

Maine Justice for Children Task Force
August 6, 2020 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
Via Zoom
AUGUST MEETING MINUTES

Attendees:

Hon. Andrew Mead, Acting Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court; Hon. Ellen Gorman, Associate Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court; Hon. Jed French, Chief Judge of the District Court; Caroline Jova, Family Division Manager; Betsy Boardman, Child Protective and Juvenile Process Specialist; Joanna Davis, Family Division Process Specialist; Kaela Jalbert, Coordinator, Guardian ad Litem Services; Katharine Wiltuck, Director of Process, Planning, and Services; Dr. Todd Landry, Director of the Office of Child and Family Services; Nora Sosnoff, Assistant Attorney General; Bobbi Johnson, Associate Director of Child and Welfare Services; John Pelletier, Executive Director, MCILS; Mike Sauschuck, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety; Liam Shaw, Maine General; Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director, MCEdV; Andrea Mancuso, MCEdV; Debra Baeder, Chief Forensic Psychologist, State Forensic Service; Elizabeth Ward Saxl, Executive Director, MECASA; Travis Bryant, Executive Director, Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine & The Kinship Program; Chris Bicknell, Executive Director, New Beginnings; Christine Alberi, Executive Director, Ombudsman; Colleen Madigan, Representative, Maine State Senate; Ashley McAllister; Jamie Brooks, Parents as Partners; Kelly Dell'Aquila, Opportunity Alliance.

I. Welcome: Hon. Andrew Mead, Acting Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court

II. Introduction of Attendees

III. Minutes from February 2020 meeting approved.

IV. Updates

1. Judicial Branch: Hon. Andrew Mead, Acting Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court

- COVID-19: In March, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, some courts were closed. However, Child Protection cases were, and remain, a top priority, and those cases continue to be heard.
- Acting Chief Justice Mead shares the same commitment to child welfare cases as did the previous Chief Justice, now Dean Saufley.

2. Organizational Update from the Judicial Branch: Hon. Jed French, Chief Judge of the District Court

- The annual judicial child welfare conference will be held in October with a decision being made to hold the conference virtually.
- PC filings are down 14% statewide from last year.
- A transformation zone project focusing on quality hearing in child welfare cases will begin in September.

- Two-year project involving two judicial officers.
- The two judicial officers will follow certain guidelines during hearings by using a bench book that was created to enhance engagement of parties during hearings.
- There are currently four district court judge vacancies.
- National Judicial Leadership Summit: The summit was held last September and a team that was put together by then Chief Justice Saufley attended. The team is still intact and is moving forward with strategic plan items and summit follow-up.
- Next CASA training will take place in August and will be the first virtual training. There are 29 confirmed attendees.
- Most recent Pandemic Management Order states that the presumption is for jeopardy and TPR hearing to happen in the courtroom, but upon motion for good cause may be held remotely.

3. Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS): Dr. Todd Landry, Director

- Less than a handful of children in care have tested positive for COVID-19.
- Data: COVID-19 Weekly Trends:
 - Decrease in calls to the child welfare hotline as well as OCFS reports taken from March to June. (This is a national trend as well)
 - As of July 27, 2020, there are 2,312 children in care.
- Resumed full, in person monthly case worker contact and investigations as of June 8, 2020.
- E-Discovery: Expanded e-Discovery statewide. Overall it has been met with positive responses. A free training for attorneys will be offered.
- Family First:
 - Hired a Family First manager, Christine Theriault in March.
 - Working on getting providers what they need to be Qualified Residential Treatment Providers (QRTPs).
 - Goal is to have a draft plan by the end of the calendar year 2020 or January 2021.
- Systemic Bias and Racism:
 - DHHS has been examining the child welfare system from that perspective.
 - Northeast Association of Child Welfare Directors and Commissioners are working to share best practices and data review.
 - DHHS has a cooperative agreement with the Muskie School, which will be looking at DHHS practices and policies for systemic bias or racist components.
 - Shared data on child welfare disparity in Maine. (See attached) Main groups identified as disparate were children in care for 2 or more years and youth aging out of the system.

4. **Maine Commission on Indigent Legal Services (MCILS): John Pelletier, Executive Director**
 - Monthly meetings with parent attorneys, MCILS, and the AG's office are occurring.
 - Juveniles who are committed to Long Creek Youth Development Center are now having post-adjudication counsel appointed to represent them during commitment.
 - Pilot project in Region 3 involving initial assignment for adult criminal cases being made before the first court date discussed. Stakeholders are currently considering this model for juvenile cases.

5. **An Organizational Update from the Office of the Attorney General – Nora Sosnoff, AAG, Chief, Child Protection Division**
 - AAGs have continued to process cases without delay despite COVID-19.
 - Scheduling of Zoom court appearances has been different throughout the state. The AAGs prefer to have a separate link for each court appearance rather than one link for the full day.
 - Request that, for in-person hearings that require multiple days, these hearings be scheduled for consecutive days when possible.
 - AAGs have been holding settlement conferences to limit in court time. Suggestion that the court begin ordering trial management conferences/judicial settlement conferences.
 - The number of children exiting care has decreased due to the pandemic.
 - Frequent threats of safety to child welfare case workers and AAGs. Asking that the individual Task Force members keep communication open and deescalate individuals in their work whenever possible.

V. Strategic Plan

- **Updates:**
 - **Reunification Plans: Bobbi Johnson**
 - The new reunification plans have been used as part of a pilot project that is ending in Portland.
 - Staff in Portland have liked the plan and they have received positive feedback from attorneys and the court.
 - **Task Force Information Sharing: Bobbi Johnson & Betsy Boardman**
 - The Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) website will be converted to house all three citizen review panels required under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) required panels.
 - New panel coordinator, Kathryn Brice, was hired and has taken the lead on the website project.
 - Projected timeline for the website was delayed due to COVID-19. Current date for completion is October.
 - Website design is complete and the workgroup will provide content as a next step.

- **Resource Navigator Pilot Project: Chief Judge Jed French & Betsy Boardman**
 - Committee was established to explore the idea of a navigator resource individual pilot project in a courthouse.
 - Workgroup has met a couple of times.
 - The workgroup completed research on the project and determined that there were many obstacles to implementation.
 - Proposal to abandon the project to allow the task force to focus on new planning efforts in response to the current challenges the system is facing. No objections were voiced.
- **Cross-System Discussion and New Strategic Planning Suggestions**
 - Discussion of creating a workgroup to implement a virtual curriculum to help parents navigate the child welfare system.
 - There were no voiced concerns or opposition to creating this workgroup and volunteers were identified as workgroup members.
 - Acting Chief Justice Mead requests ideas for solutions for those who do not have access to internet/appropriate technology in order to interact with the courts.

VI. Next meeting: TBD

Attachments:

- DHHS chart for disparity in child welfare in Maine.
- DHHS chart on number of children in care.