



On Balance

Dane County Department of
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Meet Presiding Juvenile Court Judge Nia Trammell



Judge Nia Trammell was named Presiding Judge for the Dane County Juvenile Court effective January 20, 2026. A long-time Madison resident, she is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School. She worked in Michael, Best & Friedrich's commercial litigation unit as an associate attorney for nine years. She also dabbled in employment law and intellectual property law. Judge

Trammell began her career as a public servant when she was appointed to an administrative law judge position with the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Workers' Compensation Division. She served in that capacity for over 11 years. In 2019, Judge Trammell pivoted away from her traditional legal role to serve as the chief operating officer for the Department of Safety and Professional Services under Governor Tony Evers' administration. In that role, she served as the deputy secretary, managing the daily operations of an agency with 250 professionals dedicated to licensing millions of professionals doing business in Wisconsin and protecting the safety of Wisconsin citizens in work performed by the building and trade industries.

On Aug. 28, 2020, Governor Evers appointed her as the first Black female judge to serve on the Dane County Circuit Court. She has spent the majority of her time on the bench in the juvenile court rotation and served two years in the civil court rotation. In addition to her current rotation, Judge Trammell recently helped launch the Dane County Community Court, which aims to provide repeat, low-

level offenders with wraparound social services and targeted rehabilitation to reduce recidivism and address root causes of criminal behavior.

Judge Trammell's passion for serving youth and marginalized communities is evident from her long history of giving her time, treasure, and leadership to various organizations. She has been involved in or served in leadership roles for the Dane County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Wisconsin CASA, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girls on the Run, Madison Equal Opportunities Commission, the Madison Police and Fire Commission, Urban League of Greater Madison and the Madison Metropolitan (WI) Chapter of The Links, Inc. Through her civic engagement, she has helped shape policy, mentor youth, and champion causes that help improve the lives of others in our community.

Since assuming her new role, Judge Trammell has met with various stakeholders to learn about their work – successes and pain points. She has been soliciting input on how our ecosystem is functioning, with an eye toward process improvements. Her most immediate priority is to conduct the biennial review of the Dane County Juvenile Court Program's Policy and Procedure Manual, as dictated by the Court's local rules. She is equally sensitive to stakeholder concerns about continuity of care for youth and families serviced by the Court and its partners. Stakeholders have asked for consideration on several issues, including, but not limited to:

- Concerns around the inadequacy of placement options for youth, including options for step down from more restrictive placements into their homes;
- Exploring how to best position shelter home to address higher need youth who do not require secure placement;
- How to best address justice-involved youth who may need intervention as children in need of protection or services;
- Creating better safety nets that address the mental health needs of youth that touch our system;
- Examining how we can best serve youth who straddle the youth and adult justice system;
- Getting ahead of the eventual retirement of foster parents who have served our youth to ensure that we fill the foster home gap; and
- Improving scheduling times with the Branches, as well as addressing requests for operationalizing specific measures to create consistency.

Congratulations Heather!



Heather Crowley, YJP Early Intervention Services Unit Supervisor, is a part of the graduating class of the 2026 National Tribal Trial College!

According to Heather, “Excellent faculty, staff, and new friends from Indian Country across the U.S. have made it the best.”

Now they venture on to support women back in our tribal courts who lack representation in cases of domestic violence and other vulnerable situations.

Grace Under Pressure

By Kim Lex

Recently, I experienced an unexpected life-threatening medical emergency at work after being stung by a wasp and going into anaphylactic shock. What made the experience especially memorable was the way my coworker, Oto Carrasquel Zambrano, responded. It was with calmness, compassion, and grace.

Oto hadn't even been aware that I had been stung. When he returned and realized I was having a serious reaction, he immediately stepped in, remained remarkably calm, helped communicate what was happening, and made sure I received the emergency care I needed.

What could have been a chaotic situation was met with steady, caring action. And his support didn't end when the ambulance arrived. He used his personal time to visit me in the emergency room and took the time to pray with me. That simple act of kindness meant more to me than I can adequately express.

