



On Balance

Dane County Department of
Human Services & Dane County Juvenile
Court Program Publication

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The CYF Empathetic Approach to Supporting Human Services



By Dr. Martha Stacker

During difficult times, empathy is paramount for Human Services and the Children, Youth and Families (CYF) staff because it addresses heightened client vulnerability, builds essential trust in crisis situations, enables effective and tailored crisis response, mitigates trauma, and promotes client and staff resilience. By understanding and acknowledging the emotional toll of hardships, staff can provide compassionate support, fostering a safe environment and empowering individuals to navigate challenges and rebuild their lives, ultimately ensuring more effective and humane service delivery.

An empathetic approach to supporting human services begins with truly acknowledging immense burdens towards sustainability. It's about recognizing the weight of increased caseloads, the strain of resource scarcity, and the emotional toll of sometime witnessing human suffering or trauma. We must move beyond simply stating these difficulties and delve into understanding the impact on individuals. This means actively listening, validating theirs and our own experiences, and creating a space where everyone feels seen and heard. When addressing potential resource scarcity and advocacy, an empathetic approach necessitates acknowledging the constant pressure to do more with

less. We must provide advocacy strategies with sensitivity, recognizing the emotional investment involved in fighting for clients and services. Collaborative efforts should be built on mutual respect and understanding, and documentation of client needs should be viewed as a tool for empowerment, not just a bureaucratic task or enabling strategy.

This empathetic lens should inform every aspect of our mutual support. When discussing burnout and compassion fatigue, we must go beyond clinical definitions and offer practical self-care strategies with genuine compassion. We should understand that setting boundaries isn't always easy, that mindfulness requires practice, and that accessing mental health resources can be daunting yet sometimes imperative. Organizational support holds the responsibility of a deep understanding of the staff's daily realities. Most importantly, we must validate the challenging work within CYF, not as a commonality, but as a sincere recognition of dedication and resilience.

Building resilience and adapting to change requires us to acknowledge the emotional impact of constant shifts in policies, practices, and procedures. Within CYF, we must continue to offer strategies for growth and communication with sensitivity, recognizing that change can be unsettling and stressful yet rewarding. Continued education and training should be delivered with an understanding of the staff's time constraints and learning styles for successful outcomes.

Essentially, an empathetic approach is about seeing the human being behind the job title. It's about recognizing the emotional labor involved in the CYF Divisions' human services work and providing support that is both practical and compassionate. It means acknowledging the staff's resilience, not as a given, but as a testament to dedication in the face of immense adversity. It's about creating a culture where empathy is not just a buzzword, but a guiding principle.

Empathy is not just seeing with another's eyes, but feeling with another's heart. It transforms understanding into connection, and turns compassion into action.

2024 Holiday Host a Family Recap

By Heather Soehle and Shelly Gnewikow, 2024 Host a Family Coordinators

The recent Holiday Host a Family Gift Program, sponsored by AFSCME Employee Group 2634, was once again successful in supporting many families during the recent holiday season. A total of 277 families were referred to the 2024 Host a Family Program. These referrals produced a total of 670 children who received gifts to meet their needs and wants. Additionally, many parents and caregivers received additional holiday assistance to meet the general needs of the home or the caregivers. The generosity this year was simply amazing!

The Holiday Host a Family Program is a long-standing program that benefits low-income and homeless families all over the Dane County area. Each year, recruitment for "hosts" (those who volunteer their time and money to shop for needs and wants of children) begins in October. By November, social workers from Dane County Department of Human Services begin making referrals to the program for families that need a little help during the holiday season. The program receives referrals of all sizes. All of our hosts are matched with a family size of their choosing, some matching with a single family, some taking on a multitude of referrals for larger groups of people to work on together, and some just making monetary donations so other volunteers can shop for a family referral.

This program continues to grow year after year and is heavily supported across many county departments, with many of the hosts being Dane County employees from (but not limited to) Children, Youth, and Families, Prevention & Early Intervention, Youth Justice, Economic Assistance and Work

Services, Corporation Counsel, Family Court, Child Support, District Attorney's Office, City of Madison Finance, AFSCME Local EG 1871, City of Madison Community Development, the Sheriff's Office, the Mayor's Office, and many more. This program is also supported throughout the community by groups of individuals at the following (but not limited to) agencies: the UW Health Child Protection Team, SSM Health, and UW Health and Clinics, Psychological Services, Better Life, St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Pinney Library, Central Library, Abiding Shepherd Lutheran Church, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Hampton Inn & Suites, Fleet Feet, Yahara River Learning Center, United States Postal Service, Adam's Outdoor Advertising, Walgreens, Wisconsin State Lab of Hygiene, Baer Insurance, and at least 1/3 of our hosts are from Epic, who each year advocate and heavily recruit for this program within their private campus. A total of 207 hosts (many of whom were point people for much larger groups of folks) were recruited in 2024. These 207 hosts helped the program fulfill our 277 referrals!

