

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

September 11, 2025; 9 a.m. – 3p.m.

Co-Chairs: Ahmen Cabral; Andrea Mancuso

Panel Coordinator: Jenna Joeckel

Note Taker: Erika Simonson

Minutes

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

Attendance: Jenna Joeckel, Ahmen Cabral, Abbie Rohde, Melissa Hackett, Bobbi Johnson, Erika Simonson, Molly Owens, Kaela Scott, Kristina Famolare, Jamie Brooks, Carlie Fisher, Kathryn Bryce, Beth Gagnon, Jenny Hinson, Sarah Langevin, Maura Keaveney, Taylor Kilgore, Adrienne Carmack.

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.

The objectives of the meeting were reviewed including:

- Provide an understanding of the Panel's role and the roles of individual members on the Panel
- Create connections to benefit the work of the Panel
- Support the planning and work of 2026

As a result of the first team-building activity, several key insights emerged regarding the importance of communication, collaboration, and planning. Participants emphasized the critical role of clear communication in achieving shared goals, noting that success depended on ensuring all members were aware of the plan and in agreement. The presence of a larger number of participants was also seen as a strength. Members also identified a gap in planning for the second half of the activity, which led to uncertainty among those expected to lead. This underscored the importance of comprehensive planning from start to finish. In addition, the experience highlighted the value of in-the-moment support—instances where members felt unsure but were reassured and guided by their peers helped build a stronger, more collaborative dynamic.

The second activity prompted deeper reflection on both individual and organizational behaviors that influence productivity and growth. Members shared a desire to create healthier boundaries between work and personal life, recognizing the importance of prioritizing tasks that align with long-term impact and sustainability. Members recognized that becoming more organized, refraining from taking on others' responsibilities, and intentionally delegating and advocating can help manage workload and prevent burnout. The discussion also addressed the importance of being intentional in selecting tasks that foster meaningful change rather than reacting to immediate demands.

Members also discussed breaking down barriers around complacency and the group identified the need to build a supportive, dependable community, highlighting the importance of having trusted colleagues to rely on. An emphasis was placed on the role of self-awareness in recognizing when complacency sets in and the importance of taking steps to grow, such as seeking new information or perspectives. Members reflected on the value of stepping back to reassess ideas, being willing to take risks by speaking up, and challenging long-held norms and practices. There was also a broader consideration of what it might look like to redefine roles, expectations, and systems in order to foster innovation and resilience.

Members identified barriers to change including the bureaucratic systems that slow progress, a limited number of resources and long-term funding beyond initial pilot efforts, and limited time and capacity among staff who are already at their limits. A resistance to change was also noted, often rooted in a culture of "this is the way we've always done it." Misalignment in accountability was seen as another obstacle. Members also spoke about the negative effects of unhealthy ownership of work, where individuals take on too much rather than delegating, and the broader societal expectation to consistently perform at 100%. These pressures often discourage boundary-setting, which is mistakenly perceived as a failure rather than a necessary act of self-care and professionalism.

11:30 a.m – Citizen Review Panel 101:

An overview of the Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) was provided to members, with a focus on the structure and function of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP). MCWAP serves as the panel that incorporates both public and private citizen input, and while public attendance at meetings is permitted, it has only occurred occasionally. The panel discussed membership terms and the ongoing effort to diversify panel composition beyond the minimum statutory requirements. Both MCWAP and the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel (CDSIRP) include statutorily mandated positions; individuals apply for these roles and are formally voted in. In contrast, members of the Justice for Children's Taskforce are appointed rather than elected.

It was noted that some other states operate Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) focused on specific areas of need, such as father engagement or mandatory reporting, allowing for a more targeted approach to oversight and feedback. National technical assistance is available to support CRPs in their work. Areas of strength identified within Maine's panels include the dedicated Panel Coordinator role, which enhances organizational capacity, as well as the consistent participation of assigned Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) staff in panel and subcommittee meetings. Areas for continued development include improving the timeliness of policy development and support efforts, strengthening the process by which the panel assesses issues, formulates recommendations, and receives structured feedback from OCFS.

Regarding MCWAP specifically, the panel reviewed its mission, value statement, and core responsibilities. The panel structure was recently adjusted to better support the ongoing work of subcommittees, which now meet monthly or more frequently as needed. While no new recommendations were issued this year, the panel engaged in meaningful reflection on past recommendations to inform future work. The Executive Committee continues to meet regularly and provides formal reporting to the Health and Human Services Committee.

12:30 p.m. - OCFS Updates:

Bobbi Johnson, Director of Child Welfare Services at the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), provided the panel with a comprehensive update on current initiatives, priorities, and developments within OCFS. The update included information on the agency's strategic planning efforts, the process for responding to recommendations from various oversight and advocacy groups—including the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP), Maine Child Welfare Action Network (MCWAN), the Child Welfare Ombudsman, OCFS staff, and the Legislature—and key staffing updates. Additional topics included updates on prevention strategies, child safety, family well-being, and a broader shift in practice mindset toward supporting families. Director Johnson also addressed legislative developments, the status of children in care—including the use of hotels and emergency departments—and the methodology for child fatality reporting, with an emphasis on the importance of systemic collaboration.

