
MAINE JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN TASK FORCE
2025 REPORT TO THE
SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT

Submitted by the Maine Justice for Children Task Force

January 15, 2026

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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 (MJB) whose mission is to improve safety, permanency, and well-being for children in the State of Maine child welfare system. The members of the Task Force, representing the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, advocates for children and parents, foster parents, and other individuals involved in the child welfare system. The Task Force is one of three citizen review panels required under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). *See* 42 U.S.C. § 5106a(c). The other two panels are the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) and the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel (CDSIRP).

The Task Force is charged with identifying opportunities for systemic improvement within the child welfare system that could improve outcomes for children and using that information to develop joint solutions among child welfare system partners. Once opportunities for improvement are identified, the Task Force prioritizes those issues, and its members collaborate to develop solutions to help capitalize on those opportunities.

The Task Force is chaired by the Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court who also appoints members of the Task Force. Pursuant to its charter, the Task Force submits this report to the Maine Supreme Judicial Court on the work of the Task Force from January 1, 2025 to December 31, 2025.

I. Meetings

In calendar year 2025, the Task Force met in January, March, June, September, and December. All meetings were held virtually. Most Task Force meetings featured updates by its

members, including leaders from the MJB, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), and the Maine Commission on Public Defense Services (PDS). The updates focused, in part, on the current state of the child welfare system, new child welfare court filings, and workforce statistics and needs. In addition to updates, Task Force meeting attendees received updates on action steps taken on strategic plan initiatives and provided recommendations for follow-up as needed.

II. Strategic Plan

The Task Force's 2025 strategic plan focused on three projects: (1) information sharing between citizen review panels and the Maine State Legislature; (2) parent attorney and guardian ad litem recruitment and retention; and (3) continuing education for child welfare professionals. A subcommittee for each project convened regularly throughout the year.

A. Information Sharing

As noted above, CAPTA requires, as a condition of funding, that each state establish three citizen review panels. See 42 U.S.C. § 5106a(c). Maine's three panels (the Task Force, MCWAP, and CDSIRP) aim to conduct complementary work without duplication. Information sharing among the panels is paramount for collaboration of panel goals and outcomes. Throughout 2025, the Task Force meetings provided a forum for all three Maine Citizen Review Panels to collaborate. Members of MCWAP and CDSIRP regularly joined the Task Force to provide information on each panel's work, annual reports, system recommendations, and discussion about major themes and trends being shared in other panel meetings. A representative from the Task Force provided similar information to the other two panels.

A chair/designee from all three panels met quarterly throughout 2025 with a focus on effective communication among the panels, pertinent data sharing, ensuring that statutory functions

are faithfully discharged, and identifying opportunities to support and collaborate on initiatives. All three panels also provided quarterly updates to the Health and Human Services Committee at the Maine State Legislature. The Task Force anticipates that such quarterly updates to the Legislature will continue in 2026.

B. Parent Attorney and Guardian ad Litem Recruitment and Retention

The 2022 MCWAP Annual Report made the following recommendation to the Task Force regarding legal representation for families involved in the child welfare system: “The Justice for Children Task Force should convene a working group to further explore and make recommendations for how to improve the retention and recruitment of parent attorneys.” MCWAP made a separate, but similar, recommendation for the retention and recruitment of guardians ad litem (GALs). As a result of these recommendations, in June 2023, the Task Force established the Parent Attorney/GAL Recruitment and Retention Subcommittee (the subcommittee). Members of the subcommittee include representatives from the MJB, PDS, the OAG, the University of Maine School of Law (Maine Law), as well as parent attorneys, GALs, and other project partners. The mission of the subcommittee is to identify and make recommendations for system improvements to increase the recruitment and retention of parent attorneys and GALs providing services to families with pending child welfare cases.

The subcommittee has met regularly since August of 2023. The subcommittee presented eight initial recommendations to the Task Force at the September 2024 meeting. Leadership from all system partners (the MJB, PDS, OAG, and Maine Law) were invited to the Task Force’s January 2025 meeting (postponed from December 2024) and the March 2025 meeting to discuss the subcommittee’s recommendations, identify any concerns or barriers to implementation thereof, and consider opportunities for collaboration. Throughout 2025, the subcommittee continued to meet to

facilitate implementation of any adopted recommendations.

