

Minutes

Maine Justice for Children Task Force

September 16, 2025, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Via Zoom

IN ATTENDANCE: Chief Justice Stanfill, Justice Lawrence, Caroline Jova, Kaela Scott, Jamie Brooks, Mara King, Erika Simonson, Michael Dixon, Hunter Umphrey, Amanda Brownell, Kristina Famolare, Julie Donahue, Bette Hoxie, Ariel Piers-Gamble, Xi Chen, Andrea Mancuso, Chris Bricknell, Lisa Lattes, Molly Owens, Noah Heldorn, Melissa Martin, Travis Bryant, Bobbi Johnson, Norma Saulis, Chelsea Peters, Jenn Christensen, Mary Bonauto, Christine Alberi, Sarah Branch.

Welcome - Chief Justice Valerie Stanfill

- **Review of June 13, 2025 meeting minutes**
 - Michael Dixon noted that at the prior meeting, Director Johnson noted that there was information online regarding child deaths. He has provided the link to Caroline for inclusion in the final minutes.
 - The minutes were approved unanimously with that amendment.

Citizen Review Panel Updates

- **Maine Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel (CDSIRP)** - Erika Simonson, Child and Family Programs Coordinator, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, CDSIRP Chair; Dr. Nicholas Miles, MD, Spurwink Center for Safe & Healthy Families, CDSIRP Co-Chair
 - The panel had a meeting in June and September. In July and August, the executive committee met to help onboard Erika as chair.
 - The executive committee is considering whether the panel needs to amend its bylaws regarding case selection and review process. The specific change for consideration is whether there should be any limitation on review when there is a pending child protection case, including a case that is pre-jeopardy.
 - In June, the panel did a Level 3 review of a case and is looking at potentially recommending an examination of resources available to medical providers who encounter injuries to children six months old or younger. The panel is also looking at whether recommendations regarding mandatory reporting is appropriate.
 - In September, the panel looked at all Level 1 cases occurring in June, July, and August. From that review, some thematic groups were identified: dog bites, safe sleep, and failure to thrive. The panel also looked at differing responses to skull fractures presented across the state.
 - The panel will be undertaking a review of past recommendations made and what support the panel can provide for implementation of those recommendations.
 - The panel has a newly-created parent voice subcommittee that has volunteered to gather information from other review panels across the country as to how parent voice is considered as part of a review.

- The panel will consider doing further work with the Narcan subcommittee and provision of Narcan to childcare centers.
- **Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP)** - Andrea Mancuso, Esq., Public Policy Director, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, MCWAP Co-Chair; Ahmen Cabral, Senior Policy Associate, Catherine Cutler Institute, MCWAP Co-Chair
 - The panel does not meet during the summer, but it did have its annual full-day meeting last week. The panel is in a period of transition with the departure of some longer-term members.
 - The panel will conduct a review of past recommendations to review the status of the recommendations.
 - The panel will provide a more robust update from the full-day meeting at the next Task Force meeting.

Organizational Updates

- **Maine Supreme Judicial Court** - Hon. Valerie Stanfill, Chief Justice, Maine Supreme Judicial Court
 - **Maine eCourts update:** Androscoggin UCD and the Lewiston District Court juvenile docket went live with Maine eCourts on June 16, 2025. All other dockets, including family and civil, had already been implemented in Lewiston District Court, so the June 16th go-live marked the implementation of the new system in *all* case types in the first court location. The Judicial Branch is now preparing to launch Maine eCourts for all case types in Rumford, South Paris, and Farmington District Courts. We expect Maine eCourts to go live in these courts on September 22. From there, the Judicial Branch will continue implementing the system for all case types in other courts until it is available statewide.
 - **Court Closures:**
 - Following legislative approval, the Maine Judicial Branch will be closing the rarely-open Madawaska District Court on November 1, 2025. The Madawaska District Court does not presently have a child protection docket, but the closure is noted for this Task Force because occasionally child protection hearings are held in this court. This court is presently open only two days per month and consolidating the operations of Madawaska to courthouses in Caribou or Fort Kent will save approximately \$50,000 per year in rent, overtime, and travel costs. In addition to increasing operational efficiency, closing the building in Madawaska will avoid the need to address court security, technology, and accessibility issues that the aging Madawaska building has.
 - Lincoln will reopen October 3, 2025 after successful mold remediation.
 - Newport District Court will continue to be closed, and cases will continue to be heard at the Penobscot Judicial Center. The Judicial Branch is in discussions with the landlord of that facility regarding the costs to reopen.

