

The mission of MCWAP is to assure that the state system is meeting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families through assessment, research, advocacy, and greater citizen involvement. Our goal is to promote child safety and quality services for children, youth, and families.

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel

December 1, 2023 , 2023; 9 a.m. - 11 a.m.

Co-Chairs: Ahmen Cabral; Deb Dunlap

Panel Coordinator: Jenna Joeckel

Minutes

9:05 a.m. Opening Statement:

Members shared the opening statement.

We are a federally mandated group of professionals and private citizens who are responsible for determining whether state and local agencies are effectively discharging child protective and child welfare responsibilities. The mission of the panel is to assure that the state system is meeting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families through assessment, research, advocacy, and greater citizen involvement. Each of us brings to this table a different set of experiences and opinions. Every voice is valued, and all perspectives are needed. Our shared goal is to promote child safety and quality services for children, youth, and families. This is the task to which we continually commit ourselves, and we hold our relationships in trust.

9:10 a.m. – MCWAP Values and Federal Mandated:

Members shared the MCWAP Values and Federal Mandates

9:15 a.m. - Welcome and Introductions:

Attendance: Kelly Dell-Aquila, Ahmen Cabral, Tammy Roy, Jenna Joeckel, Ed Wiseman, Betsy Boardman, Kathryn Brice, Esther Anne, Maura Keaveney, Erika Simonson, Julie Smith, Melissa Hackett, Kris Pitts, Brent Beaulieu, Becky Richardson, Travis Bryant, Chelsea Peters, Beth Gagnon, Michelle Westbrook, Brianna Gutierrez, Adrienne Carmack, Heidi Aakjer, Melissa Martin, Andrea Mancuso, Bobbi Johnson

Guests of the Panel – Michael Dixon, Christine Theriault, Jillian Alfeo, Heidi Dobbins, Christine Hufnagel

9:20a.m. – MCWAP Housekeeping Items:

Members voted to approve the November meeting minutes.

Bobbi Johnson, Associate Director of the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) has stepped into the position of Acting Director of OCFS. Ginna Googins, Regional Associate Director is acting as the Associate Director of OCFS. Rebecca Richardson, Regional Associate Director, will be providing coverage for District 5,6, 7 and 8. Denise Merrill, Regional Associate Director, will be providing coverage to District 1, 2, 3, and CES and intake. Jean Leonard, Regional Associate Director, will be providing coverage to District 4.

Members are reminded to include OCFS staff partners as they are meeting as subcommittees.

MCWAP has been invited to present to the Legislature on December 14th. The panel will present on the roles and recommendations of MCWAP.

The Government Oversight Committee has also asked MCWAP to join for a presentation on December 13th. The panel will present on the roles and recommendations of MCWAP. The link to the GOC can be found here: <https://legislature.maine.gov/Calendar/#Weekly/2023-11-26>

9:35 a.m. – Subcommittee Updates

Family Team Meeting Subcommittee Update – Subcommittee members have not met since the last MCWAP meeting. The next meeting will take place in January. It is likely that the subcommittee will meet bimonthly or quarterly. Two OCFS staff members have been recommended for participation in the subcommittee.

Family Centered Policy & Practice – There will be a presentation at January subcommittee meeting from the Regional Care Teams to explore if there are community care teams for child welfare as well as juveniles. More information about regional care teams can be found here:

<https://placemattersmaine.org/regional-care-teams/>. The subcommittee members are exploring information about aggravating factors as they relate to Termination of Parental Rights. Subcommittee members are also looking at the process of reviewing a child fatality within the OCFS system and at family after care. Members are gathering information to increase their understanding of the previous practice that included family team meeting specialists and what steps need to be taking to re-implement that practice.

Citizen Engagement Subcommittee – Members continue to work on the parent survey. Next steps include dissemination of the survey. Members are working with OCFS to determine strategies that can be utilized to support families in completing the survey including: survey links in OCFS offices, embedded QR codes, and having it available in the space where parents are located. Members have been doing more work on accessibility of the survey including the feasibility of having an ongoing link on the Citizen Review Panel website. Members are exploring whether resources might be needed for software, including to ensure accessibility of the survey to parents that utilize languages other than English. The subcommittee will be focusing on the provider survey next.

