

MAINE JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN TASK FORCE
2019 REPORT TO THE SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT

Submitted by The Maine Justice for Children Task Force
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. Meetings	1
II. Strategic Plan	3
A. Information Sharing	3
B. Resource Navigator Pilot Project	4
C. Revisions to the Reunification Plans	4
III. Continuing Education Subcommittee	5
Conclusion	5

Introduction

The Maine Justice for Children Task Force (the “Task Force”) is a collaborative multidisciplinary Task Force whose mission is to improve safety, permanency, and well-being for children in the State of Maine child welfare system. The Task Force is charged with identifying both strengths and barriers of the child welfare system that have a systemic impact on children and using that information to develop joint solutions among stakeholder systems. Once barriers are identified, the Task Force prioritizes those issues and develops joint solutions to help alleviate those barriers. These solutions may include the development and implementation of a training curriculum for all stakeholders in child protective matters.

The Task Force is chaired by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court who also appoints members of the Task Force. Pursuant to its Charter, the Task Force submits this report to the Supreme Judicial Court on the work of the Task Force from January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019.

I. Meetings

The Task Force met regularly throughout 2019 with an average member attendance rate of 22, in addition to numerous guests. In 2019, the Task Force focused on expanding membership to create a robust and diverse Task Force and enhance the strategic solutions developed at the plenary meetings of the Task Force. New members of the Task Force included individuals from the LGBTQ+, domestic violence prevention, sexual assault prevention, and cross-cultural communities.

Each Task Force meeting featured updates by its members, including leaders from the Judicial Branch, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), the Office of the Attorney

General, and the Maine Commission on Indigent Legal Services. The meetings also provided an opportunity for Task Force members to develop the Task Force's 2019 strategic plan (discussed further in Section II of this Report). Members at the plenary meetings of the Task Force received updates on all action steps taken as part of the strategic plan, and provided recommendations for follow-up as needed.

In addition to stakeholder and strategic plan updates, the meetings included various presentations on pertinent child welfare barriers identified by Task Force members. Presentations in 2019 included information on child welfare preventative services offered by the Maine Children's Trust, as well as a presentation on MaineCare billing practices for mental health professionals treating child welfare involved parents.

The Maine Children's Trust joined the Task Force in January to give a presentation on the statewide preventative services and programs it provides that are aimed at diverting families from becoming involved in the child welfare system. The Maine Children's Trust presented on two different programs. The first, Child Abuse and Neglect ("CAN") Prevention Councils, offers evidence-based parent education classes, support groups, and other parent resources for families. CAN Prevention Councils also provide trainings to family-serving professionals on protective factors, safe infant sleep, and mandated reporting. The Maine Children's Trust also presented on the Maine Families Home Visiting program, which provides home-based parenting education and support to parents who are expecting a child or to parents who have a new baby in the home. This program may be provided to parents until their child is three years old. As a result of these presentations, the Task Force created judicial bench cards with contact information to regional programs offering the two distinct programs.

An additional systemic barrier identified by Task Force members was the ability of a mental health professional who is treating a system involved parent to get paid for collateral contact with clients such as family team meetings, court events, and any additional contacts outside of the clinical setting. To that end, the OCFS coordinated a presentation by one of its MaineCare billing experts. The presentation laid the initial groundwork for understanding MaineCare eligible services as well as provided a direct DHHS contact for stakeholders for future inquiries and clarity. The Task Force intends to take this information and explore the process for getting collateral contact work compensated and disseminating that information to all stakeholders.

II. Strategic Plan

The Task Force's 2019 strategic plan focused on three projects: the creation of a Task Force information sharing modality; the establishment of a resource navigator pilot project strategizing subgroup; and the simplification of parent reunification plans. A subgroup for each project was formed and convened throughout the year. All subgroups had Task Force members, nonmember individuals from stakeholder organizations, and interested community members.

A. Information Sharing

The Task Force is convened as one of three citizen review panels required under The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The other two panels are the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) and the Child Death and Serious Injury Panel. One goal of all three panels is to conduct complementary work without duplication. Therefore, information sharing among the panels is paramount for both collaboration of panel goals and outcomes. Additionally, there is currently no way for interested members of the public to obtain information about any of the three citizen review panels. Therefore, the website subgroup met with Links Web Design to

transform the current MCWAP website into a landing page for all three panels. The first meeting was held on November 14, 2019 with a projected 13-week timeline for completion of the new website. The subgroup will continue to meet to develop content and design with a launch date of the new website in the first half of 2020.

B. Resource Navigator Pilot Project

The Resource Navigator Pilot Project subgroup was established to discuss and strategize the potential implementation of a pilot project to have an expert on local community resources accessible at a courthouse. The goal is for this resource navigator to serve as an immediate, in-person point of contact for system involved individuals, particularly those who may be at risk of becoming involved in the child welfare system. The hope is that navigators will be able to provide guidance on resources for housing, counseling, medication, and educational assistance.

The subcommittee met and is currently exploring independent funding options, as well as options to partner with existing programs to potentially expand their resource navigation services to a courthouse by way of “office hours.” Research on data collection is being done so as to ensure useful and statistically significant data is obtained as a result of the pilot project. The subgroup will continue to meet at least quarterly.

C. Revisions to the Reunification Plans

Feedback from Task Force members indicated that the reunification plans currently being used in child protective matters can often be confusing and ineffective in establishing a roadmap for parents to follow in order to regain custody of their children. Therefore, a subgroup was formed with members from DHHS and the Office of the Attorney General to redraft the reunification plan’s content and form. The goal is for the revised reunification plan to more clearly list the

necessary services, as well as definitively delineate who is responsible for what within the next phase of the case. A draft reunification plan was presented to the Task Force at the November 2019 meeting where comments and suggestions were given. Additional drafts are expected to be presented at future meetings with new reunification plans being distributed in 2020.

III. Continuing Education Subcommittee

In addition to pursuing the three projects identified in the Task Force's strategic plan, the Task Force also assisted in the planning of the annual spring child protective conference through its Continuing Education Subcommittee (CES). The CES meets regularly to help plan the annual spring child protective conference every year. In the early part of 2019, the CES developed the 2019 conference theme, *Substance Use Disorders and the Child Welfare System*, and aided in finalizing pertinent speakers and presentations. The first CES meeting for the 2020 conference occurred in September 2019 to discuss a tentative theme and potential presenters. The CES will continue to meet in preparation for the 2020 conference.

Conclusion

The Task Force undertook many complex, systemic issues throughout 2019 with the work on those issues continuing into 2020. Addressing each individual issue has been a collaborative process that has opened communication among child protective entities and fostered collaboration beyond the four corners of the Task Force's strategic plan. The Task Force anticipates continued collaboration and progress well into 2020 and beyond.