

Maine Justice for Children Task Force

Date: April 29, 2025

Presented by: Betsy Boardman, Esq., Maine Judicial Branch

Improving Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being for Children in the Child Welfare
System

Introduction

Mission: Enhance child welfare outcomes for children in Maine.

Task Force Composition:

- Representatives from Maine's judicial, legislative, and executive branches.
- Advocates, foster parents, and child welfare professionals.

- **Key Mandate:** Identify systemic improvements and collaborate on solutions to improve outcomes.

Annual Report: Covers activities from January to December 2024.

Parent Attorney & GAL Recruitment and Retention



CHALLENGE: RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT OF PARENT ATTORNEYS AND GUARDIANS AD LITEM (GALS).



SUBCOMMITTEE FORMATION: RECOMMENDATION OF THE MAINE CHILD WELFARE ADVISORY PANEL 2022 ANNUAL REPORT.



RECOMMENDATIONS: System recommendations submitted to the full Task Force in September 2024. Reviewed by the full Task Force in January and March 2025.

Improving Family Outcomes Through Effective Communication in High Conflict Cases
April 3 and 4, 2025
Sunday River Resort, Newry, ME

Planning for the 2025 conference began in September 2024.

The High Conflict Institute was the keynote speaker both days. Sessions included:

- **Flipping the Script in High-Conflict Cases: Understanding High-Conflict Personalities**
- **Conflict Tolerance**
- **Using a Structured Proposal Method for Reaching Agreements**
- **Managing High Conflict Personalities in Court (Judge Only)**
- **Communication Between Teams/Groups**

Attendance

Approximately 260 attendees on day one.

Approximately 240 attendees on day two.

20 different breakout sessions to choose from.

7 plenary sessions.

Opportunity to earn 12.5 Continuing Legal Education (attorneys), Continuing Professional Education credits (GALs), and Continuing Judicial Education Credits (judges).

Questions?

Thank you for your time and attention.

Contact Information:

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Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel Quarterly Report

Report to the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

April 29th, 2025

Resolved: That the child welfare advisory panel...shall submit reports to the joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over health and human services matters. Any presentations of the reports to the committee must be presented by the citizen members of the panels to the extent possible. Each quarterly report must contain, at minimum, the following:

1. A summary of generalized and anonymized observations in the prior 3-month period regarding efforts by the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child and Family Services to improve the child welfare system
2. A summary of the collaboration between the advisory panel and the review panel as well as the Justice for Children Task Force established in 2006 that reports to the Supreme Judicial Court; and
3. Any recommendations on how to further protect the State's children through Department of Health and Human Services policy and rulemaking and through legislation.

Panel Overview



CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS



MEMBERS



SCHEDULE

Our observations about DHHS OCFS efforts to contribute to the Panel's work in the last three months.

- OCFS staff participated in all Panel meetings. This included: monthly meetings of the full Panel and Executive Committee meetings.
- OCFS staff consistently participate in all subcommittee meetings and in-between meeting work. Panel members have been appreciative of this investment.

Summary of the
collaboration
between MCWAP,
the Child Death and
Serious Injury
Review Panel, and
the Justice for
Children Task Force

- Citizen Review Panels Chairs meet quarterly (last meeting January 25 and next meeting on May 5th).
- MCWAP&CDSIRP provided updates to the Justice for Children Task Force (March'25).
- CDSIRP and Justice for Children Task Force presented annual reports in March
- All panels have some degree of overlapping membership.

Structure of 2025 Work

Sub-Committees that will continue:

- Family Team Meetings
- Family Centered Policy and Practice
- Citizen Engagement
- Aftercare

Questions?

Thank you for your interest in the activities and recommendations of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP).

Panel Co-Chairs

Ahmen Cabral, ahmen.cabral@maine.edu

Andrea Mancuso, andrea@mcedv.org

Panel Coordinator

Jenna Jockel, jenna.l.Joeckel@maine.gov

Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman
Committee on Health and Human Services
Child Welfare Quarterly Update
April 29, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. Thank you for having me here today. My name is Christine Alberi, and I am the Child Welfare Ombudsman for Maine. I have a brief quarterly update for you today.

The Child Welfare Ombudsman is an independent non-profit created by statute, 22 M.R.S.A. §4087-A. As part of the Ombudsman's work, we complete case-specific reviews of Department child welfare cases from a neutral perspective, keeping the safety and best interests of the child at the forefront of our reviews. We also provide services to the public in the form of information and referral calls where we are able to help individuals understand their child welfare cases more clearly. We currently have a staff of four but will soon be at the end of the contract period for one of our staff members.