We want to take a moment to THANK all of you who participated in or hosted a family in 2024. We also want to thank ALL the social workers who referred their families to the program this year. A lot of work is put into creating family referrals, communicating with the program and assigned hosts, and working together with hosts to get gifts to and from families all over the county. We want to express our sincere gratitude to anyone who participated in this program. It is people like you who make all the difference in the world. We look forward to the 2025 Holiday Host a Family Program.

Lastly, we want to recognize and send thanks to anyone who donated to John Borquist's memorial for the 2023 Host a Family program. A total of \$510.00 was donated. In 2023, there were a total of 216 hosts recruited and a total of 264 family referrals were fulfilled (702 children benefited!). Thank you all for your donations. Your generosity means everything to this program and the community we serve.

**If you have not participated but are interested in being added as a host for 2025, please email Shelly Gnewikow at Gnewikow.Shelly@Danecounty.gov.

CPS Updates in Access, Initial Assessment, EPS, FACE and ILS

By Julie Ahnen

As most of you may know, we now have two CPS Managers in Dane County – Brenda Blanck and myself. Brenda oversees Ongoing Services, including the Social Service Specialist Team, as well as Targeted Safety Support Funds (TSSF). I'm happy to report that the team I have the privilege of overseeing is fully staffed with a group of professionals that amazes and impresses me every day!

As you will see in a different article, our Access Team has been championing Mandated Reporting Reform. Their work has been recognized statewide and even on a national level as being innovative and impactful. Likewise, the Initial Assessment staff have engaged in ongoing conversations about how we can provide the least intrusive and most supportive interventions with families during what is often the worst experience anyone would imagine. Our staff are providing people with information that explains their rights and outlines what they can expect from their experience with Child Protective Services.

One area of CPS that does not often receive much attention is our Emergency Protective Services (EPS) Team. This group of dedicated professionals provides Access (phone intake) coverage afterhours, on weekends, and on holidays. Supervisor Laura Becher oversees this team, which also includes the CYF Supervisors who are on call to support EPS staff every single day of the year. This team meets regularly

to process situations that come up, discuss best practices and problem-solve concerns. I am grateful for more space in my schedule to support this important work that happens “behind the scenes.”

The Family and Community Engagement Team continues to provide voluntary intervention with families that have experienced an Initial Assessment related to neglect concerns. This team is discovering the challenges involved in engaging with families who want support but are experiencing the daily challenges of living in poverty, struggling with behavioral health challenges, and navigating complex systems in the community.

You may be aware that the Independent Living Team (ILS) has officially moved to the PEI Division as of January 1st of this year, but they are still being overseen by Laura Becher and myself until a new Supervisor is hired. This team embraces innovative practices on a daily basis, finding ways to support young people during their transition from out of home care into various forms of independent living. They partner with numerous community members and organizations to craft unique plans for each young person. I have been impressed with their creative use of Supervised Independent Living, which allows the young person to live independently with additional supports built in.

Summer Camp Opportunities

By Erik Nielsen

Looking for your children to get outdoors and experience summer? Consider summer camp! There are many options in Dane County for both day camps and weeklong overnight camps. Going to camp can be a positive, life-changing experience for kids and is often the highlight of their summer. There may also be funding. Too many camp options to list them all, but here are two overnight camps:



Bethel Horizons Camp, located in Dodgeville, WI, near Governor Dodge State Park has week-long camps (Sunday through Friday). Various camps are offered for grades 2-11 and are divided by age and theme, such as canoe and climb, canoe and bike, underground adventures, water world, clay camp, science camp, and survivor camp, to name a few. Bethel Horizons has a longstanding partnership with Human Services. Application is online or by phone. They ask for a deposit and offer scholarships for those who need financial assistance. There is a bus from downtown Madison to camp. More information and application can be found at <https://bethelhorizons.org/summer/>.



Holiday Home Camp, located near Lake Geneva, WI has week-long camps (different weeks start different days). Various camps are offered for grades 2-12 and are divided by age and theme such as swimming/boating, archery, arts/crafts, and outdoor adventures. They ask for a \$50 deposit and offer scholarships for those who need financial assistance. There is a bus from East Town Mall to camp. Parent info is available at <https://view.genially.com/67ab907bda8cdeb695a0fffb/presentation-hhc-parent-brochure-1pdf>. Application is at <https://lakegenevafreshair.org/registration>.

