

An interview with Patricia Wilson-Coker
Commissioner of the CT State Department of Social Services
By Tony Norris



Patricia Wilson-Coker has a BA from the University of Connecticut and a dual degree, a master's in social work plus a law degree, from the University of Connecticut. From her admission to the Connecticut Bar in 1981 until 1988, she served first as Assistant Professor and then Associate Professor of Social Work at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford. She then began state service, initially with the Department of Children and Youth Services, then the Department of Income Maintenance, which became the Department of Social Services. She now heads the agency as Commissioner. The Commissioner met with us in her office at 25 Sigourney

Street in Hartford to talk about teen pregnancy prevention.

Norris: Throughout your life, you have dedicated yourself to human services in one way or another. What was it in your life that shaped you and made you decide to dedicate yourself to human services?

Commissioner: I've seen a lot of bad things happen to people when help wasn't there for them. I've always enjoyed fighting for the underdog. I can recall experiences with my mother-in-law who was fighting for social security benefits – which may have been my first advocacy work in a real way. Or even farther back, I remember working in a restaurant and having an employer pick on an older woman with disabilities who worked there as the dishwasher, and I became her advocate. Perhaps it was the way my mother raised me to care about people who had less than I did, and to use whatever talents or knowledge or abilities I had to help somebody. It could have been something as basic as that. Or perhaps it was later on in life, when I developed some individual experiences, which caused me to need to be an advocate on behalf of my husband's family. I'm not sure which of these things contributed most to my desire to make a career in human services. Going into social work clearly was a move to gain some expertise in that direction. Going into law...and I combined those two fields...there's a recognition that you need the humanity that social work breeds, teaching you about human beings and how to help human beings. Yet you can't help poor people unless you understand legal processes and legal structure and unless you can fight within that context. The two go hand in hand. I guess I was lucky that I recognized that early in my life.

I make it sound deliberate, but it was really by chance that I entered the social work field. I was going to law school and my cousin was going to social work school. I would visit her and became interested in her textbooks, which I would read for fun. When I realized that there was a dual program in law and social work at the University of Connecticut, I decided to combine the two. Whenever you work with vulnerable populations, social work and law fit together very nicely. The combination is custom-made for advocacy.

Norris: You grew up in the Storrs area, but your father was in the military. Did you move around a lot as a child?

Commissioner: My father settled us in the Storrs area, actually Warrenville. My parents built a house there when I was very young, about six years old. My father had us comfortably settled there while he went on his tours of duty. But when he was assigned to Europe, I was eleven and my



sister was fourteen, it was a perfect time to take kids of that age on a tour.

Norris: Where in Europe was he assigned?

Commissioner: In Spain and in Germany.

Norris: Where in Spain did you live, and did you live primarily in an American compound?

Commissioner: We lived just outside Madrid in a rural area, “El Encinar de los Reyes,” that translates to “Royal Oaks,” where most of the Americans lived. It wasn’t on the base, it was almost a suburb of the base. I went to an American school, but many of the service providers were Spanish and we interacted with their families. I used to go to the bullfight every Sunday, chaperoned of course. Young ladies never went anywhere unchaperoned, or in slacks. Fernanda, who helped my mother with childcare and other work, would bring me to the “mercada”, the marketplace, and it was great fun, especially at that age, to follow her around Madrid.

Norris: Do you think living in Spain and Germany affected who you are?

Commissioner: Absolutely. It certainly gave me a great understanding of the importance of culture and history and how that affects people and how they respond to life. The French are a very different people than the Spanish, the Germans are very different than the French, or the Spanish, or the English. My appreciation for different people and their cultures, and the importance that has in service delivery, may have come from these experiences, absorbing these cultures at an early age and feeling very lucky to have had that experience. I have a great respect for human beings -- who they are, where they come from, and maybe it comes from this early experience. It’s hard to say what your defining experiences were. Different things have an impact and it’s hard to separate these out and say “that particular experience shaped me.” It did give me a greater worldview, who I am in relationship to others, and how you have to serve people from within a context that they understand.

Norris: What are your thoughts on the most effective strategy for dealing with teen pregnancy prevention?