- **Volunteer Greeters Making a Positive Difference for Courthouse Visitors:** The Judicial Branch has a new volunteer greeter position at the York Judicial Center in Biddeford. Staffed by volunteers applying through the Judicial Branch’s website, greeters are stationed in the courthouse lobby beginning at 8:00 a.m. to help visitors including, of course, parents with open child protection cases, to find their way to their court events, check the daily docket list, and provide a welcoming presence. In just the first two months of being at the courthouse, greeters helped over 1,700 visitors get to their courthouse destinations quickly and efficiently, significantly reducing traffic to the clerk’s window for simple requests and directions. We know that coming to court, including for a child protection case, can be a stressful and overwhelming experience. The Judicial Branch is hopeful that the volunteers’ pleasant demeanor is making the experience of visiting a courthouse a little less stressful. The York Judicial Center staff have called the greeter pilot a “game changer” that allows clerks more time to respond to more substantive questions at the clerk’s window and attend to their other duties. We hope it will be feasible to offer this program in other courthouses in the future to continue to improve access to justice in Maine courts.

- **Maine Judicial Branch - Caroline Jova, Family Division Manager**
 - **PC Filings Update:**
 - From January 1, 2025, to September 5, 2025, there were a total of 588 new child protection filings statewide. For the same time-period during 2024, there were 634 new filings. This represents about a 7% decrease in new filings.

 - **PC Guide Translations:**
 - As you may know, the Judicial Branch has a publication titled “*A Guide for Families in Child Protection Cases*” for parents that explains the court process for child protection cases and what to expect. The Judicial Branch recently had its PC guide translated into the following languages:
 - Arabic
 - French
 - Lingala
 - Portuguese
 - Kinyarwanda
 - Somali
 - Spanish
 - Chinese
 - The hope is that offering this resource to parents in various languages can continue to improve engagement by all parents, regardless of language barriers. If there are other languages that you are seeing with frequency that could also benefit from a translated guide, please contact Caroline Jova to let her know.

 - **GAL/CASA Update:**
 - Training for new CASA GALs took place from August 11 to 15.
 - Maine CASA trained 15 new CASAs spanning 7 court regions.

- The office is engaging in a template review project to ensure the same templates are being used statewide.
 - The OAG has produced a statute booklet with Title 22 and other relevant statutory provision, as well as regulatory and policy notes. Please contact Ariel if you are interested in a copy of that booklet.
 - The AAGs are engaging in district office trips to meet with staff, discuss trends and issues, and provide training. The first trip was out to District 4 (Rockland), and it was a very productive trip. Xi Chen provided training on testifying in court.
 - The AAGs are holding internal training, including on statutory changes. There will be a day-long training in Bangor during the fall administrative week. Tomorrow, staff are receiving stress management training.
 - The OAG also has a full contingent of interns and externs.
- **Office of Child and Family Services at DHHS** - Bobbi Johnson, Director, Office of Child and Family Services, DHHS
 - OCFS has been focused on implementation of its strategic plan for all offices within OCFS. The plan is available on the OCFS website. There is also a document that lists recommendations from external entities, with status and responses to the recommendations.
 - The new Deputy Director of OCFS, Jenny Hinson started recently, and she will oversee the implementation of the strategic plan.
 - Legislative updates:
 - New law that enables OCFS quick access to a child’s medical history;
 - High-level bill to convene a work group on substance exposures in infants;
 - New law that requires DHHS to notify youth 14 and older of judicial review proceedings; and
 - New law that amends the definition of “abuse and neglect” to distinguish between poverty concerns and affirmative deprivation of essential needs for children.
 - Hotel and emergency stay services: DHHS has been using “community sitters” statewide to help stay with children. DHHS is also using an intensive short-term home model for stays up to 30 days for kids that they have not been able to place in a more permanent foster placement. This model has been used eight times statewide thus far.
 - There has been a 15% decrease in children in care (on September 1, 2024, there were 2,509 children in care; on September 16, 2025, there were 2,141 children in care and 138 of those children are young adults in a voluntary extended care agreement).
 - DHHS is seeing about an equal number of reunifications and adoptions for case dispositions. OCFS is analyzing data on outcomes for youth exiting care in the past year.
 - OCFS is still working on staffing and ensuring offices are fully staffed, particularly focusing on Lewiston and Farmington.
- **Maine Commission on Public Defense Services** - Jim Billings, Esq., Executive Director, Maine Commission on Public Defense Services; Molly Owens, Esq., Chief, Parents Counsel Division, Maine Commission on Public Defense Services; Darcy Fisher, Esq., Deputy Director of Operations, Maine Commission on Public Defense Services