The experience reminded me that how we respond in difficult moments matters. His ability to remain calm, act quickly, and care for a coworker during a vulnerable moment was a beautiful example of teamwork and compassion.

Ernest Hemingway described “guts” as “grace under pressure.” I can't think of a better way to describe what I experienced that day. Not to mention the daily grace under pressure I have witnessed with the entire Social Service Specialist team.

I am incredibly grateful Oto was there, and I will always remember not only what he did, but the grace with which he did it.

You Don't Have to Do It Alone

How FACE brings families, workers, and community partners together to create lasting change

By Sue DeBuhr

At its heart, the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) program is about one simple idea: no one should have to navigate life's challenges alone. Families don't have to figure everything out by themselves. FACE workers don't have to have every answer. And supporting families doesn't belong to any one person or system – it happens through relationships, partnerships, and a community of people willing to walk alongside a family.

Over the past year, FACE has continued to grow as Dane County's voluntary prevention program, partnering with families before challenges escalate to formal child welfare involvement. FACE works alongside families experiencing significant stressors such as housing instability, mental health concerns, substance use, financial hardship, and parenting challenges. Rather than focusing on investigation, FACE focuses on engagement – building trusting relationships, identifying family strengths, and connecting parents with the supports they need to create lasting stability.

One theme we've consistently seen is families are often navigating multiple challenges at the same time. Housing instability, in particular, continues to affect many of the families we serve. A parent who is worried about where their family will sleep next week may also be trying to maintain employment, manage a child's behavioral health needs, or address their own mental health or substance use challenges. These issues rarely occur in isolation, which is why FACE uses a coordinated, wraparound approach.

This year, FACE also became a Supportive Housing Agency and began incorporating 1915(i) Housing Support Services into our work. This has expanded our ability to help eligible families address housing barriers, transition into housing, and maintain housing stability. It's another tool that allows us to address one of the most common sources of family stress before it becomes a crisis.

FACE is also expanding its community partnerships and joining CarePortal, a platform that connects families with local churches and community organizations that can help meet concrete needs. Sometimes creating stability starts with something as basic as a bed, furniture, clothing, transportation, or help with a utility bill. CarePortal gives FACE another way to connect families with community resources while continuing to work alongside them on their larger goals. It reflects an important part of the FACE philosophy: we don't have to do this work alone, and neither do families.

The team has also been strengthening the way we support families through regular case consultation with a licensed professional counselor. These consultations give staff additional perspective on trauma, mental health, behavioral patterns, and the stages of change, while

providing practical tools for navigating complex situations and helping families move forward at their own pace. Just as families benefit from having people in their corner, FACE workers benefit from having colleagues and professionals who can help them step back, reflect, and see a situation from a different perspective.

While every family's journey is unique, one thing remains consistent: meaningful change happens through relationships. FACE workers walk alongside families, celebrating small successes, navigating setbacks, and helping parents build on their own strengths to create safe, stable environments for their children. They don't do it alone, either. FACE works with schools, behavioral health providers, medical providers, housing organizations, other county programs, and community partners to build a network of support around each family.

Parent Spotlight: You Don't Have to Do It Alone

One FACE parent's experience of having someone in her corner

What this work looks like in practice is best understood through the experiences of the families themselves. When EW first connected with FACE, life wasn't necessarily different from today – it was just harder. As a first-time single mom, EW was trying to figure things out on her own.

She knew she needed help, but asking for it wasn't easy. **"I know I don't know everything. I want to give my son the best opportunities I can in life. I don't have to do it all by myself."**

For EW, one of the most meaningful parts of working with FACE has been the relationship she developed with her FACE worker. She describes knowing that someone genuinely cares about her and her son, and that she has someone on her side. **"I can be open and honest about what I am thinking, without judgement."** That relationship has also given EW space to move at her own pace. Her FACE worker is there when she's ready to try something new, while also supporting her choices and timing when she's not.

