



# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS QUARTERLY

A newsletter for, by and about Community Connections in Massachusetts

## Our Mission

The mission of Community Connections is to facilitate the organization of comprehensive family support systems in neighborhoods throughout the Commonwealth to prevent child abuse and neglect. Community Connections promotes a planning framework that is prevention-focused, is collaborative and builds upon the strengths and diversity within our neighborhoods.

Massachusetts  
Department of  
Social Services

LEWIS H. SPENCE  
Commissioner

Spring 2003

## We are all in this together

**S**ometimes all it takes to begin to break down barriers and build trust between DSS and the families we serve is a friendly introduction. Something as simple as “Call me Harry.” With those three little words, DSS Commissioner Harry Spence set the tone for a groundbreaking series of meetings between DSS staff, parents and advocates, aimed at strengthening communication, sharing ideas and fostering community so that families can be better served and children can be safe, healthy and strong.

On Feb. 27, Commissioner Spence sat down with 60 DSS Central Office staff, regional directors, area directors, parents and advocates for a first-ever gathering he compared to a family Thanksgiving. He made the analogy that child protection agencies will have to come together with the community, like a family, in order to keep children safe and well. He asked everyone to forget their positions and titles and communicate as one group with one concern: the well being of children.

“It is my hope and my intention that today will be the beginning of an on-going process in which we partner with parents and the community,” said Commissioner Spence. “For example, the Department needs to involve parents in discussion as we develop a Continuous Quality Improvement system. We must do better in communicating with foster parents who feel isolated.”

In an effort to improve communication, the DSS staff engaged parents in small group discussions in which participants reviewed fictitious scenarios of DSS-involved families and shared ideas of how a strength-based, community-focused approach could lead to better outcomes (see inside articles).

During the discussion, a common hope expressed was that DSS could better understand how it was

and is perceived in the community. That way the Department and families can begin to have the difficult conversations that must take place in order to build trust and work toward collaboration in insuring children’s safety.

“I went to the meeting because I want to make a difference. When I think of myself in the past and DSS in the past, all I can say is - we all didn’t know what we all didn’t know,” said parent Joan Cane. “Now, if we can treat each other like human beings, maybe we can all learn from our mistakes.”)

Commissioner Spence explained how the Department is undergoing a structural and philosophical reorganization based on agreed-upon core values (see page 5). He emphasized how important it is that we at DSS engage with and listen to parents and the community as we go forward with these changes. “We are in the process of hiring a

Parent Advocate at our Central Office who will organize a Parent Advisory Council. We must conduct an enduring conversation with parents and the communities we serve,” he said.

In reflecting on the day, parent Faith Bridell said, “I felt I was sincerely listened to and hope

that this meeting, and future meetings like it, will bring positive change.”)

In closing the meeting, Commissioner Spence again assured participants that this was only the first step. DSS will continue to have meetings like this in different setting – both on a statewide and area-based level. The Commissioner also gave acknowledgement and a note of thanks to Community Connections coalitions. “Without the longtime work of coalitions in building trust with families, a day like today would not have been possible,” he said.



**Joan Cane, (above) reflects on her experiences with Commissioner Spence (right). “I went to the meeting because I want to make a difference. When I think of myself in the past and DSS in the past, all I can say is – we all didn’t know what we all didn’t know,”**

**Building Partnerships to Prevent Child Abuse – Community by Community!**  
Community Connections is funded by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services

## BOSTON

- Chelsea Community Connections (617) 889-7100
- Dorchester CARES: (617) 474-1256
- Jamaica Plain Coalition: Tree of Life/Arbol de Vida: (617) 522-4832
- Lower Roxbury Coalition (617) 989-3111
- South Boston FANS: (617) 269-9331

## CENTRAL/METRO

- Fitchburg Joint Coalition for Health (978) 342-2069
- Framingham Coalition Community Connections Action Team: (508) 879-6874
- Southbridge Community Connections (508) 765-6670
- Worcester Community Connections Coalition (508) 754-1176 x126



**“The power of gaining parents’ input in a real way can’t be measured in just this one day. I think we will continue to see the impact for a long time to come.”**

## Ask lots of questions

One of the liveliest discussions focused on what the social worker should have known that was not in the report. The following is a summary of the kind of information that the groups felt was important to know if they were going to work with this family.

- What is the “A” family’s cultural background? Their values?
- What does the “A” family think they need to keep the children safe?
- Why were the children placed in foster care? Why weren’t the kids placed with the maternal grandmother, Nancy?
- How is the kids’ relationship to Terry, Nancy, and other kin?
- Why aren’t the fathers involved?