EISU Summer Programming

By Tonya Pollard

The Early Intervention Services Unit (EISU) is fully engaged in planning summer programming for our youth. This year, participants will take part in the second annual YJP Restorative Justice Training, facilitated by our partners, YWCA, with sessions scheduled in both June and July.

In addition to the training, youth will have the opportunity to engage in first-time experiences through a variety of enriching activities, including volunteer work, job shadowing, financial literacy workshops, mentorship, and more. These experiences will take place both at our YJP building and out in the community, in collaboration with our trusted partners.

Summer is one of the busiest and most impactful seasons for EISU, and we are excited to continue building on the strong relationships we've formed as we support our youth year-round.

Meet the City of Madison Police Department Special Victims Unit (SVU)

By Detective Sergeant Mark Hull



DET SGT MARK HULL
MHULL@CITYOFMADISON.COM

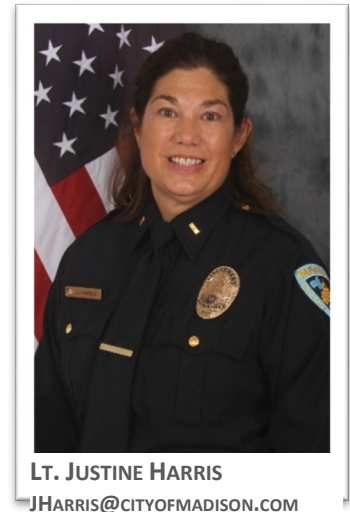
After two years as the SVU Detective Sergeant, I became the supervisor for the Special Victims Unit (SVU) in November 2024. This opportunity came after Glenn Davis was promoted to Lieutenant. I started at MPD in 2007, after a three-year career with the US Capitol Police in Washington, DC. I was born and raised in Wisconsin and received a degree from UW-Madison in Sociology and History. After five years in patrol, I was promoted to detective in 2012. Over the next 12 years, I have investigated pretty much every type of case, including three years in SVU under Detective Sergeant Julie Johnson. I collaborated with many of you during that time and truly valued the connections made with many of the initial assessment social workers.

Lieutenant Justine Harris is my immediate supervisor and the overall SVU commander. She came to SVU in December 2025 after serving as the patrol lieutenant for the South District. Lt. Harris has been with MPD for almost 20 years. Early in her career, Lt. Harris worked in patrol services and then served as the Teresa Terrace neighborhood officer. Lt. Harris was promoted to detective and investigated crimes against children. Prior to her promotion to Lieutenant, she investigated major incidents with the Violent Crimes Unit.

Throughout the years, many of you have worked with members of SVU. If you did not already know, MPD used to operate in a district investigative model, where detectives investigating crimes against children were spread out at district stations across the city. In 2016, MPD created SVU to centralize those detectives into a team that could share information and investigate crimes against children in conjunction with community partners like you all. In 2025, SVU has eight total detectives, who are based out of the South District Station off S. Park St. Two of those detectives investigate internet crimes, one investigates human trafficking, and the remaining five investigate predominately physical and sexual

abuse of children (under 16 years of age). Our goals are to hold offenders accountable, but equally important, SVU seeks to advocate for victims and offer supportive services to them and their families. In 2024, SVU investigated close to 400 total incidents, and three months into 2025, we are around 100 total incidents investigated.

SVU is slightly different than a lot of our other investigative units in that our job relies so heavily on our community partners. Lt. Harris and I hope to continue to foster the relationships that we have with Dane County Human Services, Safe Harbor Child Advocacy Center, and the many other partners throughout the community. SVU is seeking ways to educate and engage the community, and we are very open to requests for presentations on topics like human trafficking and internet safety. If anyone has questions, ideas for collaboration, or community engagement, please do not hesitate to contact Lt. Harris or myself. I cannot overstate how much I value the work that you all do in the community, and I hope to continue to strengthen those relationships.



LT. JUSTINE HARRIS
JHARRIS@CITYOFMADISON.COM

Redefining Reporting in CPS

Mandated Reporting to Mandated SUPPORTING

By Lisa Rondini

This is not your parents'/grandparents' Mandated Reporting

You may have come up as a social worker with “see something, say something” or “when in doubt, call CPS.” Nationally, statewide and in Dane County, there is a shift from mandated reporting to more of a supporter role. Mandated Supporting is a framework that shifts community messaging away from surveillance of families to that of emphasizing the need for shared responsibility around family support; it moves the CPS system away from responding with punitive measures to reflecting the true responsibility of mandated reporters as supporters to the families and communities we serve.