I am pleased to report that we have continued to have a much-improved relationship with the Department. For example, I attended a meeting with all of the program administrators and assistant program administrators last month which provided an opportunity for us to exchange and update information about the ombudsman process as well as give us an understanding of the many challenges that the districts face. The Department has also kept me updated on the structural improvements that the central office continues to implement.

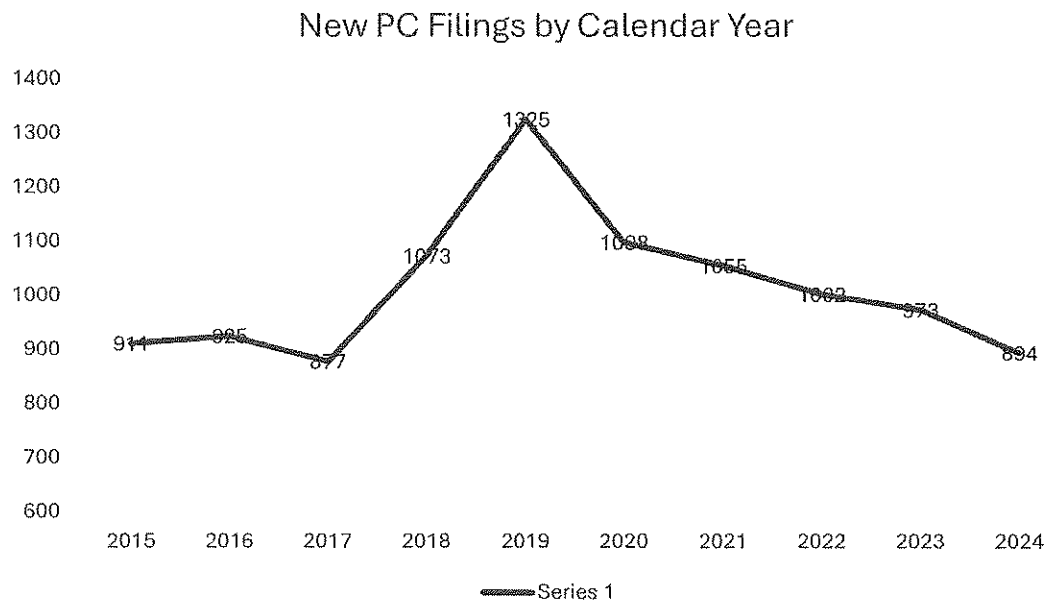
I would like to take a moment to comment on one of the fundamental questions of child welfare: are we taking too many children into state custody or are we not intervening when we should, leaving children unsafe? Our current statutory framework has existed with only slight changes for many years, but the child welfare pendulum has swung back and forth over the last decade significantly. Our work in the Ombudsman's office continues to reinforce our findings that casework practice, supported by resources for caseworkers, allows and supports the Department's ability to make safety decisions that are appropriate, and that appropriately balance the rights of the parents, trauma to the children, and the importance of protecting children from harm and the lifelong consequences of that harm. I think that sometimes in our public discussions of child abuse, the voices of the children can be lost or diminished. The best way to make sure that children are safe, both physically and emotionally, is to support thorough and effective casework practice—to continue to make sure that child welfare staff can gather the information that they need to make sure children are safe and to reunify parents and children as quickly as possible when appropriate.

I have included some data below from the judicial branch that shows the number of child welfare petitions filed each year. This includes both jeopardy petitions and petitions for preliminary protection orders. As you can see, this number has been steadily decreasing since 2018, and reflects hopefully what should be the end goal of child welfare, to decrease, safely, the number of children removed from their parents.

As you know, the Ombudsman's office is only able to evaluate child welfare cases, but as we said in this year's annual report, services for parents and children, including prevention services, are the best tool we have to stop families from becoming involved with child protective services in the first place, and to shorten the amount of time that children spend in state custody. These prevention services need to include financial support as well as mental health, behavioral health, and substance use services.

