

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

February 7, 2025; 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.

Co-Chairs: Ahmen Cabral; Andrea Mancuso

Panel Coordinator: Jenna Joeckel

Minutes

9:30 a.m. - Welcome and Introductions:

Attendance: Andrea Mancuso, Ahmen Cabral, Jenna Joeckel, Kelly Dell'Aquila, Jamie Brooks, Erika Simonson, Abbie Rohde, Maura Keaveney, Christine Alberi, Julie Smyth, Travis Bryant, Heidi Aakjer, Melissa Hackett, Christin Hufnagel, Beth Gagnon,

*Guest of the Panel – Sarah Heald-Langevin, Rebecca Richardson, Carlie Fischer, Mariette Aborn, Christine Theriault, Christopher Guillory

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.

Members participated in a review of the Panel Values Statement.

9:10 a.m. – MCWAP Housekeeping:

The panel voted on and approved the November minutes.

The Annual Report is being drafted. The Panel Coordinator will complete final drafting and send the draft to Panel members prior to the March Panel meeting.

In January, the Panel co-chairs had an opportunity to provide an update to the Health and Human Services Committee regarding the 2024 recommendations.

Two Bylaw changes were proposed to the Panel regarding timeframes for membership of the Executive Committee and joining the Executive Committee. A proposal was made to change the time limit from two years to one year and to waive the requirement to sit on the executive committee prior to being a co-chair of the panel. This was a unanimous recommendation from the Executive Committee. The Panel Coordinator will send an electronic vote to Panel members prior to the next meeting for both Bylaw changes.

A recommendation has been made to expand panel participation in the role for individuals representing health and mental health professionals and individuals representing substance use treatment and recovery. A recommendation was made to shift Panel member Abbie Rohde's role from individuals representing substance use treatment and recovery to individuals representing health and mental health professionals and add additional members that will represent substance use treatment and recovery. The Panel Coordinator will send an electronic vote to members regarding shifting the roles within the Panel.

Additionally, Jamie Brooks has traditionally attended Panel meetings in a support role and has expressed interest in joining as a member representing parents and representatives of parents' groups. An electronic vote for membership will be sent by the Panel Coordinator.

The three citizen review panels have met and are practicing information sharing. The Panel co-chair provided some updates from the Justice for Children's Task Force:

- There are currently 28 Attorneys that represent parents in PC cases. This impacts permanency timeframes for children in a negative way.
- There was an 8% decrease in the custody filings from 2018 to 2024.
- The Supreme Judicial Court is getting ready to introduce new rule proposals for Family Court, Protective Custody Cases, and Protection from Abuse Cases. Community feedback will be encouraged once they are released, and Panel members will be updated when they occur.
- A small amount of funds have been set aside for a Guardian Ad Litem mentoring program.
- The Office of the Attorney General and the Office of Child and Family Services have decided not to participate in the Judicial Conference in April.
- There have been challenges with parents withdrawing from cases and the court process around that.

One of the Panel Goal recommendations from last fall was to add a subcommittee that explored services for youth after being in the care and custody of the State of Maine. Members are encouraged to participate in the subcommittee and notify the subcommittee chair, Panel member Kelly Dell'Aquila, if interested.

9:40a.m. Presentation on the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan

Melissa Hackett, Coordinator of the Maine Child Welfare Action Network, Mariette Aborn, Child & Family Well Being Special Projects Manager from the Department of Health and Human Services, and Christine Theriault, Family First Prevention Services Program Manager from the Office of Child and Family Services provided a presentation on the 2025 strategic priorities related to the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan. There has been a focus on understanding mandated reporting and community support for families in Maine. Members are encouraged to connect with Melissa with any questions. The slide presentation is included with the minutes.

Additional Information about the 2025 Strategic Priorities can be found here: [2025 MCWAN Strategic Priorities](#)

A Panel member offered resources regarding models being implemented in other jurisdictions including Family Friendly Schools. In New Hampshire, intake workers were starting to offer community-based service referrals during the report phone call and referred more complex cases to the community liaisons. A suggestion was made to determine how the strategies could be implemented into the work that the subcommittees are doing.

10:20 a.m. Presentation on the Ombudsman 2023 Annual Report

The panel had the opportunity to review the Ombudsman's 2024 Annual Report and the Office of Child and Family Services Response to the Report prior to the meeting.

The Ombudsman 2024 Annual Report can be found here: [2024 Child Welfare Ombudsman Annual Report.pdf](#)

The OCFS Response to the Ombudsman 2024 Annual Report can be found here: [OCFS Response to 2024 Ombudsman Recommendations.pdf](#)

Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman discussed the Ombudsman 2024 Annual Report. She included information about the history of the Ombudsman's office including staffing and their role within the child welfare system. The majority of the time is spent on two tasks including information and referral calls and reviewing cases. The presenter clarified that the system is a complaint driven, collaborative process and when a case is opened, it is as a result of a complaint being made. The Office of Child and Family Services also has an opportunity to respond to a case review. Case specific reviews are completed on an average of 80-100 cases and reports with recommendations are drafted specific to those cases. The presenter discussed trends that were outlined within the report and recommendations made as a result of those trends including a focus on the serious shortage on children's mental health and behavioral health services, the child welfare information system, limited visit supervisors, limited placements for children, a shortage of PC defense attorneys, and prevention community supports. The presenter recommended that members review page 15 of the report to include positive findings within OCFS districts.

The presenter also noted that Adoptive Foster and Families of Maine now had Kinship Navigators, and this has impacted the number of calls that the Ombudsman's office has received from grandparents.

Panel Discussion:

Members discussed collaboration barriers between community mental health providers and the Office of Child and Family Services that impact the number of providers that are willing to provide services to families involved with child protective services including the timeframe in which providers are paid, the limited documentation that the provider receives when a child enters care, the expectations around court proceedings, protected documentation from therapeutic sessions, and release of information expectations. Members also outlined limited communication as a barrier.

A recommendation was made to add a future agenda item regarding the relationship between community providers and OCFS.

A Panel member asked the Panel to share the following survey to support a collaboration between our Office and Mid-Atlantic Equity. The audience is identified as Families/caregivers of Maine school-aged children: [Qualtrics Survey | Qualtrics Experience Management](#)

10:57a.m. OCFS Updates

Rebecca Richardson, Manager of Child Welfare Strategy and Policy Implementation from the Office of Child and Family Services, provided an update regarding policies. The two policies that have been developed and sent for feedback are the Caseworker Contact Policy and the Placement Policy. The Placement Policy hasn't been finalized yet. A new individual has been hired within the training unit to support the finalization of new policies.

Next Panel Meeting: March 7, 2024, 9 a.m. – 11a.m.