Commissioner: Any strategy we use has to be early. Children’s understanding of who they are and why they might want to delay pregnancy has to start before the age when they’re beginning to learn about sex. We’re talking about third grade, fourth grade. You can’t start talking about family planning at that point, but you can talk about what it takes to make a good parent, the level of maturity necessary, the level of ability to support a family, the level of educational needs. It seems to me that you need to do that very early...define what a family is, what a parent is, what a good parent is and how one achieves that. I don’t think we start to talk about these issues early enough in this country. And, it has to be comprehensive. You’re not going to get at it through just one avenue. There are many causes of and effects that result from teen pregnancy. There’s an education component, there’s the problem of kids having too much unstructured time. Kids have limited ability to look past the immediate...when you can’t see a future for yourself, then you can’t see a good reason not to create something that you think you can control, like a life. Basic sex education is important. A lot of people focus on that, but it’s just one component. There’s also the community piece. I think most people don’t think about the effect the community can have. Are there enough activities for kids? Are there adults willing to interact and supervise young people? Are values placed on different ways to grow, other than sexually? Can they look out their window, either literally or figuratively, and see a future for themselves, a life that they want to live, and believe that they have the skills to obtain that lifestyle? If these things can be engendered in

children, then teen pregnancy may not be as big a problem.

But there are also studies that show that if you live in a depressed area, where things as basic as your personal safety are an issue, people may look at life differently, life may have a different meaning under those circumstances. It's the tenuousness of one's everyday existence that might lead to a liaison with another individual. Children in that environment may be thinking, "Today is today, and I have that. I own that. I can control my body, if nothing else in the world. And if I can give that and make something of that, why shouldn't I?" Whereas if you are in an environment where people can see that there is more, that they can achieve a sense of control outside of their own body, then taking some of these other avenues may seem like a more viable option. So the community does play a role.

The messages we receive from the media are another important factor. If the message is "sex is fun," that physical beauty generates respect, that being sexually attractive achieves a certain amount of status or clout, then we shouldn't be surprised when kids act on that message. The community, though, can play a role in counteracting that kind of superficial media message. We, as part of our communities, have to teach people to value themselves outside of their physical being. And we have to educate young men as well as young women. If young men see sex as a rite of passage, as an indication of their manhood, and that's the spin the media reinforces, then we shouldn't be surprised when we see boys respond to that message. We need to teach responsibility for actions, and not in a negative, punitive way, but showing a better way of life, teaching about child support, that's it's more than just a financial responsibility, it's a legal and moral responsibility. We need to teach respect of girls, of young women, we need to mature people through education. That will have an impact.

And we're not just talking about young men. There are older men involved in teen pregnancy. We're talking about statutory rape. We need to address all the issues through education and legal accountability.

Norris: Can you talk about the Department of Social Services' current approach to teen pregnancy prevention and describe the direction you'd like the Department to take in the future?

Commissioner: Right now we fund nine teen pregnancy prevention projects. Our approach has been primarily funding other entities to do positive youth development through use of the Carrera model. And we also have the "Breaking the Cycle" program in Hartford that targets a slightly younger population. I think both programs are significant and I'm not favoring one approach over the other.

In terms of the future, teen pregnancy rates are falling, and I must believe that these programs are contributing to that, both the Carrera model, with its outreach and long-term interaction, or the shorter term, Breaking the Cycle model, which reaches hundreds of kids. But, there may be other innovative programs and practices that we should investigate. I've been reading about other states working on preventing the second pregnancy, which often happens shortly after the first. It's an approach called Second Chance Homes. As you know, we require that teenage parents live with a supervising relative, and that they just can't set up their own household. But in situations where there is no supervising relative, then perhaps this Second Chance Home could fulfill that need -- teaching the child parenting and life skills while they continue their education. Now, we try to locate another supervising person for that teenage parent. The "Second Chance Homes" concept could be another model that provides closer supervision and more services for teenage parents. The Fatherhood Initiative, which we're beginning to undertake here in Connecticut, is another innovative program. One aspect of the Fatherhood Initiative is looking at how well prepared men are for parenthood. Every child deserves the support of both parents, both financially and emotionally. Our welfare system was set up for mothers and children. But there is often a man who is a very important, but underacknowledged, part of that equation -- somewhere underground. Statistics show that early in the child's life -- we're talking about before two or three years old --

