



Visiting Nurse Association  
of Central Jersey

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## **Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families Pays a Visit to Expectant Teen Mom**

*Commissioner Kimberly Ricketts sees DCF-funded programs in action*

LONG BRANCH, NJ, 2009 – The New Jersey Commissioner of Children and Families (DCF), Kimberly Ricketts, likes to see for herself how well the programs funded by the DCF are working. To do just that, she recently spent the day with Visiting Nurse Association of Central Jersey (VNACJ) in Long Branch to speak with family support staff and travel to family homes. VNACJ provides services to several DCF grant-funded home visitation and community programs for families at risk throughout Middlesex and Monmouth County. The DCF-funded services total more than \$1.8 million.

Prior to making home visits, Commissioner Ricketts met with Mary Ann Christopher, president and chief executive officer of VNACJ, Gloria Aftanski, president and chief professional officer of United Way of Central Jersey and more than 15 program directors and staff to learn more about the challenges and successes of program families. The goal for DCF is to reduce child welfare caseloads and expand child abuse prevention and family strengthening services.

“I like to get out as often as possible to make sure you have what you need to do your job,” said Commissioner Ricketts, in speaking to the group. “From your stories, the importance of what you are doing is so evident – you help me prove to legislators that because of these programs a mother can get a second chance at life, obtain a job and regain custody of her children; that teenage mothers can learn good parenting skills and reignite their aspirations to have a career; that children won’t end up in child protective services.

At the end of the meeting, Commissioner Ricketts traveled to the homes of two families that participate in two nationally-recognized home visitation programs, Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) and Healthy Families (HF). Her first visit was made with Rebecca Pepe, RN, a Nurse Family Partnership home visitation nurse, to the home of Maria St. Amand. Maria, 17, lives with her father in Farmingdale, NJ She is expecting her first child, a girl, and has been part of the NFP program since March. Each week, Rebecca who has an extensive background in maternal child health, visits Maria to provide parent education. Her goal is to ensure positive pregnancy outcomes; good child health and development, and improve economic self-sufficiency for mom and her family.

Helping to carry a new crib into the freshly painted, soft green bedroom where Maria and her new baby will sleep, Commissioner Ricketts observed while the nurse taught Maria about safe cribs, sleeping positions, and child safety when in the crib. Maria also learned how to bathe her baby, again with a focus on safety as well as communication – never leave a child in the bath alone, talk to your baby often to create a strong bond.

“I am so happy she’s here,” said Maria when asked about Rebecca’s visits. “She has taught me so much and really helped to prepare me for Corrine’s arrival. She even helped me decide how to spell her name.

“I really trust what she says,” Maria added. “I read all the information she gives me.”

“It seems like you are getting a lot from this program,” said Commission Ricketts. “Would you mind if Rebecca let me know how you are doing after the baby comes.”

“Not at all,” smiled Maria. “You can come back and meet her.”

The Nurse Family Partnership Program in Middlesex County has become a signature program for success in helping first time moms and is provided by the implementing agency, United Way of Central Jersey in partnership with Visiting Nurse Association of Central Jersey. The United Way of Central Jersey funds more than 100 human service programs from 42 agencies serving residents of Middlesex County and Franklin Township of Somerset County. In 2007, VNACJ received a grant to initiate NFP services to qualified residents in Monmouth County. The program is available to first-time mothers and offers home visitation by a registered nurse through the child’s 2<sup>nd</sup> year. In 2008, nearly 200 mothers and children benefited as a result of the NFP program.

The VNACJ Healthy Families Program is an intensive home visitation program by specially trained lay staff for at risk, first time mothers in Asbury Park, Long Branch, and Perth Amboy, NJ. Experienced family support staff work closely with community health nurses to offer parenting assistance and community resource assistance prior to birth and through the child’s fifth year. Services include prenatal and postpartum care as well as offer family support including job training, education, nutritional counseling, housing, and transportation. In 2008 270 mothers and children were enrolled.

Visiting Nurse Association of Central Jersey, now in its 97<sup>th</sup> year of service, is a nonprofit provider of in-home health care, hospice care and community-based health services throughout Middlesex, Monmouth, Ocean, Mercer, Burlington, Gloucester, Camden, Somerset, and Union counties. VNA of Central Jersey is the largest VNA in New Jersey and cares for over 100,000 individuals each year. For more information about these and other community-based programs, call VNACJ at 800-862-3330 or visit “In the Community” at [www.vnacj.org](http://www.vnacj.org)