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REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

TO: Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
FROM: Office of Child and Family Services, Maine DHHS
DATE: February 13, 2024
RE: Report of Stakeholder Group pursuant to Resolve 2023, Ch. 62

Introduction

Resolve 2023, Ch. 62, introduced as LD 594, *Resolve, to Review the Resource Parent Bill of Rights*, directed the Office of Child and Family Services to convene a stakeholder group to review the Resource Parent Bill of Rights to ensure that it adequately supports foster, adoptive, and kinship families as active participants in the State's efforts to care for children in need of out of home placement. Specific topics discussed include resources, supports, services, resource family involvement, and communication.

Stakeholders invited to participate in the meetings included individuals representing a wide range of background, expertise, and viewpoints. This included, but is not limited to, department personnel involved in the child welfare system, representatives from statewide organizations that provide support services for adoptive and foster parents and kinship families, representatives from a statewide organization that advocates to improve the short-term and long-term outcomes for youth who are or have been in foster care, and resource families.

The stakeholder group also included individuals from a range of different types of resource families, including a family that provides care to a child in the child welfare system, and individuals that are kinship families, foster parents, permanency guardians, adoptive parents, and members of a child's extended birth family. The full list of participants is below.

Participants:

- Facilitator: Bobbi Johnson, then Associate Director of Child Welfare Services, now OCFS Director
- Facilitator: Rebecca Richardson, OCFS Regional Associate Director
- Becky Beal, OCFS Resource Parent Program Manager
- Tammy Mahan, Foster and Adoptive Parent (District 1)
- Angela Burgess, OCFS Resource Supervisor (District 1)
- Bunny Wermenchuk, OCFS Community Care Worker (District 1)
- Hannah Pelletier, Foster and Adoptive Parent (District 2)
- Melanie Blair, Foster and Adoptive Parent (District 3)
- Carrie Rapp, Kinship, Foster and Adoptive Parent (District 4), Facilitator for AFFM Trainings

- Ashley Pesek, Foster, Adoptive and Permanency Guardianship Parent (District 7)
- Sarah Hatt, Foster and Adoptive Parent (District 8), Resource Family Specialist for AFFM
- Jenn Bryant, Lead Liaison for Resource Parent Care Team with Community Health and Counseling Services
- Travis Bryant, Executive Director, Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine, Inc. & The Kinship Program
- Ahmen Cabral, Catherine Cutler Institute – USM, Youth Leadership Advisory Team
- Julianna Morningstar, Former Youth in Care, Intern with YLAT
- Phil Proctor, OCFS Staff
- Tammy Sylvain, Kinship Resource Parent, provided feedback by email
- Other individuals were invited to provide feedback by email

Meeting Dates:

1. September 12, 2023, Full Stakeholder Group
2. September 28, 2023, Full Stakeholder Group
3. December 21, 2023, Resource Parent Advisory Team
4. January 18, 2024, Resource Parent Advisory Team
5. *February 2024, to be scheduled with the Large Stakeholder Group*

Resource Parent Bill of Rights

The original Resource Parent Bill of Rights was established in 2019 in partnership with the Resource Parent Advisory Committee and Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine (AFFM).

Stakeholder Meetings

Each stakeholder meeting was held virtually. The Resolve and Resource Parent Bill of Rights were reviewed in the first meeting and both documents were sent to participants in advance with the meeting invitation. Participants agreed that the issue was not the content of the document, but rather the need to more effectively communicate and implement the Resource Parent Bill of Rights. Further, the group identified the need to better ensure pathways for resource families to follow if they have questions or do not feel their needs are being met. Many resource parents had questions about where to find and access information regarding services and supports. In the meetings, it was recommended to review Resource Parent Bill of Rights documents from other states.

As part of the discussions, five domains of practice were explored with the stakeholder group to understand their perception of whether the current Resource Parent Bill of Rights was meeting their needs. These domains included resources, supports, services, resource family involvement, and communication.

- Resources
 - This discussion included the need for timely reimbursements and payments as well as an ability to see what has been paid, the availability of child care, functionality of the resource parent portal and, more efficient access to resources.

- Supports
 - This discussion included respite payments and coordination, grief counseling for resource parents, mentors, and communication regarding available resources and supports.
- Services
 - This discussion included suggestions for a triage system for mental health services for children in OCFS custody, having someone available to “troubleshoot,” and someone specific to call when having issues, such as a centralized process for complaint or issue resolution. Transportation for children in care was identified as a gap. Historically resource parents had one parent available at home to take children to appointments, visitation, etc. Currently most resource families have two working parents and are unable to provide transportation for the children in their homes. OCFS staff do not have the capacity to provide transportation, and this often becomes a contentious issue between resource parents and OCFS staff.
- Resource Family Involvement
 - This discussion included concerns about a lack of acknowledgement during court proceedings, not feeling like they have a voice in court, even though this right is outlined in statute. One suggestion was to identify an individual in the judicial branch that resource parents could contact if their rights are not met and training for judges. Another training topic recommended was supervised visitation for situations where resource parents are asked to provide this service. Resource families want to be invited and included in Family Team Meetings and want to be consulted when caseworkers are scheduling meetings and coordinating visitation or other services in order to ensure that their schedules are taken into consideration. They feel it is very important to be a part of the family team to be kept informed of the status and direction of the case and to help support the child in their care.
- Communication
 - This discussion included the concerns about the length of time it can take to get a response back from OCFS staff, particularly regarding services and respite for children. Resource parents also shared that they want the ability to have their own family time, and flexibility and involvement in decisions regarding visitation schedules. It was suggested that OCFS create a system for resource parents to notify staff of payment errors, to access “pay stubs” and knowledge of who to reach out to if there is an issue. The group also felt there was a lack of consistency in the information they receive which at times is perceived as dishonest or the result of staff inexperience.

Timeline and Next Steps

Following the large stakeholder meetings, one facilitator researched Resource Parent Bill of Rights documents from other states and drafted a new document based on the feedback from the stakeholders. This document was shared with the Resource Parent Advisory Committee members who were instrumental in creating the first Resource Parent Bill of Rights and are participants in the current workgroup. Their feedback has been incorporated into a new draft which will be shared with the larger stakeholder group at the February meeting.