



January 2016 • TurleyCT.com
A product of TurleyCT Community Publications
Volume 3, Edition 4

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'An opportunity to feel we've made a difference in someone's life'

Morna Murray heads up Department of Developmental Services

by Mara Dresner
Staff Writer

When Morna Murray has visitors to her office, they're often taken by the beautiful artwork. They're also frequently surprised when they learn who the artists are, according to Murray, who was named commissioner of the state Department of Developmental Services by Governor Dannel Malloy in February. The artwork is done by people with disabilities.

"Every time I look at it, I feel calm. It's absolutely beautiful," Murray said of one of the current pieces.

Murray, who is a graduate of the George Washington University National Law Center and a member of the Connecticut, Washington, D.C., and Florida bar associations, has spent her career as an advocate for children, adults and families in the areas of developmental disabilities, health care, behavioral health, early childhood, and child and family wellbeing.

Courtesy photo

Governor Dannel Malloy appointed Morna Murray as commissioner of the state Department of Developmental Services earlier this year.

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Courtesy photo

Morna Murray, commissioner of the state Department of Developmental Services, enjoys reading historical fiction to relax. She was appointed to the position in February 2015.

It's an interest that she developed early in life.

"I was always interested in low-income children and family issues," said Murray, who grew up in Scranton, Penn. "I come from a classic Irish Catholic background. We were taught as kids that you give back what you have. I went to Jesuit schools, which taught me the same thing. Really, it's been something I've felt called to in terms of using whatever tools and gifts I had at my disposal, it sounds Pollyannaish, to help other people that were less fortunate than I was. In my professional background, I've worked for the most part in public policy, particularly in Washington, and nonprofit organizations. I did a lot of lobbying for children and family issues, and disability issues, basically, for vulnerable populations," she said.

Murray served as senior counsel to Sen. Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA); was vice president of First Focus, a national children's policy organization in Washington, DC; and director of Youth Development for the

Children's Defense Fund, also in Washington, D.C. From 2013 until being appointed commissioner, she served as president and CEO of the Connecticut Community Providers Association, a trade association for community-based health and human service providers. The association serves individuals with significant challenges, including intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental health disorders, and substance use disorders.

"They are 98-percent nonprofit providers. They are really salt of the earth people who are helping our most needy people around the state," said Murray, who brings a unique perspective to her work.

"When our son was born and had some challenges, that took me another level. I was fortunate to have a great education and resources, and I still had a difficult time advocating for my son. It sensitized me even more to parents and families and kids who need help and need assistance in figuring out

where to turn," she said.

Today, Murray's son, who has dyspraxia, a processing disorder, is at Cape Cod Community College. She also has an adult daughter.

"I have a good knowledge and experience of what the providers are facing," she said. "Being a parent and having worked with the providers, and having worked in public policy all these years, is really helpful to me in my current position."

She said she considers it an honor to serve as commissioner.

"It's an exciting job. It's a never-a-dull moment job, but it's humbling. There are about 4,000 people in our agency," she said. "It is really a very broad and diverse position. Obviously I'm one person in a leadership role. My job is making sure people in key management positions have my support and are able to function to their best ability and all the people who cascade down from that. It's very much a servant-leader position as I see it. My role is making sure that the people around me have everything they need, that the people who receive those supports as effectively as possible with as little stress as possible, and that things are running as fiscally [sound] as possible in times of great fiscal stress."

It's no simple task.

"Our challenges frankly are we don't have enough resources to meet the needs of all the people who need services. That's a fact of life we have to live with. We have a waiting list of individuals for day services and residential [programs]. We are trying to look at the way our services are delivered and save money anywhere we can, so we can offer more services. That is a daily challenge for us," she said. "Being a large organization, a large bureaucracy, and I don't say that as a negative, making sure everyone is communicating effectively; that sounds like a nice sound bite, but in reality it is difficult to achieve. We're spending a lot of time looking at internal policies and procedures and making some changes so we can operate more as a team. Again, it sounds like a nice sound bite, but that is what we have to have forefront in our heads."

Murray has been working on improving communication,

including bring in an organizational consultant.

"It's a long-haul job. It's not something we can do overnight," she noted.

She's also changed the organizational structure.

"We're making life easier for the consumers. That's what everything we're doing is about," she noted.

She has words of praise for her staff.

