

Gov. Pritzker Announces Heidi Mueller As Next Director Of Illinois Department Of Children And Family Services

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CHICAGO - Governor JB Pritzker announced today that, following a national search, he is appointing youth justice and child welfare expert Heidi Mueller as the next Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) pending Senate approval. Mueller currently serves as Director of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), where she has been recognized for her nation-leading reform

work and advocacy on behalf of young people. Robert Vickery, currently Deputy Director of Programs at DJJ, will serve as interim director of the agency while a search is conducted for Mueller's permanent replacement.

"The work Director Mueller has done at the Department of Juvenile Justice over the last several years has been transformative for the juvenile justice system in Illinois, and I am thrilled that she will bring her unique experience and talents to DCFS," said Governor JB Pritzker. "Heidi's care and compassion for the most at-risk young people in our state and her exceptional leadership are hallmarks of her career, and I know that her passion and expertise will be a significant asset as we continue to improve our state's child welfare system."

"As someone who has devoted my career to supporting children and families, I am honored and humbled to be entrusted by Governor Pritzker with the responsibility of leading DCFS," said incoming DCFS Director Heidi Mueller. "In my role as Director of DJJ, I have witnessed firsthand the critical importance of a strong and supportive safety net for our state's most vulnerable residents, and the tragedy that results when there are holes in that net. I am grateful to Director Smith for his successful work in driving real progress at DCFS, and I look forward to carrying the torch forward toward an Illinois that supports and empowers all children and families to thrive."

Marc D. Smith, the current Director of DCFS, will continue to serve in his role through January to ensure a smooth transition, at which time Mueller will assume the Director role on February 1. Smith announced his plans to depart DCFS in October of 2023 after serving as head of the agency since 2019.

Mueller has served as Director of DJJ since 2016, overseeing the care, custody, and services provided to youth committed to the Department by Illinois Courts. In 2020, Mueller launched [the 21st Century Illinois Transformation Plan](#) to reshape the way DJJ cares for youth in its custody. She has worked diligently to fulfill its commitment to reduce the harm of incarceration by divesting from the adult prison model, creating a restorative close-to-home model, and building a continuum of care in the community.

Prior to joining DJJ, Mueller served as the Director of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, advising the Governor and General Assembly regarding juvenile justice policy and practice and administering the state's federal grant funding under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. Her background includes development and management of community programs for vulnerable and justice-involved youth and families, legal practice, front-line youth services, and social science research.

Mueller earned a bachelor's degree cum laude in psychology and history at Macalester College, completed graduate studies in social psychology at Stony Brook University and holds a J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School. She serves on the Board of Directors for the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators, as well as the Advisory Board for the Illinois Justice Project. She is co-chair of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Leadership Council and a member of the National Juvenile Justice Leadership Network through the Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. In 2023, she was appointed to the Illinois Supreme Court Committee on Juvenile Justice.

Robert Vickery, who will serve as Interim Director of DJJ, has served as Deputy Director of Programs since 2016. He previously worked as the Executive Director of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission and as a Program Director for the Illinois Collaboration on Youth.

“Director Mueller has proven to be a tireless advocate for the well-being of Illinois’ youth through her work at the Department of Juvenile Justice. That passion will serve her well as leader of DCFS,” said Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton. “Director Mueller is also highly qualified with experience serving our most vulnerable residents and I am confident she will make a positive impact on Illinois’ families.”

“The Illinois Collaboration on Youth applauds the nomination of Heidi Mueller to lead DCFS. Throughout her 10 years at the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, Director Mueller has demonstrated an abiding commitment to addressing the root causes driving young people into the justice system,” said Andrea Durbin, CEO of Illinois Collaboration on Youth. “Director Mueller understands the importance of investing in young people, their families, and communities so they can thrive.”

“One of the most important functions of the child welfare sector is giving kids the tools to be successful,” said State Senator Cristina Castro (D-Elgin). “Illinois has a responsibility to protect children, and I look forward to working with DCFS’ new director to ensure the continued safety, security and success of youth in state care.”

“DCFS faces unique challenges that requires compassionate leadership to uplift our state’s most vulnerable children and put them on a path to a better tomorrow,” said State Senator Elgie R. Sims, Jr. (D-Chicago). “Director Mueller’s background speaks volumes to her ability to step up to the challenge to build a strong and solid foundation for young people in Illinois.”

“Heidi Mueller's visionary leadership, creativity, and determination will undoubtedly drive positive change even in the most challenging systems and situations,” said State Senator Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago).

“Heidi Mueller has a track record of compassionate effectiveness within state government—getting things done to make life better for our most vulnerable children, families, and Illinois communities. I’m so pleased that she will be leading DCFS,” said State Representative Lindsay LaPointe (D-Chicago).