Support has also included practical help – connecting her with resources and providing financial assistance for needs that aren't always covered elsewhere, including laundry, rent, and daycare assistance. But perhaps the biggest change has been recognizing that asking for help isn't a weakness. **"I don't like feeling weak. I don't like being scared. Growing up is about asking for help when you need it. Sometimes there are things that are bigger than yourself. I recognize change takes time."**

Today, EW is proud of how open she has become and continues to work toward her goals: graduating from school, getting a car, improving her life, and becoming the best parent she can be for her son. Her vision of parenting is deeply connected to her own relationship with her mother, who made her feel seen and safe enough to be honest about how she was feeling. **"I never felt invisible with her. I could be honest about how I was feeling."** That is something EW hopes to carry forward with her son.

EW's experience captures what FACE hopes to offer every family: not a promise that challenges will disappear, but the reassurance that families don't have to face those challenges alone. When asked what she would want other families to know about FACE, her answer was simple: **"They should give it a chance, even when it is hard, uncomfortable, or scary. You can have someone with you in the scary. You don't have to be alone."**

2026 Spring & Summer YJP Boys' Group

By Joe Muellenberg



During the Spring and Summer 2026 sessions, 11 boys participated in groups at Youth Justice and Prevention (YJP). The program focused on helping participants better understand their emotions, make positive choices, and set meaningful goals for their future.

The boys participated in interactive sessions led by Morgan Reed of Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS), where they explored healthy relationships, teen dating violence, and the impact of gender stereotypes. Through discussion and hands-on activities, they developed empathy for survivors, strengthened their understanding of respectful relationships, and learned to recognize and challenge harmful beliefs and behaviors.

The group also took part in community-based activities, including fishing, boxing at BossHog Training Center, and a behind-the-scenes tour of Camp Randall Stadium at UW-Madison. These experiences promoted teamwork, built confidence, introduced new skills, and reinforced the value of positive relationships and healthy decision-making.



Group discussions complemented these activities by providing a safe space for participants to reflect on their experiences and discuss topics such as teen takeovers, peer pressure, conflict resolution, and the legal and personal consequences of their choices. Together, the discussions and experiential activities helped the boys build practical life skills, strengthen positive relationships, and develop greater confidence in making responsible decisions for their future.





Meet Acting Community Program Manager Diane Brown

Suzanne Stute retired from Dane County on August 7, 2026. Suzanne worked as the Community Program Manager for 19 years, in which she supervised both the Youth Shelter Home and the Home Detention Program. Diane Brown has been designated as Acting Community Program Manager until recruitment for a new supervisor is completed. Diane shares her journey in working with Dane County Youth Services.

I have been around the Dane County Juvenile Court Program since the beginning of 1995 when I started as a volunteer in Detention. Dennis McClain then hired me on as an LTE in Detention, which eventually led to me becoming a permanent part-time employee. I enjoyed my time working in Detention, but I had to make the move to full-time down at the Dane County Juvenile Shelter Home in summer of 1997. The opportunity to become full-time made me want more, so I ventured out and began mentoring on the side for CAP, which is now known as Briarpatch Youth Services. I learned and enjoyed my couple of years doing that and mentoring some young ladies in the community. It gave me the opportunity to learn more about our clients from a different aspect. While mentoring, I was asked to join a new program at East High School that was developed from a DMC grant. Peaceful Youth Options was operating in East High School helping to mediate between youth and youth and staff, offered group programming, tutoring, and a place to sometimes just cool off for a youth. While I was mentoring, I also decided it was time to start foster parenting. It was something I always knew I would do in life. There have been so many life lessons, learning experiences, insight, knowledge, and new family members gained. Foster parenting at times was one of the most difficult things that I managed, but rewarding experiences watching so many young people develop into productive citizens. Michelle Palay was always a voice of reason on the toughest days when foster parenting challenged our patience and skills. My husband and children have always been the most important people and support system for me and the things I have done. While I was pregnant with my own children, I also decided it was a good time to go back to school and earn my Masters in Counseling. Russell always pushed me to keep going, and I did, graduating two weeks before my son was born. Needless to say, I was tired as I was still working full-time and fostering four girls at a time. We collectively decided that we would stop foster parenting when our own children entered high school. This enabled us to so give them the attention and focus completely on them as they had shared their entire lives sharing their parents. So, I have a long history in the community working with our population of youth in a variety of settings and experiences. I have case managed, supervised, and worked crisis moments in a variety of settings. I have learned a lot over the years from previous coworkers and supervisors. I'm thankful.