- Does the mother have supports (formal and informal) already in place?
- What other supports or services does Terry need or want?
- How are the children doing? (school, health, developmentally?)
- What do we know about the Nancy’s willingness or ability to keep on providing support? Does she have a support system?
- Are there other family members who could help out? The fathers’ families?
- What is Terry’s boyfriend’s history?
- What was the Terry’s childhood history? How is she functioning as a parent?
- What are her goals and career wishes?

## Focus on Strengths

Although the scenario was written from a very negative perspective, the groups, when asked to find the family’s strengths, found several.

- Terry loves her children and believes she is a good mother.
- There is no evidence of physical or sexual abuse of children.
- Terry acknowledges she had problems and is in treatment.

- Despite problems, Terry’s mother Nancy is an ongoing support.
- Terry knows how to find and use resources –she found housing in the past.
- She is employable, is seeking housing and wants to be reunited with her kids.
- Terry, who had held it together since she was 16, is strong, resourceful, and resilient and has no drugs or alcohol problem.

## Involve Kin

The group felt that as soon as DSS became involved with this family they should have talked to aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins or others to ask questions like the following:

- Could the extended family for Terry and the children’s fathers help?
- How can we support the extended family when they get involved?
- Could an extended family member act as mediator to help this family?

- Would it be helpful if the extended family help care for the children?
- Can the extended family be involved with the safety plan?
- Might another family member help find or provide housing?
- Are there ways that the extended family can provide emotional support? Role modeling?



### Keep us informed!

Send us your:  
Story ideas

Comments or questions  
Announcements, events,  
or special projects

### Community Connections

24 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, MA 02210  
Attention: Jan Elia  
or fax it to  
(617) 748-2441

## NORTHEAST

- Lawrence/Methuen Community Coalition  
(978) 975-8793
- Lowell Alliance for Families & Neighborhoods  
(978) 454-5405, x122
- Lynn Community Connections Coalition  
(781) 477-2902



## SOUTHEAST

- Brockton Neighbors United  
(508) 588-5099
- Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition  
(508) 539-2711
- New Bedford Community Connections  
Coalition: (508) 994-9625 x21
- United Neighbors of Fall River (508) 675-0098

# What would you do to help this family?

When parents and advocates recently met with DSS staff, the agenda was very simple. Small groups reviewed one of two “family scenarios” and discussed questions about how DSS could have been most helpful to the family. The scenarios focused almost exclusively on the problems of the family. The questions were designed to show how a strength-based approach to case practices could uncover important information, lead to unknown supports and resources and produce better results for families. Bellow is one of the fictitious family scenarios. These pages summarize some of the spirited discussion that followed.

## The A. Family Scenario

DSS has been involved with this family since June 1998 when local police filed a 51A report and Terry A. was arrested for domestic assault and battery on her mother, Nancy. Terry is the mother of three children ages, 5, 3 and 2. The family has lived with Terry’s mother, Nancy, since losing their apartment for non-payment of rent approximately nine months ago. Terry is twenty-one years old and apparently has a conflictual relationship with her mother that at times reaches the level of physical altercation/violence. It seems evident from initial interviews that Terry is dependent on her mother for a considerable amount of child-care. This seems to be a source of friction between them. It is clear that arguments have led to violence, placing the children in at-risk situations. The local police have been called on two other occasions in the last six months. Terry contends that her only issue is lack of housing that her mother is constantly picking on her and correcting all that she tries to do. Her three children are by three separate

fathers, none of whom are around to offer either physical or monetary support. Mother has an active social life and goes “out” to be with her friends several times per week. There are no indications that mother has drug/alcohol problems.

During the assessment period Terry located housing and moved, with her children, in September. Since then, three 51A’S have been supported for neglect. The first involved Terry not following through in obtaining asthma medication for her oldest child. The second was supported for neglect when Terry left a friend, Jim, “babysitting” the children; he left the apartment at approximately 10:00 p.m., leaving the children alone. The landlord made the report. The third report was supported for neglect as mother and her boyfriend were involved in a loud argument during a party. The police were called and found the apartment in a shambles with, little food or supplies available for the children. This incident led to an eviction and caused Terry to move back in

with her mother Nancy. A care and protection petition was filed and children were temporarily placed into foster care in two separate homes.

Currently, Terry’s new boyfriend has three previous restraining orders filed against him by three separate complainants. She feels that these are in the past, and irrelevant, and wants her children returned to her ASAP. Terry has a very limited work history. Most of her jobs have been in fast food restaurants and she has either quit or been let go from all of them within three months.