Thank you for having me here today, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Christine Alberi
Child Welfare Ombudsman
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2015: 911
2016: 925
2017: 877
2018: 1,073
2019: 1,325
2020: 1,098
2021: 1,055
2022: 1,002
2023: 973
2024: 894

Office of Child and Family Services Quarterly Child Welfare Update

Health and Human Services Committee

April 29, 2025

Director Bobbi L. Johnson, LMSW



Content of April Updates

- Child Welfare Management Reorganization – One Year Later
- Strategic Priorities and Efforts Involving Recommendations
- Decision Making Framework
- Hotel and Emergency Department Utilization
- Policy Updates

Child Welfare Management Reorganization



Enables focused oversight of the Districts to advance consistency and cultural improvements, as well as streamlining and clarifying roles

Consolidates and more closely aligns strategy, training, and policy development and implementation

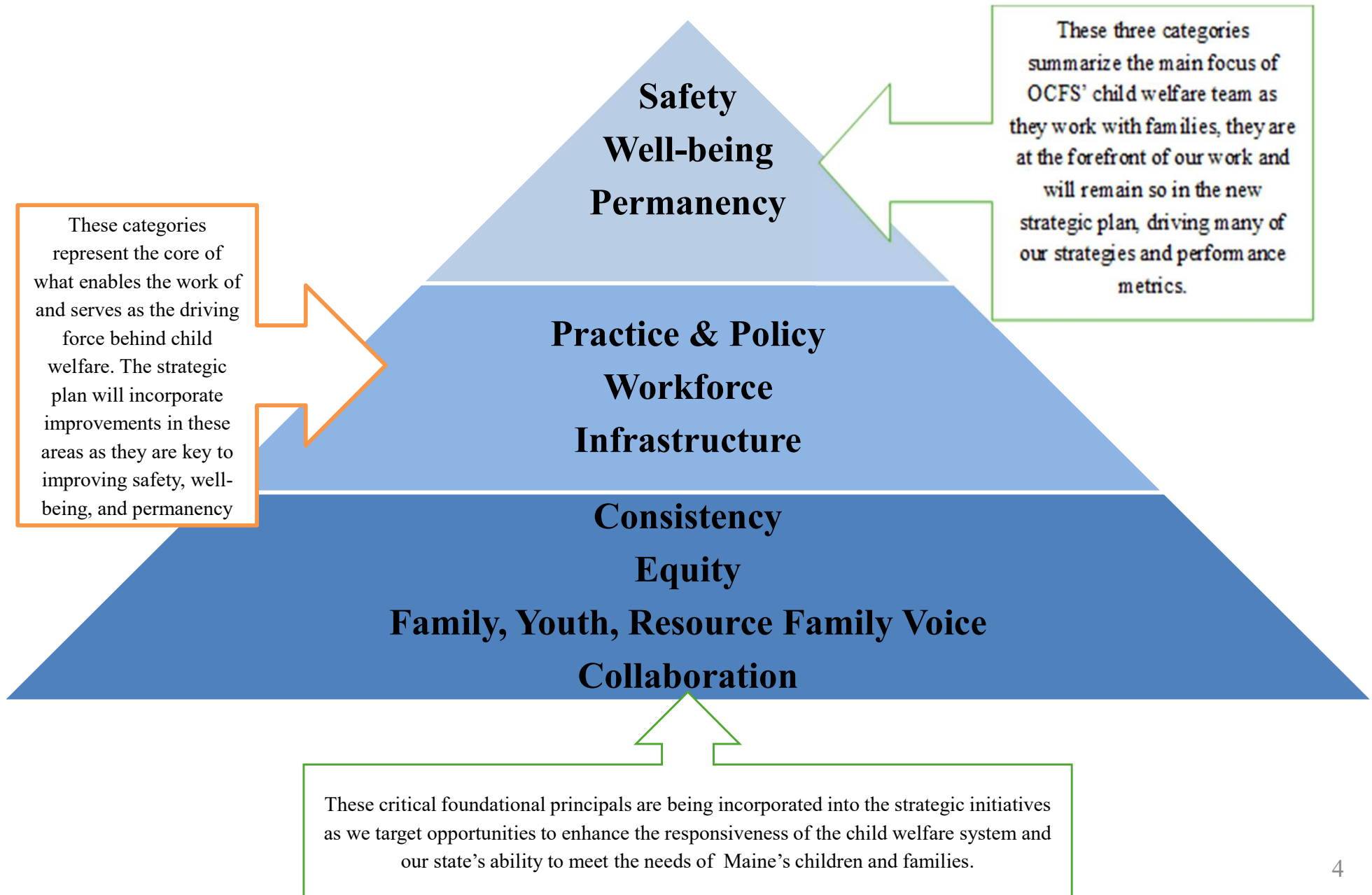
Creates a child welfare senior management team that can collaborate within clearly defined roles and established responsibilities allocated among the team

