

Jim Doyle
Governor

Reggie Bicha
Secretary



State of Wisconsin
Department of Children and Families

201 East Washington Avenue, Room G200
P.O. Box 8916
Madison, WI 53708-8916

Telephone: 608-267-3905
Fax: 608-266-6836
dcf.wisconsin.gov

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Contact: Ryan Reszel, Department of Children and Families, 608-266-9000

Secretary Bicha Honors ‘Caring for Kids’ Award Winners

Reggie Bicha, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, recognized the incredible accomplishments of five child welfare professionals by presenting them with the Secretary’s Caring for Kids Award, for Excellence in Child Welfare. The ceremony at the State Capitol celebrated Social Work Month and the unique contributions of workers who have gone to extraordinary lengths to care for children and strengthen families in Wisconsin.

“Protecting children is a 24-7 job,” Secretary Bicha said. “Child welfare professionals nurture where others have neglected. They initiate healing where others have hurt. They lift up where others have knocked down. They are our heroes.”

As a former child welfare social worker and supervisor, Secretary Bicha felt it was important to honor those courageous and dedicated individuals who save lives and support families each and every day they go to work. The following individuals are the inaugural Secretary’s Caring for Kids Award recipients:

- Stephanie Lozano of the Ho-Chunk Nation
- Leslie Mollet of Walworth County
- Mary Ellen Prinsen of La Crosse County
- Kathleen Salmon of Milwaukee County
- Carolann Yeska of Waushara County

The five award winners were chosen from nominees by private and public agencies across the state of Wisconsin.

“We are celebrating child welfare professionals from rural communities and urban environments,” Secretary Bicha said. “Yet whether from the heartland or the heart of the inner city, they have made a remarkable difference in the lives of Wisconsin’s families. These individuals truly embody what it means to care for kids.”

Child welfare professionals serve those most in need in their communities in a number of ways, including: investigating claims of child abuse, recruiting and supporting foster or adoptive parents and working with family caregivers. They also provide services in group home and residential care. Child welfare professionals work in coordination with law enforcement agencies, school officials, health care providers and substance abuse professionals.

Stephanie Lozano

At 26, Stephanie Lozano has already made a significant impact on the children and families of the Ho-Chunk Nation. She represents tribal children in court rooms across the country, helping them understand their rights to maintain their culture, their language and their tribal heritage.

What makes Lozano's dedication all the more remarkable is that she has aspirations to obtain a law degree, but has temporarily set this goal aside and put the needs of kids in her community first. Even when she does receive this degree, she plans to continue working for the Ho-Chunk Nation as the Child and Family Services attorney.

Leslie Mollet

In her more than 25 years of service to her community, Leslie Mollet has always focused on achieving permanency and safety for children. Most of her time is spent with families who suffer from trauma, substance abuse, mental illness and homelessness.

On one of Mollet's cases, a young parent kidnapped her baby from a court-ordered placement with her grandmother. When the parent and baby were eventually found in Central America, Mollet and a group of detectives traveled to Belize to help rescue the baby. Because of Mollet's work, the child was safely reunited with her grandmother.

Mary Ellen Prinsen

Mary Ellen Prinsen has committed more than 40 years of her life to serving the children of Western Wisconsin. In that time, she has helped countless families become safe and stronger.

Prinsen and her colleagues in La Crosse County are well known in this field for developing ways to cater to the unique needs of families. The vision of creating "No Wrong Door" became a reality when she began basing service provision on the philosophy that no matter which door a child or family in need comes to the attention of human services, they will always receive services that address their unique situation.

Kathleen Salmon

Kathleen Salmon is always there for children in need. When a child experienced a mental health crisis late into the evening, Salmon was there to intervene. When another child was at risk for self-harm, Salmon provided early morning respite. She even helped three children reconnect with their mother after nearly ten years apart. Salmon personally took the children to Chicago to make the reunification possible.

This is just a snap-shot of Salmon's willingness to go above and beyond the expectations of her position. She seeks to provide safety for children and families and simultaneously strives to improve their overall well-being.

Carolann Yeska

Carolann Yeska was assigned a case where both parents were addicted to prescription pills, cocaine and abusing alcohol. The couple had three young children and accompanying allegations of significant neglect related to their substance addictions.

Yeska encouraged services that the parents often refused or did not follow through with. She even offered them food and transportation to appointments. After one year, the couple agreed to go to treatment, but the early months of recovery were a huge challenge.

Thanks to Yeska's efforts, both parents have now been sober one full year. The kids have been living with their parents – successfully – for three months. Both parents are employed full-time and are committed to following their respective recovery programs.

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