"The people I work with are so committed. It's a big job and it can get so stressful. We do take care of each other. We try to make sure no one's getting too overwhelmed," she noted. "I have such a great staff and they work so hard."

Andrea Barton Reeves, president and CEO of HARC Inc., met Murray when she was interviewing for the position at providers' organization.

"She is an extremely adept consensus builder. She's very, very smart and she's very intuitive. She can pick up on what the concerns are, and she always come to the table with solutions. She's always thinking about, 'What can I do to add value? What can I do to make it better?'" Barton Reeves said. "Speaking from a private provider perspective, I think she has completely transformed the culture as far as how providers see DDS."

She said that the perception has changed from being looked at as second-class citizens to being considered as partners in delivering services to vulnerable populations.

Some of the changes Murray has made may seem small, but Barton Reeves said they've had a big positive effect.

"For years and years and years, there used to be a thing called trades meetings. There was a limit on the number of providers who could attend; we were given the agenda in advance. It was very much controlled by DDS. She's totally changed the paradigm. There's no limit; you can bring anyone you want. She moves it around the state, so providers can come and have a dialogue, instead of there being Oz behind curtain. She brings her leadership team so they can hear what the concerns are. It is a much more collaborative, open exchange of ideas. That's

been an enormous change,” she said.

“Commissioner Murray is a champion for persons with intellectual disabilities and their families. She is a strategic thinker fueled by optimism and a sense of commitment that providing essential services to families and individuals in need is not just a nice idea but a vision which must be made real. She has the ability to listen to and hear diverse points of view as she leads all stakeholders down that path. In the face of tough financial times and distressingly disproportionate rescissions imposed by the governor’s office on the Department of Developmental Services, we are most fortunate to have a commissioner of Morna’s caliber and skills,” said David Hadden of Simsbury, the father of two intellectually disabled sons and a member of the Connecticut Council on Developmental Services, who has also served on the boards of HARC Inc. and Oak Hill for more than 25 years.

Murray acknowledged the challenges of working within budgetary constraint, although she said that doesn’t mean that the state isn’t dedicated to providing services.

“The governor has a very tough job. We have a large deficit. They’re being very careful about watching the budget. I know the governor has quite a commitment to people with

disabilities; I’ve witnessed that myself,” Murray said. “We are doing the best we can in difficult economic times. It’s a reality we have to live with and make do. We are trying to find a way to manage those rescissions so that it doesn’t affect the high-quality services to our children and families.”

She believes that the more inclusive society is, the better.

“You can’t preach to people

“Luckily, pretty much every day something comes across your desk [or] you get a phone call saying, ‘This is how you’ve helped me.’ It makes your day, it makes your life. Otherwise you wouldn’t be doing this work.”

–Morna Murray

that their lives are enhanced by being integrated with people with disabilities. There are quite a few studies that when employers hire people with disabilities, it’s good for productivity, it’s good for the culture.

A lot of times, I’ll hear from employers, ‘Our best workers are the people we hire with disabilities. They have the best attitudes. All

they want to do is to make things better,” Murray said. “I think of people as differently abled with different abilities. I have yet to meet a person with a disability that doesn’t have a gift in another area of their lives that is a counterbalance.”

She said that she has learned a great deal from her son.

“I often talk about how my son has taught me to be an authentic human being,” said Murray who

potential and it’s our job is to help get them there.”

Despite the many responsibilities of her position, Murray said she really doesn’t get too stressed. She enjoys reading, especially historical fiction, spending time outdoors, going to the library, even grocery shopping.

“Going to Gardiner’s Market is a big de-stressor for me,” she said with a laugh. “I love South Glastonbury. It’s so nice. I’m so grateful for the life I have.”

Knowing that her work is impacting people’s lives makes it all worthwhile.

“Luckily, pretty much every day something comes across your desk [or] you get a phone call saying, ‘This is how you’ve helped me.’ It makes your day, it makes your life. Otherwise you wouldn’t be doing this work. It’s pretty cool. It makes you feel very fortunate to be in position you’re in,” Murray said.

Recently, one of her staff members shared a collage of photographs that someone had sent showing a client engaged in a variety of activities that had been made possible by the department’s funding.

“It was an incredible collage of photos because of what funding had done. I almost cried,” she said. “Almost every day, there’s an opportunity to feel we’ve made a difference in someone’s life. That’s what it is all about.” **GL**



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