The strategic plan encompasses all OCFS sections, each of which now operates with clearly defined missions and values. The strategic framework is grounded in the core pillars of child welfare in Maine: Maximizing Safety, Achieving Permanency, and Increasing Well-Being (MAINE). OCFS has organized its responses to various recommendations into thematic areas and is actively working on several key initiatives aligned with those themes.

Prevention includes three-tiered approach: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. The Family First Prevention Services model is categorized within the tertiary level of this framework. Emphasizing a shared responsibility for child safety and family well-being, Director Johnson highlighted the importance of coordinated efforts across systems and community partners.

Additional updates included a report on the decrease in the number of children in care over the past year, and a review of specific placement strategies. These included the continued use of Community Sitters as a short-term support model, as well as Intensive Short-Term Homes, with ongoing evaluation to determine what is working well and what areas require improvement.

Lastly, Director Johnson highlighted the availability of the Child Fatality Data Dashboard, which provides access to data that includes both cases with and without prior involvement with the child welfare system. The dashboard represents a step toward increased transparency and data-informed practice. The dashboard can be found here: [Child Welfare Data Dashboard | Department of Health and Human Services](#)

An OCFS Dashboard FAQ can be found here: [Key Measures Dashboard FAQ.pdf](#)

Panel Discussion:

Members discussed the need for therapeutic providers to share highly detailed information in OCFS-involved cases and the potential negative impact these information requests may have on a provider's willingness to work with families involved with OCFS. Concerns were also raised about the limitations on what information can be shared. Information was shared that, though there's a perception that the number of available clinicians has contracted, the number of licensed clinicians has actually increased in Maine since the pandemic. This is critical resource type for family safety and stability. Understanding any barriers is important, and the group agreed to refer this topic to the Family-Centered Policy and Practice Subcommittee for further review and discussion.

Maine Pediatric Behavioral Health Partnership: Resources are available to support access to healthcare for children: [Maine Pediatric & Behavioral Health Partnership Program | BH Partners](#)

Link to OCFS review of recommendations: [Status of Recommendations to OCFS 2025](#)

1:30 p.m. – Subcommittee Updates:

Members heard updates from the subcommittees of the Panel:

Family Centered Policy and Practice: Melissa Hackett is the chair of the subcommittee and would like to encourage members to consider co-chairing the subcommittee. The focus of the subcommittee is on the systems/processes and how they play a role in understanding, supporting and meeting the needs of families.

Family Team Meeting: A proposal was made for the subcommittee to be absorbed into Family Centered Policy and Practice. The recommendation made by the Panel that would have called for and supported a more robust dialogue and collaboration around family team meetings was not successful during the 131st Legislature, and follow up can happen quarterly as within the Family Centered Policy and Practice Subcommittee.

Citizen Engagement Subcommittee: Esther Anne is the chair of the subcommittee. The focus of the subcommittee has been on trying to create opportunities to have speakers for the Panel to learn about areas, accessibility (language, reading level, translation) for parents that have child welfare and OCFS involvement to have materials that educated them pre-court action (potential know your rights pamphlet—and the implementation of this resource). Catherine Cutler is also working on this and is willing to collaborate with the Citizen Engagement Subcommittee.

Aftercare: An aftercare committee, that would focus on family supportive services, post OCFS involvement was suggested in recent years, but there has been insufficient panel interest or capacity to create a standalone subcommittee. The Panel can review this recommendation for possible future action as part of the review of prior recommendations that the Panel is currently engaging in.

2:15 p.m. – Recommendation Review:

Panel Coordinator presented a worksheet with the combined recommendations that the Panel has put forth over the last 3 years. An invitation will be sent to members after the meeting to add updates to the worksheet. Members were asked to add their initials next to the update they provide. The sheet with recommendations can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HimbpldXTsHsWyc0YVaotxuexTgHgsK-cjfN2Xy6-WM/edit?usp=sharing>

MCWAP Housekeeping:

The panel voted on and approved the June minutes

The website for the Maine Citizen Review Panels can be found here: [Maine Child Welfare Citizen Review Panels | Maine](#)

The link to the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) can be found here: [Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel | Citizen Reviews](#)

Next Steps:

An evaluation will be sent to the Panel for feedback about the annual retreat.

Panel members will add updates to the recommendation sheet found here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HimbpldXTsHsWyc0YVaotxuexTgHgsK-cjfN2Xy6-WM/edit?usp=sharing>

Next Panel Meeting: October 3, 2025, 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.