- PDS continues to have difficulty recruiting new attorneys for the rosters, which is made more difficult by budget limitations. The budget currently allows only for four staff attorneys and one administrative position. Attorney Chelsea Peters joined PDS as staff parent counsel recently, and she will be taking cases in the Portland area. Another staff attorney will vacate her position later this fall, but PDS has been interviewing candidates such that there should not be a gap in representation for any of those clients. PDS also just posted a new entry-level position for a parent attorney hoping to target recent law school graduates.
- Regarding the rostered attorneys, it looks like there will be a budget shortfall in paying rostered attorneys in the spring of 2026. PDS does not yet have a specific date when the funds will run out, but PDS estimates that it is currently paying out \$130,000 per day to rostered attorneys and will be seeking supplemental funding.
- PDS child protective division was more active in this legislative session than in prior years and had good collaborations with other community partners.
- Molly provided information about a federal grant for the [“Strengthening Youth Defense”](#) project to track and analyze court and related data and best practices to evaluate the youth defense system in Maine. This will be a three-year project. PDS has partnered with Roisman Law, Maine Law, and Place Matters at USM on this project.
- Discussion:
 - There was discussion that in August of this year, the commission announced it would no longer pay counsel fees for weapons restriction cases and civil commitment cases for appointments made on or after September 1, 2025. The Judicial Branch is now paying these fees, but the funding has not been allocated to the Judicial Branch, so this change will not result in savings but rather a shifting of expenses.
 - DHHS is also now paying for counsel fees for representation in a juvenile matter for youth who are placed in the custody of DHHS, but the funding has not been allocated to DHHS. Attorneys retained by DHHS for representation of the youth in the juvenile matter expect to be paid at commission rate, so appropriate funding is needed.
 - A suggestion was made that there needs to be continued conversation to identify all areas in which attorneys are appointed and the cost thereof so it can be appropriately funded by the Legislature.

Strategic Plan Updates

- **Continuing Education Subcommittee** - Caroline Jova, Esq., Family Division Manager, Maine Judicial Branch

- The subcommittee has not yet met to discuss plans for 2026. Caroline will be sending an email to past members of the subcommittee this week. Task Force members who wish to be removed or added to this subcommittee going forward should contact Caroline.
- **Parent Attorney/GAL Retention and Recruitment Subcommittee** - Kaela Scott, Esq. GAL/CASA Services Coordinator, Maine Judicial Branch
 - This subcommittee met in September after taking the summer off. The meeting focused on collaboration with Maine Law and opportunities for more courses on child welfare law.
 - The subcommittee meets monthly and will be undertaking a review of past recommendations and the status of those recommendations. Task Force members who wish to be removed or added to this subcommittee going forward should contact Kaela.

Other Updates

- **National Kinship Care Month.** September is National Kinship Care Month. Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine has assisted 739 kinship families in the last year.
- **Micmac Nation Tribal Court.** The Micmac Nation in Aroostook County will be starting their tribal court in the next month or so and will begin with a caseload of family cases. The court will look to progress to deferred disposition and restoration cases and will then move into civil and criminal matters. There has been coordination with judicial officers in Aroostook County on this effort and there will be a presentation at the Judicial College in October.

2025 Meeting Dates: December 16th