2026 YJP Awards Banquet

By Alex Maves



The 2026 Youth Justice and Prevention Awards Banquet took place on the evening of Wednesday, June 24 at the Alliant Energy Center, where we gathered to celebrate the youth, caregivers, staff and the Dane County partners who support them. Jasmine Benson with Briarpatch Youth Services brought the energy as this year's MC, and we were honored to have Henry McDavid, an educator, entrepreneur, author, speaker, and the Co-Founder of KIKIFER'S Entrepreneurial Academy, present as our keynote speaker.



Both youth and adults were recognized at the Awards Banquet; nine youth received awards, recognizing various traits including leadership, professionalism, resilience, and a commitment to their self-improvement. Thirty-eight youth certificates were also presented to youth, celebrating their academic achievements, big hearts, and consistency in programming and personal growth. Additionally, seven adults received awards and were honored for their great successes and collaboration in supporting youth and families in Dane County.



Guests at this year's Awards Banquet also got to experience the creativity of your youth through their art, music, and entrepreneurial skills. A young man in our GRIT programming, Mane Thompson, kicked off the event by singing and playing a song on his guitar, and awardees received Swag Bags that included handmade soaps from the boys who participated in the CEO's Of Tomorrow boys' group at YJP. Two high school students involved in our programming also set up booths in the Alliant Energy Center and sold their artwork, which included paintings and various crocheted items. At the conclusion of the event, both students reflected on the support and the impact selling their work had, with one saying, "This really just opened my eyes that I have some talent and should take making and selling my art seriously", and the other expressing her growing confidence, saying "Wow, I'm feeling motivated right now. Having people come up and tell me for the last three hours that my work is great makes me feel like maybe I am kind of great at this."



I'd like to extend a huge thank you to everyone who came out to celebrate the youth, families and staff at this event, and to recognize their hard work and dedication to themselves and their community. Thank you to all who attended, and a special shoutout to the YJP Awards Banquet committee's hard work and coordination that brought this event to life and made it a success!



Where Are They Now?

By Erik Nielsen



We recently caught up with Mr. DL Bridges. DL Bridges was a social service specialist with Youth Justice for 28 years, retiring in 2019. He worked at various locations including Applegate, Lafollette-Monona, South Madison, Northport, and the Youth Justice & Prevention building. Supervisors he had were Tom Reed, Diane Prellwitz, Debbie Vieaux, and Jennifer Zehr. DL was famous for always coming through and saving the day.

What have you been doing since retirement? Retirement stuff, taking care of the house, mowing the lawn, chasing his 12 grandkids, relaxing, taking it easy, and enjoying life. He's still active in the community and keeps himself busy. He sees Human Services people all the time out and about.

What was your favorite part of the job? He loved helping kids, traveling to various group homes and treatment centers all over the state, talking with kids about what they needed to do to stay out of trouble, giving them a taste of his homegrown Mississippi values. Kids listened to him in a way they didn't always listen to their parents or their social workers. He loved guiding youth, helping them make better decisions, and helping them see the bigger picture. He loved telling the judge good things kids did. To this day, adults approach him thanking him for when he worked with them years ago.

Any fun memories while at working at Human Services? So many memories! He loved driving around the state in the county van listening to old school music, going to places he'd never see otherwise, just to do face-to-face meetings with youth about how they were doing and the progress they're making.

Any advice to Human Services staff? This was more than just a job. Kids can tell if you care about them. His advice is to be consistent, be direct, tell it like it is, and keep it real.

