

The Homecoming

Now cancer free, Cassandra Callender, the Windsor Locks teen who initially rejected treatment and was placed in state custody, returned home for the first time since December.



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<http://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-cassandra-goes-home-0428-20150427-story.html>

WINDSOR LOCKS — She went into the hospital five months ago identified in court papers as [Cassandra C.](#), the Windsor Locks teenager taken into state custody and forced by court order to receive chemotherapy for her Hodgkin's lymphoma after rejecting the treatment and running away.

She came out of the hospital Monday afternoon as Cassandra Callender, 17, [cancer](#) free, with a glowing smile, her face flushed by the first gulps of outdoor air since December, her brown hair growing back in over dark eyes.

She was ready to hug her cat, wolf down her mom [Jackie Fortin](#)'s shepherd's pie and mac and cheese, sleep in her own bed, and see where she stands at Windsor Locks High School, where she would have walked with her graduating class in June had she not become an international news story and a poster girl for those who advocate alternatives to chemotherapy.

"I'm so happy to be home," Cassandra told a group of reporters who greeted her and her mother as they pulled into the driveway of their neat, modest home in Fortin's red Ford Escort. As they do with all patients, staff members at the [Connecticut Children's Medical Center](#) in Hartford gave Cassandra a celebratory send-off before her discharge, and she said she will stay in touch with several close friends she made during five months in the hospital.

But they were months apart from her mother, and Cassandra said that the time, the treatment and the confinement in the hospital weighed on her.

"I can't wait to get back to my regular life, my mom, my cat, school, a job. I'm so happy to breathe the fresh air."

"I'm in remission, and I grateful for that, but it was a long five months. My mom and I had never been apart. Things got really hard. I've tried hard to be strong. Everyone has seen DCF's side," said Cassandra, referring to the Department of Children and Families. "I'm so happy to be able to talk for myself."

DCF had secured a Superior Court order, affirmed by the state Supreme Court, to take temporary custody of Cassandra to assure that she completed the regimen of chemotherapy. Doctors had testified that without the treatment, she would have died. With it, they said, she had an 85 percent chance of survival and recovery.

"I just think DCF went a little too far. I should have been able to see my mother all the time, I should have been able to see my friends," Cassandra said.

"We have a lot of catching up to do," said Fortin. "A lot of detoxing, and nutrition, and getting her healthy again."

Fortin said at the outset that her daughter just wanted more time to seek an alternative treatment and a second medical opinion after CCMC doctors removed part of her lymph node last fall. Fortin said that people from all over the world reached out to her and her daughter through social media, supporting

their decision to try to seek an alternative.

For Cassandra's homecoming Monday, the front door was covered with a tie-dyed banner that proclaimed, "Welcome Home Cassandra!" and the back fence was draped with another banner that bore the words of a Bob Marley song:

"Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!"

"Get up, stand up: don't give up the fight!"

After a few minutes in her driveway, Cassandra walked briskly across Center Street, where several friends and neighbors had gathered. She hugged four or five of them in succession, smiling broadly with eyes clenched shut against tears, accepting their good wishes.

"I'm out of the hospital and will never look back," she said.

Early this month, a judge had ruled that Cassandra had to remain at the hospital, in temporary state custody, until she completed the court-ordered chemotherapy, and the judge denied visitation to Fortin during those last few weeks in the hospital.

Cassandra's lawyer, Assistant State Public Defender Joshua Michtom, said Monday morning that DCF has withdrawn the temporary-custody petition and has indicated that it will remove the neglect petition as well.

"It's a matter of filing the paperwork," Michtom said.

The case drew widespread attention when Cassandra initially rejected chemotherapy treatments after her diagnosis. She said she didn't want to poison her body — but later did agree to begin treatment. She ran away after two doses and became the subject of a Silver Alert issued by police for runaways.

DCF Commissioner Joette Katz said Monday, "We are delighted that today Cassandra will go home with complete confidence that she is healthy and has recovered as the result of the amazing work" of the hospital and DCF staff members.

"No doubt, this was a difficult and scary experience for Cassandra and her family. No parent or child wants to face such an illness, and no one wants to undergo a medical treatment as difficult as this one," Katz said in a prepared statement. "However, we were responsible to save Cassandra's life under these circumstances, and we are very happy that she is now moving successfully to another phase in her life — a healthy and happy one. Cassandra has shown great spirit throughout this ordeal, and we wish her all the best."

Her attorneys said that Cassandra was a powerful advocate for herself throughout her ordeal.

During a hearing in March, Cassandra testified for an hour from the hospital, via a video link.

"I think she did great," said Michtom. "She's a smart kid and a competent witness."

Cassandra will turn 18 in September, and at that point could make medical choices on her own as an adult. At issue in the court hearings and Supreme Court appeal was whether a minor could be mature enough to make those decisions, and whether Cassandra fit that category.