
MAINE JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN TASK FORCE
2020 REPORT TO THE SUPREME JUDICIAL
COURT

*Submitted by The Maine Justice for Children Task Force
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Introduction

The Maine Justice for Children Task Force (the “Task Force”) is a collaborative multidisciplinary Task Force convened by the Maine Judicial Branch whose mission is to improve safety, permanency, and well-being for children in the State of Maine child welfare system. The membership of the Task Force consists of representatives from the legislative, judicial, and executive branches and other participants including advocates for children, parents, foster parents, and other individuals involved in the child welfare system.

The Task Force is charged with identifying both strengths and opportunities for improvement within the child welfare system that have a systemic effect on children and using that information to develop joint solutions among stakeholder systems. Once opportunities for improvement are identified, the Task Force prioritizes those issues and develops joint solutions to help capitalize on those opportunities.

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, 2020 to December 31, 2020.

I. Meetings

The Task Force met regularly throughout 2020 with an average member attendance rate of 25, in addition to numerous guests. The February Task Force meeting was held in person, while the August and December meetings were held virtually. 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 agency updates focused, in part, on creating interagency data sharing opportunities in order to develop and enhance the Task Force 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 opportunities identified by Task Force members. Presentations in 2020 included information on the Restorative Justice Project Maine, as well as various systemic processes put into place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Restorative Justice Project Maine was invited to present at the Task Force meeting to explore whether it could house the Resource Navigator Project described in greater detail in Section II of this Report. The Restorative Justice Project Maine presented its plans to establish community “hubs” to serve as a central repository for community members to access needed services and local community support. As a result of this presentation, the Task Force convened a subgroup to assess the feasibility of adapting this model to a court-based resource navigator.

Plenary Task Force discussion items in 2020 also regularly focused on how the pandemic created a need to consider the health and safety of individuals involved in the child welfare system as they continued to provide necessary reunification services and timely permanency for children. Communication among agencies was critical in managing the unexpected challenges that were faced as a result of the pandemic, much of which was facilitated through existing Task Force relationships and communication channels.

Additional topics discussed at the Task Force meetings throughout 2020 included steps for the development of Maine’s plan to comply with the Family First Prevention Services Act, how to address systemic bias and racism within all agencies in the child welfare system, and discussion of various training opportunities. These discussions are ongoing and will continue to be a focus of the Task Force in 2021.

II. Strategic Plan

The Task Force’s 2020 strategic plan focused on four projects: the creation of a Task Force information sharing modality; research to determine whether to implement a resource navigator pilot project; plans for the development of a virtual curriculum to help parents navigate the child welfare system; and the simplification of parent reunification plans for better accessibility. 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 by 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. Beginning in November of 2019, representatives from all three panels met to transform the current MCWAP website into a landing page for the panels. The content and design were completed in October 2020 with a projected “go live” date of early 2021. The website contains Task Force information

as well as meeting minutes, meetings dates, and organizational documents such as the Justice for Children Task Force Charter.

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 at a courthouse. The subgroup met at various times throughout 2020 to discuss the feasibility of this project, as well as the particular challenges presented by the implementation of this project during a pandemic. The subgroup researched similar projects in other localities throughout the country, and the Restorative Justice Project Maine was invited to meet with the members of the Task Force to explore the possibility of that organization housing the resource navigator.

Ultimately, the Task Force unanimously voted to abandon the resource navigator pilot project due to several implementation barriers, some of which were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. These barriers included the lack of physical space to house the navigator in a time when in-person court appearances were being reduced, challenges with collecting valuable outcome data to measure efficacy while still maintaining personal and case confidentiality, and obtaining a stable funding source to maintain the project.

C. Development of Curriculum for Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System

In August 2020, the Task Force added the development of a curriculum for parents involved in the child welfare system to its strategic plan. A subgroup was created and met on December 7, 2020 to begin the discussion of implementation. At the meeting, the subgroup reviewed the “Dependency 101” curriculum offered by the *Parent to Parent* program in Washington State, and discussed how portions of this program could be implemented in Maine. The Washington State model offers voluntary participation in classes focused on understanding

child welfare agency processes, court procedures, and suggested practices for parents to implement in order to be successful throughout the case.

The subgroup determined the need to identify an organization to house the program, ideally one that has the ability to pair current system involved parents with mentors who are parents who were previously involved in the child welfare system. The subgroup also began researching opportunities for stable funding for the program. Additionally, the subgroup began discussions about whether piloting the project in specific areas to collect data would be a prudent first step. The subgroup will meet on a monthly basis with the goal to have the program available to parents in the child welfare system in 2021.

D. Revisions to the Reunification Plans

Task Force members provided feedback that the reunification plans currently used in child protective matters should be revised to more clearly present a roadmap for parents to follow to regain custody of their children. Therefore, beginning in 2019, a subgroup was formed with members from DHHS and the Office of the Attorney General to redraft the reunification plan's content and form. Throughout 2019 and 2020, the subgroup revised the reunification plan and piloted the new plan in Portland. As a result of feedback from the pilot project, the new reunification plan was separated into three discrete documents: Preliminary Rehabilitation and Reunification Plan, Rehabilitation and Reunification Plan, and Prevention Services Family Plan (for those families not yet court-involved.) The new plans received positive feedback from stakeholders and, therefore, were implemented statewide.

III. Continuing Education Subcommittee

In addition to pursuing the four projects identified in the Task Force's strategic plan, the Task Force also assisted in the planning of the Maine Judicial Branch's annual child welfare

conference through its Continuing Education Subcommittee (CES). The CES meets to help plan the annual child protective conference every year. The first meeting of the CES took place in September of 2019 to review past conference data and discuss possible themes for the 2020 conference. In the early part of 2020, the CES developed the 2020 conference theme, *From Child Protection to Child Welfare: Redefining the Role of a Child Welfare Professional*, and helped to select the speakers and presentation topics. The focus of the conference was holistic services for families involved in the child welfare system. The conference was originally scheduled as a two-day, in-person event in April. However, due to the pandemic, the conference was ultimately held virtually in October of 2020. The virtual conference spanned three and a half days and offered participants the opportunity to earn 20 continuing legal education (CLE) credits in addition to 1 ethics credit on topics ranging from preventing initial child removals to navigating housing issues for individuals including evictions and housing benefits. The average number of attendees at each session was 205. Participants reported a total of 3,563 hours of CLE credits, 208 hours of ethics credits, and 74 hours of self-study CLE credits. The number of GAL credits received was 1,900.

Conclusion

The Task Force focused on data and system process sharing throughout 2020 resulting in Task Force members pursuing complex initiatives aimed at systemic improvement and change. This year, more than ever, interagency communication and collaboration was a crucial component of the Task Force's work to ensure that safety and justice remained intact while faced with a global pandemic. All agencies demonstrated a commitment to collaboration, and the Task Force anticipates that this solid foundation will serve the mission of the Task Force well in the years to come.