children in the juvenile justice system.

Children's residential treatment providers are on the front-line, and have been providing services to children with the most significant needs 24-hours-a-day throughout this COVID-19 crisis. Our staff continues to make great personal sacrifices to protect the health



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and safety of the youth in our programs. It is selfless, admirable, and reflects their deep commitment to a mission we share with the Department of Children and Families – helping children thrive.

Since late February, when the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic was becoming more clear, our partners in state government have worked with us to ensure the children and families in our care remain safe and supported. Leadership on these issues begins with Gov. Ned Lamont, who has been transparent, forthcoming and realistic about the risks and his concerns, but also offers a sense of optimism and hope.

This leadership extends to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) under Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes, as well as the Departments of Developmental Services, Social Services, Education and the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch. These agency leaders have prioritized the needs of the state's most vulnerable and have responded through partnership and collaboration.

Our missions have been deemed critical, and our employees have now been categorized as essential to the health and welfare of Connecticut's citizens. As a practical matter, this policy approach has meant that our employees now have access to testing and personal protective equipment. From a management viewpoint it has meant regular communication and collaboration to meet the needs of children and families, streamlining of administrative processes, and increased flexibility. Those changes make it easier to deliver services under emergency conditions and allow us to focus precious resources on vital services over administrative processes.

National best practices for the care of children and families call for a continuum of care, providing services inclusive of in-home supports, outpatient clinical services, residential treatment and an array of other services. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for robust systems to support children and families, flexibility in meeting changing needs, and the prioritization of those with the most significant needs.



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Even prior to this crisis, the leadership team at DCF has consistently demonstrated a leadership style that is inclusive, collaborative, and, most importantly, focused on meeting the vital needs of those we serve. This was true in their engaging approach to system redesign under the Families First Prevention Services Act and continues in the collaborative approach with the Children's League of Connecticut (CLOC) during this current crisis. DCF has sought input and has provided opportunities for ongoing dialogue. This partnership fosters a dynamic system that is proactive and responsive to changes. This culture of collaboration is vital now, but also for the long-term well-being of Connecticut's children and families.

We hope that the lessons learned from this crisis will influence the way the state partners with its nonprofit human service providers. We are learning important lessons about responding to the ever changing needs of children and families. We are also learning that the most effective ways to fulfill the promises to the children and families of Connecticut is to work in partnership to support a continuum of care. This inclusion also means that our young people and families have a voice in the process.

We know that the state will face severe budget shortfalls in the coming year. This will no doubt mean that the government will have to carefully prioritize spending as never before. Caring for vulnerable populations, including children and families in need, along with the dedicated staff who provide essential services 365-days-a-year, should remain a top priority.

If our Coronavirus response reflects our societal priorities accurately, then we believe this test has proven the strength of Connecticut's character, its leadership, and its people.

*Dan Rezende is the president of the Children's League of Connecticut, a group of private non-profit service providers offering a broad range of behavioral health care, residential treatment, and educational services to youth and families across Connecticut.*



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