Divides programmatic oversight from business operations to create a system for clear governance and decision-making between distinctly different functions

Allows for supervision practices that align with best practices at every level of Central Office, creating opportunities for coaching and management that will strengthen consistency and culture

Office of Child and Family Services

Child Welfare Strategic Priorities



Strategic Priorities

Prioritizing Safety

- Updating policies regarding child abuse and neglect findings, safety planning, substance use disorder, and chronic maltreatment
- Reinforcing policy and practice expectations through CQI

Ensuring Permanency

- Implementing kinship-specific licensing standards
- Strengthen the permanency review process
- Improve supports for resource parents

Promoting Well-Being

- Continued expansion of phase two of Maine's implementation of the Federal Family First Prevention Services Act
- Increase the strength and utilization of Plans of Safe Care for children born exposed to substances
- Improve oversight and implementation of efforts to improve the health of children in care (including the use of psychotropic medication)
- Implement additional placement options for children awaiting placement in non-resource home settings and children with behavioral health needs

Enhancing Policy and Practice

- Updating and enhancing policies regarding Family Team Meetings, case closure, drug and alcohol screening, complex cases, disparities in child welfare, etc.
- Implementing a framework for decision-making in child welfare
- Evaluating and improving services for families

Supporting the Workforce

- Recruitment and retention
- Improving and expanding opportunities for coaching, mentoring, and training
- Ongoing implementation and expansion of safety science principals

Decision Making Framework

- Based on and in response to one of the key takeaways from OCFS' Organizational Assessment (completed last year) that staff were struggling with role clarity and confusion about decision-making processes.
- Developed by PCG with input from OCFS staff
- Seeking to ensure that staff are empowered to make decisions while understanding the boundaries of their own authority and knowing where to go to for guidance

ME OCFS Child Welfare Decision-Making Framework

Updated 12.19.2024

Key Goal of the Framework: Contribute to an environment in which OCFS child welfare employees feel **empowered to make decisions within clear and consistent boundaries**, leading decisions to be made at appropriate levels of the organization. By identifying the decisions made on a consistent basis, this framework also aims to support a **shift away from a daily "crisis" mode to a mode** where most staff on most days can work in predictable ways.

Guiding Principles for Decision-Making at OCFS are as follows:

- Decisions are made in **consistent and predictable ways**, in terms of the decision-making approach that is used for a given type of decision, who provides input, when and how they provide input, and how decisions are communicated
- The approach to decision-making reflects a culture of **empowerment within boundaries** –
 - Routine decisions are made as close to the case as possible – caseworkers and supervisors are experts on their cases
 - Staff know their decision-making authority and responsibility
- The approach to decision-making **balances risk and responsiveness**
- Staff **have managements' support** regarding the decisions they make in accordance with OCFS best practices and policies
- Decisions are made and communicated to all relevant parties in a **timely** manner.
- Decision-makers have all **appropriate and available resources and data** to make well-grounded decisions, as much as possible

Hotel and Emergency Department Strategies

Community Sitters

Intensive Short Term Homes Model

Meetings to brainstorm placement options for youth in these settings to build short-term and long-term solutions

- Individual case specific meetings, include OCFS and OBH/CBHS
- OCFS, OBH/CBHS, CDC, OMS
- Stakeholder meetings

Policy Updates

In Review/Revision

Child Abuse and Neglect Findings
Decision Making and Service Authorization
Legal
LGBTQI+
Methamphetamine Exposure
Refugee, Immigrant, and Undocumented Minors
Safety Planning (new stand-alone policy versus current embedded policy)
Working with Families with Substance Use Disorder

In Final Review

Adoption
Children's Emergency Services (CES)
Discovery
Human Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation
Placement
Psychotropic Medication

Completed

Audio Recording Policy
Caseworker Contacts
Child Protective Investigation
Domestic Abuse and Violence
Entry into Care
Indian Child Welfare (ICW)
Intake Screening and Assignment
LGBTQIA+
Missing and Runaway Youth
Resource Home Licensing
Safe Sleep and Period of Purple Crying
Supervision
Use of Expert Consultation in Assessing Child Abuse and Neglect
Youth Transition Services

New since last report

Completed since last report

Questions

Bobbi L. Johnson, LMSW
Director
Office of Child and Family Services