The following is a summary of the status of each recommendation at the close of the 2025 calendar year:

1. Recommendation: “PDS, the MJB, and the OAG should implement an exit interview protocol for parent attorneys, GALs, and AAGs who are no longer working with the protective custody docket. Survey results should be shared with the Task Force on an annual basis.”

a. Status: The MJB has developed an exit survey for GALs who resign from the GAL roster. The survey is intentionally brief and consists of only five questions¹ to increase the likelihood that it will be completed. PDS is interested in adapting the GAL exit survey to use as part of its exit interview protocol and a copy of the survey has been sent to PDS for this purpose. Representatives of the OAG’s Child Protection Division also serve on the subcommittee and are in conversations with their leadership regarding the OAG’s exit interview protocol. Starting in 2026, the GAL exit survey results will be shared annually with the Task Force by the GAL Services Coordinator at its December meeting. PDS and the OAG will also be invited to share any findings related to attorney departures from their roster or office with the Task Force on an annual basis to discuss whether there are system responses that could help reduce attrition.

2. Recommendation: “Ask that the Board of Overseers of the Bar establish the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) Child Welfare Specialist designation in Maine. The

¹ The five questions for the GAL exit interview are:

1. What is your name? (*Optional*)
2. From which of the following judicial region(s) did you regularly accept GAL appointments? (*Select all that apply*)
3. Did you request a leave of absence or removal from the GAL roster?
4. Please briefly summarize the reason(s) that you have requested to be removed from the GAL roster.
5. Are there any changes that could be made to GAL services in Maine so that you could consider returning to the GAL roster in the future?

purpose of offering this designation to attorneys practicing child welfare law in Maine is to provide them with an *optional* opportunity to deepen their expertise; PDS agrees this designation should not become a requirement.”

a. Status: This recommendation was discussed by the Task Force at its January 2025 meeting. Guidance was provided that to move this forward, a request would need to be made to the Board of Overseers of the Bar, pursuant to Rule 7.4 of the Maine Rules of Professional Conduct, to designate this as a specialty. The subcommittee will discuss the best way to move this request forward at upcoming meetings.

3. Recommendation: “The Maine Supreme Judicial Court should amend M.R. Civ. P. 90(a) and M.R. Crim. P. (56)(a) to allow students at an ABA accredited law school to receive student practice authorization for internships and externships with contract counsel supervised by PDS.”

a. Status: The Maine Supreme Judicial Court authorized a pilot program to conditionally authorize law student externs to provide public defense services under the supervision of PDS contract counsel, effective December 18, 2024. See [Administrative Order JB 24-03](#). The pilot program expires on September 5, 2026, unless sooner modified or extended. To qualify, the law student, supervising attorney, and PDS must comply with several conditions set forth in the Administrative Order. Law students may request up to 12 credits of externships. Representatives of Maine Law have indicated that interest in this program is starting to build and have shared data with the subcommittee. To further enhance interest, members of PDS participating in the subcommittee offered to explore additional opportunities to disseminate information about this program with PDS contract counsel.

4. Recommendation: “The Maine Judicial Branch should prioritize implementation of an electronic billing system for guardian ad litem billing.”

a. Status: On August 13, 2025, the MJB transitioned to electronic submission of GAL vouchers using either eFileMaine (in courts that have implemented Maine eCourts) or ShareFile (for all other courts). Vouchers are now also being internally processed using ShareFile. The MJB is confident that the end of a paper-based process reliant on the mail system will help make the GAL voucher payment process more efficient. The MJB is also still exploring the implementation of a more robust electronic payment module for GAL vouchers. Meetings to begin mapping out such a system have begun, but implementation is still a few years away given the need for more funding and the limited capacity of the MJB's Office of Information Technology, which is currently focused on the implementation of Maine eCourts.

5. Recommendation: “The Maine Judicial Branch should eliminate the requirement for GALs to submit a motion for prior approval to exceed the legal stage hourly cap for billing and should instead allow GALs to submit a justification for any hours above the cap at the time the voucher is submitted. The justification would be reviewed for reasonableness (akin to the process adopted by PDS).”

a. Status: This recommendation was discussed by the Task Force at its March 2025 meeting. The MJB noted that the current presumptive caps and pre-approval process is an important fiscal control for responsible cost management of GAL services. There was also concern that review for reasonableness at the invoice stage (as opposed to before the performance of the services) could result in GALs providing services for which they are ultimately not compensated if an invoiced amount is determined to be unreasonable. Task Force members noted that PDS has mitigated this risk by allowing more frequent billing opportunities, which guards against large invoices for several months at a time. However,

an increase in billing opportunities is not possible under the current GAL voucher system. There are already approximately 6,000 GAL vouchers that are submitted per year and the MJB does not have the resources to manage an increase in invoices without a robust electronic payment system. As noted under recommendation 4, the MJB is taking steps towards such a system, but it is not available at this time.

