



Published on *The Connecticut Mirror* (<http://ctmirror.org>)

[Home](#) > Supreme Court justice to head troubled child welfare agency

Supreme Court justice to head troubled child welfare agency

Mark Pazniokas

and Jacqueline Rabe

November 30, 2010

Governor-elect Dan Malloy today turned to Justice Joette Katz of the Connecticut Supreme Court to lead the Department of Children and Families, a troubled agency that has been under court supervision since 1991.

Katz, 57, is giving up a seat on the state's highest court to take over an agency that has frustrated efforts by three gubernatorial administrations to escape the oversight of the U.S. District Court.

The choice announced today during a press conference in Hartford was a political blockbuster by a governor-elect who has enjoyed offering surprising choices to populate his new administration.

Katz brings to the job a reputation for a first-rate intellect, but no experience in running a major bureaucracy. Prior to going on the bench, she was the chief of legal services for the Office of the Public Defender.

Malloy said Katz, who also serves as the administrative judge for the appellate courts, has significant management experience in the judicial system, but he made clear he was most interested in bringing a keen mind and an outsider's perspective to a difficult job.

"Quite frankly, I'm hiring a pretty smart person right now," Malloy said.

Katz called her new appointment, which is subject to confirmation by the General Assembly, "my most important challenge."



Joette Katz

She said Connecticut should be grateful to the advocates who first filed suit during the administration of Gov. William A. O'Neill to demand improvements in DCF, which has been subject to court oversight since the administration of O'Neill's successor, Lowell P. Weicker Jr.

"The DCF today is not the same DCF that it was," Katz said. "Having said that, however, it is clear to me that it is not the DCF that it can be."

Earlier this year, U.S. District Judge Christopher Droney refused a request by the administration of Gov. M. Jodi Rell to end court oversight, the latest reminder of the difficulties of bringing the child-welfare agency up to national standards.

In response to a reporter's question, Katz dryly acknowledged she was giving up a "monastic" life on the court for the rough and tumble life of running an agency that often invites the harsh glare of the media.

"You mean, have I seen my psychiatrist this morning?" she said, smiling.

She was appointed to the Superior Court by O'Neill in 1989 and became the state's youngest justice at age 39 in 1992 with her appointment by Weicker to the Supreme Court. She was reappointed by Gov. John G. Rowland and Rell.

Once justices are confirmed for an initial eight-term term, by tradition they are reappointed every eight years until retirement, an effective lifetime appointment. Katz could think of no one who had left the court for another career outside the law, though she had succeeded Alfred V. Covello, who resigned to become a U.S. District judge.

Jamey Bell, the executive director of Connecticut Voices for Children, called Katz a "brilliant choice" to lead DCF.

"It takes the precisely right person, and I think this choice is the best shot we've had in a long time to bring this agency up to where it should be," said Bell, who rushed to the announcement from another meeting at the Legislative Office Building.

Among the agency's failings, according to a court-appointed monitor, were inadequate health and dental services, as well as delays in moving children from state institutions to foster care.

"We don't have a scarcity of foster parents. We have enough if we could just retain them," Bell said.

Bell and Malloy have also said the state's inability to comply with the consent decree is not from a lack of money – the agency has a \$865 million budget for the current year.

"Money is not the barrier, retaining foster parents is," Bell said.

Martha Stone, one of the lawyers behind the class-action lawsuit that led to federal oversight, said she knows from her professional dealings with Katz that "she is not going to tolerate bureaucracy hindering progress. ... She has absolutely got her eyes on the prize. She wouldn't have left a job with as much prestige unless she is dedicated."

Stone also said Malloy's selection is "unique" from any other previous DCF commissioner.

"It's definitely a different kind of appointment from what we've seen because she doesn't have a child welfare background. That will make it that much more important who her team is made up of," Stone said. "I think she is going to get the job done."

Betty Gallo, who was a lobbyist for the American Civil Liberties Union when it helped bring the DCF suit, complimented Malloy for "a best-and-brightest" approach to his initial appointments.

"This augers well," Gallo said.

Katz is an honors graduate of Brandeis University and the University of Connecticut Law School.

She was a public defender from 1978 to 1983 and the chief of legal services for the Office of the Public Defender from 1983 until she became a judge in 1989.

Katz was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. She is married to Dr. Philip Rubin, the chief executive officer of Hoskins Laboratories in New Haven. She is the mother of two adult children, Jason Rubin and Samantha Katz.

[Election 2010 - The Transition](#) [Your Government](#) [Human Services](#)

Source URL: <http://ctmirror.org/story/8582/supreme-court-justice-head-troubled-child-welfare-agency>