often the father is living with the mother or at least visiting very often. As that child ages, he or she tends to lose that father, he tends to drift away. We need to find out why that happens and see to what extent we can establish paternity earlier and make it possible for that man to be a viable member of that family. We would be more likely to end up with not just more child support payments, but more emotional support for that child. We need to make this happen through education, training, collaborations with the labor force as well as trying to provide some advocacy for the man in both the child support and custody court systems.

Men need to be more than a paycheck, or a child support check, and become an important part of that child's existence and future. That's part of what the Fatherhood Initiative is about. It'll begin with a study of how we treat fathers, what's wrong with our system, how we can be more father-friendly in various state agencies, what programs are out there for fathers and, how we can support and publicize those programs. We will examine what we doing well and what needs to be changed in our child support system. Does the treatment of low-income fathers differ from the treatment of fathers with significant means?

We need to consider the prison population since that's where the fathers of many of the children in our system are, and, determine how we can build better connections between that system and the child support system. Many times, men go into the prison system and no one instructs them on how to modify their child support. Then they leave prison and they're hit with a bill for \$30,000 that they owe the state. It would be more appropriate to work with him as he enters prison, so he can begin to make an appropriate contribution to his child when he returns to society. I'm not saying that every man in jail is an appropriate father, I just don't want to lose someone unnecessarily because another system is working against him. Statistics show that men who come out of prison and are connected to a family are much less likely to return to jail.

We're going to try pilot sites to test this program out, with an education and training component, and developing support systems for fathers. We're in the early stages here. Maybe we'll try three pilots with a hundred or fewer men each. It's a public education process to move the focus away from just women and children and recognize the importance of the man's role.

Norris: Do you feel welfare reform is working in Connecticut and how do you think it's affecting teen pregnancy prevention?



Commissioner: That's kind of a trick question since it assumes welfare reform is something we did and now we assess how it worked. Step one of welfare reform is over. We're just beginning steps two, three and four. To the extent that we changed the way that people think about welfare, to the extent that we changed the notion that welfare was a permanent or semi-permanent way of life, I think that it was successful. More than fifty percent have left the welfare rolls.

Moving people into the mainstream, and getting them in ever-improving jobs so they get to the point where they're truly self-sufficient and not just "off welfare" -- that's the work that is now taking place. Normalizing that population, connecting it to the workforce system that serves the rest of us, and insuring that the Labor Department and workforce development services are fully used by that population so they can improve that first job to increasingly more satisfying, better paying, better kinds of jobs -- that's where the focus on welfare reform is now. Insuring that the children of women and men who were in the welfare system have role models who are working is a very positive thing. It's important to teach people that they have opportunities, like "school to career." It's important to show people that they have something in their future beyond welfare and having babies. When you've never seen someone close to you work, when you don't

know what a joy it can be to bring home a paycheck, or to feel needed by the larger society, when you're seeing your mother or father going to work for the first time, completing a training program, getting a job, surviving his or her working test period, getting a promotion, when you see those things at home, the likelihood of your thinking that you're capable of achieving those same goals, and moving beyond your parents is much improved.

I recently heard some criticism of welfare reform that children are becoming pregnant because they are being left unattended while the parent or parents work. You have to realize that many other children are being left unattended in families with two working parents as well, so I don't think that this is just a problem for former welfare recipients. We need to develop opportunities for children to have supervised activities while their parents, whether or not they are former welfare recipients, are at work. Another positive aspect of welfare reform is having children see their parents, whom they probably viewed just as caretakers, succeeding in a larger work environment. Children may see the opportunity to be able to move forward as well. Most of us surpass our parents, most of us have better jobs than our parents had. Even if a former welfare recipient is moving forward slowly, that can be a place that their child can use as a foundation, to move further forward than their parents did.