Trauma informed/Lived Experience – Members continue to build a partnership with the Maine Child Welfare Action Network (MCWAN). MCWAP members are invited to be part of that process. Interested members should be in contact with MCWAN Coordinator, Melissa Hackett, at MHackett@mekids.org.

10:00 a.m. – Homebuilders Presentation

Christine Theriault, Family First Prevention Services Program Manager; Heidi Dobbins, Bethany Christian Services Director Maine Programs; Christine Hufnagel, Bethany Christian Services Assistant State Director, and Jillian Alfeo, Bethany Christian Services Regional Director of Operations, Northeast provided a presentation to the panel about the Homebuilders Program.

Family First is a federal law passed in 2028 that allows states to claim title IV-E prevention funding. This supports children remaining safely in their homes. States are required to develop and submit a plan to support children remaining safely in the home to access the funding. The Homebuilders program is part of the State of Maine's plan. The State of Maine has contracted with Bethany Christian Services to provide services. Services started in 2022, and services went statewide a couple of months ago.

The Family First State of Maine Plan can be found here:

<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/data-reports-initiatives/system-improvements-initiatives/families-first-prevention-act/planning-implementation-updates>

Presenters from Bethany Christian Services shared information about the agency's values and beliefs, program characteristic, services, key elements of those services provided, and information about program performance. Presenters shared that the program is purposefully designed to eliminate barriers to service while promoting safety and is a strength based, trauma informed approach to supporting families. The presentation materials are attached to the minutes.

Discussion:

Members engaged presenters in a discussion about the utilization of the word "Christian" while engaging in services with families. Presenters explained the inclusive policy and practices that have been added at Bethany Christian Services to include everyone in services regardless of cultural of background or religious belief. The presenters explained that Homebuilders is not a faith-based model, and they work hand in hand with family development. Family populations served under the Homebuilders model are very diverse. The Homebuilders program is providing services in areas near tribal reservations and have included the ICWA director. Staff are trying to be sensitive to the indigenous population's culture and want to have open communication. Staff encourage opportunities for collaboration and a more comprehensive presentation. The model is evidenced based, and criteria for exclusions for services revolve around safety concerns. Presenters clarified that referrals to the Homebuilders program can only be made by OCFS.

Panel members expressed interest in reviewing data related to performance measures when they become available, including data on the demographics of families served and data around the proportion of families served by the Homebuilders Program who ultimately lost/retained custody of their children. Presenters indicated that a report on the first year of Maine's Homebuilders Program will be completed in February. The Panel asked that this be shared with the Panel prior to the March 2024 meeting.

Presenters provided information to the panel about the comprehensive assessments that they complete with families at the start of services. Presenters noted working with a large number of families experiencing domestic violence. Panel members asked how staff are supported in working with these families. Presenters reported staff receive training about Domestic Violence and partner with local organizations to: create a structure for safety in the home, implement safety measures, and provide support to the family when they utilize community services.

Presenters clarified that individuals do not need to practice Christian religion to be employed at Bethany Christian Services or work for the Homebuilders Program. There is a statement of faith that is presented and discussed at onboarding that is in line with federal laws. There are internal exemptions provided for staff that are unable to subscribe to faith-based practices.

Members discussed information shared with families about confidentiality. Presenters clarified that HIPAA applies to their services. Staff from the Homebuilders program get called as witnesses in active court proceedings. Staff have open conversations with the family when services are implemented and the same confidentiality rules and mandating reporting rules apply.

11:00 a.m. – OCFS Updates

Bobbi Johnson, Acting Director of OCFS shared updates related to her new role within OCFS and thanked the panels for ongoing partnership in child welfare work.

11:05 - Adjourn.

Next Panel Meeting: January 5, 2023