What’s wrong with Mandated Reporters reporting? Isn’t that what we want?

Nationally, research tells us that 53% of African-American children will experience CPS involvement in their childhood, compared to 33% for all other races. African-American children have consistently been referred to CPS at rates between 6-8 times that of White children. Hispanic children have consistently been referred to CPS at double the rate of White children, and Asian youth are referred at rates that are lower than White children.

Income status of a family is significant predictor of involvement in the child welfare system. Families living below the poverty line are three times more likely to be substantiated for child maltreatment. This approach is not working and is, in fact, contributing to the racial disparity within the CPS system.

What is WI/Dane County doing to address this?

DCF has put into motion Child Welfare Transformation with the goal to strengthen communities, build services to support families, and keep children in family settings when possible. Community providers can become a support network for families.

DCDHS has been offering Mandated Reporter training for the past five years. Please feel free to join any presentation on Mandated Supporting. DCDHS is committed to educating community members around the legal definitions of maltreatment and what it means to have reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been maltreated.

If you would like to schedule a Mandated Supporter training for your organization or want to register for a zoom training, please email MRT@danecounty.gov

Current sessions:

4/17/2025 9-11am

06/17/2025 1-3pm

7/14/2025 1-3pm

10/9/2025 1-3pm

11/14/2025 9-11am

What can I do as a Mandated SUPPORTER?

Dane County CPS has opened their phone lines to provide consultation to reporters. During consultations, reporters share their concerns and engage in a conversation with Access social workers about whether there is reasonable cause to suspect a child has been maltreated in accordance with the statutory definitions. During these consults, workers engage reporters in determining if a report should be made or if a family's needs may be better met through community resources, and how the reporter can go about supporting the family.

You're Invited!

Annual Youth Justice Awards Banquet

Thursday, June 26, 2025

5:00-7:00 PM

Warner Park Community Recreation Center
1625 Northport Dr., Madison, WI

Join Youth Justice and Prevention (YJP) to celebrate youth and professionals who support them! Guests can expect to enjoy a catered meal, guest speakers, performances, and the awards ceremony.

Nominate a Youth or Professional for an Award!

Nominations for youth and professionals are currently being accepted. Anyone can nominate a youth or professional involved with YJP programs. Nominations are due April 25. Please find the award descriptions and nomination forms attached to this email.

Please consider nominating youth and professionals you've worked with over the past year so we can give them the recognition they deserve!

Save the Date

Youth Justice and Prevention Conference

Strengthening Communities through Transformative Justice

November 14, 2025 8 am – 4 pm American Family Insurance, American Parkway

YJP Boys' Groups

By Joe Muellenberg



In the Fall of 2024 and Winter of 2025, over 15 boys participated in Wednesday evening groups at Youth Justice & Prevention, led by Program Leaders Ricky Naylor and Joe Muellenberg. These groups are intended to create an encouraging environment for boys to engage in socio-emotional learning, have constructive experiences, and build a sense of community and belonging.

Throughout the Fall of 2024 and Winter of 2025, boys engaged in a variety of enriching activities. They took part in community service projects at the Schulte Food Pantry Garden, learned essential financial and professional skills from Carol O'Mara of The Cove, and participated in meaningful group discussions.

Highlights of the recent groups included a field trip to the 93.1 Jamz radio station for a studio tour with DJ Fusion and attending a youth art gallery at the Northport Community Center where they practiced being role models for young artists. They also had an insightful visit from Dr. Alvin Thomas, a clinical psychologist and professor at UW-Madison, who focused on the importance of Black father-son engagement and mental health. Some of the boys even earned a field trip to watch the UW-Madison men's basketball team play (and win) against Illinois!

These experiences helped the boys develop their emotional intelligence and foster a supportive environment for sharing personal experiences. The program leaders utilized the Carey Guides/BITS and ART curriculum to facilitate constructive discussions, addressing important topics such as moral reasoning, managing anger triggers, building healthy relationships, and enhancing conflict resolution skills.



Big thanks to MSW intern Olivia Dupasquier for supporting the boys to focus and positively engage in group activities. She provided excellent suggestions and helped think through how to improve the structure and consistency across group activities. Olivia even created and led an interactive activity for the boys to think proactively to identify and work toward achieving personal goals. Congratulations on your impending graduation from UW-Madison and we wish you the best in your social work career!