

UNDERSTANDING LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH DCF

The Department of Children and Families' (DCF) [Strategic Plan](#) identifies a set of core approaches, including Family Voice, that staff across the department are working to embed in all aspects of our work. The Office of Family Voice (OFV) was established in 2018 to support the department's approach to listening to, learning from, and partnering with DCF *constituents with lived experience*. OFV's vision is that "Families and communities actively guide and participate in DCF's work to transform child and family services so that all New Jersey residents can be safe, healthy, and connected."

WHAT IS LIVED EXPERIENCE?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines people with lived experience as "those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues, as well as the strategies to address these issues. This lived experience provides them with valuable insights that extend beyond their professional or educational backgrounds, offering a unique perspective rooted in their personal identities and life histories. These insights can potentially inform and enhance systems, research, policies, practices, and programs."¹

The term "lived experience" can be seen as jargon and as not reflecting circumstances that someone may still be experiencing. "Living and lived experience" may also be used or "people impacted by the system". "Constituents" is used in this tipsheet, but other terms such as "community members" or that reference a person's role within the context of DCF, e.g. parent, young person, child, survivor, or individual can be used. It is always best to refer to people using terms they prefer, identify with, and choose.

MEET THE EXPERTS

OFV empowers individuals to share their first-hand knowledge of DCF as well as their perspectives and recommendations, making them vital partners in driving change. Meet two lived experience experts: Tawanna and Terence.

TAWANNA BROWN



Tawanna Brown is a graduate from Seton Hall University with her BA in both Africana studies and Political Science. She joined the inaugural Youth Council in 2020 as the second youngest member. Tawanna was placed in a resource home at the age of 12. She eventually transitioned to kinship placement and from there to independent living. Her experience with the Youth Council allowed her to find her voice "on a whole new level" and made her realize she has "value and something to contribute." Tawanna is extremely proud of her contributions to many projects, including helping to pass the Siblings' Bill of Rights and recommending edits to improve the PRIDE training for resource parents. The fact that the edits she and other Council members suggested were applied made her believe that she could "impact positive change for other people." Tawanna is passionate about her role in advocating for children impacted by the child welfare system and has been able to apply her lived expertise in the work she contributes.

TERENCE DAVIS



Terence Davis has been on the D.A.D.S. Council since 2020. He is a dedicated father and grandfather who grew up in the NJ foster care system. Terence is a business owner, was educated in Trenton public schools, and earned a degree from Mercer County Community College. As a lived experience expert with DCF, Terence has been involved with several projects, including focus groups with the Office of Legal Affairs and Division on Women, and speaking at the 2023 NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect's Biennial Conference. Terence and other D.A.D.S Council members also met with (then) Congressman Andy Kim to help guide federal policy affecting fathers. Terence says partnering with DCF has allowed him to be "a voice for those who look like him but are perceived wrong because they dress a certain way" and it allows him "to be able to create change."

[1] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. "What is Lived Experience?" by Grace Guerrero Ramirez, Kate Bradley, Lauren Amos, Dana Jean-Baptiste, Ryan Ruggiero, Yvonne Marki, Jeremiah Donier, Helena Giroud, Danny Murillo, Laura Erickson, and Amanda Benton. Washington, District of Columbia: 2022.

WHO IS A DCF CONSTITUENT?

A DCF constituent has lived and living experience with DCF services. Constituents are the experts on what they need to be safe, healthy, and connected. OFV partners with DCF's Divisions and Offices to advance shared leadership and co-design with constituents to improve service delivery, practice, policy, and programs.

"Constituent" is an umbrella term for parents, family members, children, youth, and individuals that DCF serves. The range of experiences that DCF constituents may have is highlighted here.



CHILDREN'S SYSTEM OF CARE (CSOC) CONSTITUENTS

- Children and youth receiving mental/behavioral health services and/or substance use services in the community, in-home, or in out-of-home treatment settings
- Children and youth receiving intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) services in the community, in-home, or in out-of-home treatment settings
- Parents and family members that utilize and participate in treatment services for their children and peer supports for themselves

DIVISION OF CHILD PROTECTION & PERMANENCY (DCP&P) CONSTITUENTS

- Families, currently or formerly involved with DCP&P, which may include the following:
 - Parents who have been investigated or had child welfare assessment by DCP&P and children/youth who have been interviewed or assessed by DCP&P
 - Families who receive in-home services or services to support reunification and permanency when children are placed out-of-home
 - Children and youth placed in out-of-home DCP&P settings, e.g., resource care, kinship homes or congregate care settings
- Resource and kinship parents: Kin and non-kin adults who are licensed through DCP&P to care for children and youth in a home setting (I.e. resource home, kinship home)

OFFICE OF EDUCATION (OOE) CONSTITUENTS

- Children and youth receiving educational services and support at a residential facility within DCF's Divisions of Child Protection and Permanency and Children's System of Care, a DCF Regional School, or a public or private community-based program
- Parents of children receiving the above educational services and supports
- Students enrolled in the Teen Education and Child Health (TEACH) programs for pregnant and parenting teens with licensed daycare centers for the infants/toddlers of the parenting teens
- Students enrolled in Transitional Education Centers (TEC) programs for at-risk youth

DIVISION OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS (FCP) CONSTITUENTS

- Parents (Expectant mothers and fathers, adolescents, and parents of children birth through age 5) and caregivers participating in prevention programs and/or connected to community resources and supports, such as Evidence-Based Home Visiting Programs, Family Success Centers, and County Councils for Young Children
- Adolescents participating in prevention and support programs and services, such as School-Based Youth Programs, New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S), Parent Linking Programs, and the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Initiative
- Kinship caregivers (sibling, aunt, uncle, grandparent) who are not licensed by DCP&P but who are eligible for services under the New Jersey's Kinship Navigator Program
- Parents and adolescents with first-hand DCP&P experience, receiving supportive services, including Family Preservation Services (FPS) and Supportive Visitation Services (SVS)
- Adolescents and young adults receiving various services, including housing, life skills, mentoring, employment/training, educational support, youth advocacy, and healthcare

DIVISION ON WOMEN (DOW) CONSTITUENTS

- Survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) that participate in domestic violence programs and services, sexual violence services, and PALS Program
- Participants in abuse intervention programs
- Participants in employment readiness programs, including Displaced Homemakers Programs and Hispanic Women's Resource Centers
- Participants in prevention programming, including girls leadership, and boys and men working to end violence against girls and women

OFFICE OF LICENSING (OOL) CONSTITUENTS

- Parents or family members with children in a DCF-licensed childcare center
- Children who reside or receive services in a licensed DCF group home facility, residential treatment center, or private residence