6. Recommendation: “The University of Maine School of Law should return to offering the child protection class each year and consider adding a clinic that is focused on child protection. The Maine State Legislature and/or PDS should provide financial support to establish and maintain this clinic to ensure sustainability. Additionally, the University of Maine School of Law should partner with PDS to ensure that the curriculum qualifies as the minimum standards training required for PDS.”

a. Status: The University of Maine School of Law is again offering a child protection course in the Spring of 2026 and intends to continue offering this course, provided a qualified adjunct professor is available and willing to teach the course. This has been very well-received by law school students and offers an introductory overview of child protection law; however, it is not taught for the purpose of satisfying the PDS minimum standards requirements. Members of the subcommittee from PDS intend to explore with PDS leadership whether an additional course could be offered at the Law School that could satisfy the minimum standards requirements for rostering as a parent attorney, similar to the bridge course currently offered at the Law School that satisfies the pre-service core training requirements for GAL rostering. These discussions are ongoing, and PDS has offered to share updates with this Task Force as they develop.

Regarding the clinic recommendation, the Law School does not currently have a child

protection clinic, but its general practice clinic does occasionally accept referrals of child protection cases, particularly cases involving straight petitions. The establishment of an additional clinic specialized only in child protection cases would require significant funding and infrastructure that is not currently available.

7. Recommendation: “The pay rate for Title 22 GALs and Parent Counsel should be re-evaluated and increased at least every two years to meet or exceed statewide, regional, and national cost-of-living adjustments, inflation rates, and market rate trends for legal services.”

a. Status: An increase in the payment rate for parent attorneys requires legislative action. The MJB has, in turn, ensured that the rate for GALs appointed in Title 22 cases matches that of parent attorneys. Apart from advocating for parity in payment among parent attorneys and GALs, it is not appropriate for the MJB to get involved in the budgetary process for a separate entity. PDS offered to provide information regarding any advocacy by PDS for further increases to the hourly rate for parent attorneys.

8. Recommendation: “The requirement that GALs—alone among all other practicing attorneys in the State—accept pro bono or reduced fee referrals from the courts, as set forth in M.R.G.A.L. 2(b)(5), should be eliminated.”

a. Status: The Task Force discussed the protocol to present proposed changes to the Maine Rules for Guardians ad litem at its March 2025 meeting and determined that changes of this nature must be made to the Guardian ad Litem Review Board, in its capacity as the advisory committee on the Maine Rules for Guardians Ad Litem. The Review Board considers proposed rule changes to determine whether to present a suggested revision to the Supreme Judicial Court for consideration. Next steps will be discussed at future subcommittee meetings.

C. Continuing Education

In 2025, the Task Force also assisted in the planning of the MJB's annual child protective conference through its Continuing Education Subcommittee (CES). The CES meets to help plan the annual child protective conference every year. During its meetings to plan the 2025 child protection conference, the CES identified the increasing conflict that families, lawyers, and Department staff are facing daily. Therefore, the subcommittee identified a need to learn how to address high conflict cases and individuals with the ultimate outcome being better outcomes for the families and children in Maine. Accordingly, the MJB hosted a two-day conference titled *Improving Family Outcomes Through Effective Communication in High Conflict Cases* on April 3 and 4, 2025.

Throughout the two-day conference, the High Conflict Institute and others presented strategies and information on how to provide high quality and effective legal representation in cases where there is often conflict between the parties.

There were approximately 250 participants each day. The following credits were awarded for the April 2025 conference (approximate):

1. Total credits awarded: 2060 credits
2. Continuing Legal Education (attorneys): 965 credits
3. Continuing Professional Education (GALs): 587 credits
4. Legal Ethics: 163 credits
5. Continuing Judicial Education (judicial officers): 345 credits

Conclusion

Throughout 202-5, the Task Force subcommittees generated systemwide recommendations and helped to implement system change. Many Task Force projects have contributed, in some way,

to statewide initiatives that have the potential to have a lasting effect on the child welfare system and the families of Maine. We would like to thank all the Task Force members for their past and ongoing meaningful collaboration and work to support the child welfare system.