Norris: Is there a message you would like to send to the people in the trenches of teen pregnancy prevention?

Commissioner: Keep doing what you're doing. When you're in the trenches, it's hard to see the progress. You see the progress with the one individual you're working with but you can't see the larger picture. There are so many different pieces in the teen pregnancy prevention puzzle: improvements in the general community, improvements in children's recreation, positive adult role models, messages we give to children, education and not just sex education but people understanding that there's education in life beyond the teenage years. These messages work together to create young adults who see a future and will make a future for themselves. People in the trenches need to know what an important role they play. I often think of it as ripples in a pond. You dropped that pebble and you may never see how many ripples that pebble caused. You may be that one influence that causes that child to think "somebody cares enough about me, to really think I can do it. I bet I can, too." So these interactions have an impact. And since the child is young, the helping foundation you establish for that child builds a path for the next helper that comes along. So keep doing what you're doing. You're making a difference and you should feel pride in the declining teen pregnancy rate.

Norris: This may be related to teen pregnancy or it may not. You've spent so much of your life, both in social services and the law, dealing with children. What is your perspective on the anger we see among our children these days?

Commissioner: Perhaps a lot of the anger may come from the dissonance between what people have and what they see that others have. Our television and media often portray the glamour of money, power and control that many people aren't feeling. I think that some of it may come from the media.

I think we may have become a less civil population than we once were. We also don't have the manners we once had. We don't have the common human consideration for one another that even in my childhood was common, and I'm not that old. When I was young there were certain courtesies, certain human kindnesses that were taught and expected and it seems somewhere along the way we lost that.

I am not one of those people who like to blame parents for everything that their children do, but some of the adults in this society have to take responsibility. I don't want to oversimplify, but I think there are a lot of negative things that are portrayed in the media. Life seems cheap because so

much in the media makes life seem like it's not real, and that may contribute to people not thinking much of violence when they see it.

And, I think there's a widening separation between those who have a lot and those who don't have enough. I don't think that is lost on people, and I think there's a certain amount of helplessness and hopelessness that comes from not having enough in an environment where there's so much. Children are neglected in different ways than they used to be. I think that we don't spend as much time creating loving human beings as we do productive ones, and I think you have to be loving and productive. This goes back to the lack of civility and humanness that we as a society sometimes demonstrate. We don't spend enough time focusing on the basic human needs that children and young people have, and attending to them in any meaningful way. Instead, we focus on how good their scores are, or how much money they make, or what kinds of jobs they can get. I heard on the news this morning that some people are picking their children's names based on how good the name will look on a resume. It struck me as odd. When I picked my son's name, I wanted a name that meant something and hopefully would capture who he would be. It seems odd to focus on the look of a resume when selecting your child's name.

What role do we give recreation, music, art, and cultural appreciation in our children's learning? Learning is more than reading, writing and arithmetic; it's more than computers. You also need to learn how to get along with the person next to you, how to demonstrate caring across cultures, how to listen, how to articulate and advocate for people who have less than you. That's how you make a human being. (Laughter) Here I am talking like I'm the mother of thousands when I've only had one child, but to me that's what you have to do to make a complete human being. You have to have all of those aspects and you have to start young, because by five years old they're pretty much who they're going to be. That's not to say that we should throw out our education system, but it does mean that we have to start just out of the womb, or maybe while they're still in there, to begin to develop values. Children don't learn from what you say, they learn from what they see. They have to see us work, they have to see us care, they have to see us give, they have to see us listen, they have to see us play, they have to see us handle disappointment well, they have to see us handle conflict intelligently and productively. That's how they'll learn to do those things on their own.

Children learn to be responsible by seeing us be responsible. We must have missed the boat somewhere along the way to have what we're having happen now. I hate to be the person who says, you know, "it must be the parents" or "it must be the adults." I think the whole society must have missed the boat collectively. We have to get back to a more integrated education at a much earlier age. People who do something disrespectful to somebody might not know what respect is or even respect themselves. Maybe that's why I've come to the conclusion that we have to take great care what we teach our children, as a whole society, not just parents, or schools, but as a whole society.

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