Her attorney has advised her not to sign releases, or submit to an evaluation requested by DSS. For the past three months Terry has been seeing a counselor at a local mental health clinic. She refuses to work on the identified issue of anger management with a therapist from MSPCC. She contends that she is an excellent mother that she would do anything for her kids and is seeking adequate housing so that they may resume again as a family.

**“Families need to be part of open conversations with the department and other stakeholders to decide what is best for the safety of the children. It all comes down to open communication.”**

**“If you want to know what families need, ask them!**

**– Discussion group notes**

## WESTERN

- Brick House Community Resource Center (413) 863-9576
- Enlace de Familias de Holyoke: (413) 532-9300
- North Quabbin Community Coalition (978) 249-3703
- Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (413) 663-7588
- Southwick Family Support Coalition (413) 569-3456
- Springfield Family Support Coalition (413) 733-7699
- Valuing Our Children Program, Athol (978) 249-8467

## Reach Out to Fathers

One of the more controversial questions addressed was: What is DSS's role/responsibility with respect to fathers? Some of the ideas offered were:

- Encourage fathers to be part of their children's lives from the time they are born. Birth certificates and paternity testing can help.
- Find the fathers, talk to them, and see if they would like to be a positive support for their children
- Make sure there is no criminal record that would get in the way of their parenting.
- Work with Department Of Revenue to have fathers make support payments.
- Encourage father's kin to have contact with children.
- Encourage and acknowledge the importance of children being able to visit with their fathers.
- Parenting classes and groups should be available for the fathers.

- Don't always assume that only mothers should have custody of children.
- Listen to Terry about why the fathers are not involved.
- Make Sure It's Safe.

If the father has perpetrated domestic violence on the mother, it does not necessarily preclude him from being involved in his children's lives. However, it is imperative that:

- The partner he was abusive toward considers it safe to do so.
- He has addressed the violence effectively (batterer's intervention program.)
- He has an express understanding of the effect of his violence on the children.
- He has made efforts to improve his parenting and relationship with the children.
- The children (if age-appropriate) are not afraid and are ready to see him.

## Ask the Community for Help

People at the meeting felt that they didn't have enough information to make solid recommendations, but here are a few ideas that they thought would be useful to DSS in working with the A. family:

- Provide more community services before a Care & Protection (C&P) petition is filed and explore more options. (Note: C&P is when DSS petitions the court for temporary custody of the children.)
- Work with community based organizations, shelter, schools and other agencies to have an open dialogue with the family – provide an

opportunity for the family to have a Family Group Conference and/or a Multidisciplinary Team meeting.

- Ask if the family has (or would like to have) a religious affiliation, and find out what resources are available.
- Refer Terry to appropriate agency to help figure out/work toward career goals.
- Make domestic violence counseling available.
- Assist the A. family in exploring the community for after school programs and seeking help

**"It was thrilling to meet the Commissioner and see that he really understands strength-based practice, and to see that DSS is in the process of making a change to more family-friendly relationships."**



## Family Support Specialists can provide help and info about Community Connections

To find out more about Community Connections, check-out the Community Connections web site [www.state.ma.us/dss](http://www.state.ma.us/dss), or call your local Family Support Specialist:

- Brockton, Cape Cod, Fall River, New Bedford
  - **Manuela DaCosta** (508) 894-3959
- Holyoke, Montague, North Adams, North Quabbin, Southwick, Springfield
  - **Mary Kenney** (413) 452-3435
- Dorchester Patch, Lawrence/ Methuen, Lowell, Lynn, Roxbury
  - **Danny Lewis** (978) 557-2717
- Fitchburg, Framingham, Southbridge, Worcester
  - **Carl McCarthy** (508) 929-2153
- Chelsea, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, South Boston
  - **Sarah Potter** (617) 574-8412
- Family Support Team Leader
  - **Brian Cummings** (617) 748-2336
- Family Policy Analyst
  - **Joan Stiles** (617) 748-2355
- Director of Domestic Violence and Family Support
  - **Pamela Whitney** (617) 748-2338





# Core Practice Values

- ❖ Child Driven
- ❖ Family Centered
- ❖ Community Focused
- ❖ Strength Based
- ❖ Committed to Diversity and Cultural Competency
- ❖ Committed to Continuous Learning



## FIND A WORD

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 NEGLECT  
 NEIGHBORHOOD  
 PARENTS  
 PREVENT  
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 RELATIONSHIPS  
 SAFE  
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 SHARE  
 SOCIALCHANGE  
 STRENGTH  
 STRONG  
 SUPPORT  
 TEAM  
 TRUST  
 VOLUNTEER  
 YOUTH

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS QUARTERLY



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