



DHS News

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Five questions with Michele Kustra

Michele is senior social work training specialist in the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Training Department. She can be reached at Michele.Kustra@alleghenycounty.us.

1. What was your path to Allegheny County/DHS?

As a young person, I always had an interest in child development and considered early childhood education as a career path. However, after graduating from college, I discovered that the workforce was full of other people with the same idea. As I was looking for a job, I saw positions available for child welfare caseworkers and began my career here at DHS as a caseworker in CYF Intake. I loved both the work and the different career options available within the agency. After a few years in the Intake Department, I moved into our Foster Care Department and had the opportunity to train prospective foster parents. As time went on, I was able to leave my job as a caseworker and move into my current role in the Training Department.

2. Tell us a bit about the work you do.

A large part of my current role is educating new casework trainees about the necessary policies and procedures of the child welfare casework process. This is done through the delivery of a mandated curriculum that is determined at the state level and enhanced through the delivery of several Allegheny County specific modules. I also collaborate with the rest of my team to develop and deliver trainings on supplemental topics, which give all casework staff the opportunity to attend training sessions to maintain their casework certification. Everyone in my department also acts as a mentor to new workers, is involved with various special projects and operates as part of the support staff team in one of the CYF regional offices.

3. How does your work help to support DHS's mission and goals?

Part of our training process with new workers is helping them understand how historical practices in child welfare helped to shape and reshape the work we do today. With those historical practices in mind, we work diligently with staff to help them see how collaboration with families helps them to achieve better outcomes. Our teaming model gives workers the opportunity to help families identify strengths and draw on their own support systems to manage challenges. We model and practice teaming in every aspect

of the training process, which gives staff the opportunity to incorporate this into their professional practice as well.

4. *What most excites you about your work?*

I love the opportunity to meet new people who are excited to begin their career in child welfare. I look forward to sharing information with trainees in the classroom and watch them grow into competent caseworkers in the field. I also love that even though I often provide the same trainings, each training cohort is different and brings new insight, research or practice to the group. It helps me look forward to coming to work each day.

5. *What is the most important thing DHS staff should know about your role?*

Although a large part of my role is training new staff, each of us in the Training Department at CYF is happy to assist in training community partners and others inside and outside of the DHS system. We get multiple requests every year for community-based presentations about the process and structure of Children, Youth and Families. We are also available to provide ongoing educational support to anyone who has questions about any of the topics that we train. Our work does not stop at the end of an individual's time in training.