

**Minutes**  
**Maine Justice for Children Task Force**  
**December 16, 2025, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.**  
**Via Zoom**

**In attendance:** Justice Rick Lawrence, Caroline Jova, Kaela Scott, Melisa Martin, Frayla Tarpinian, Hunter Umphrey, Xi Chen, Mara King, Bette Hoxie, Ariel Piers-Gamble, Erika Simonson, Chris Northrop, Chelsea Peters, Liam Shaw, Andrea Mancuso, Taylor Kilgore, Bobbi Johnson, Lisa Lattes, Nick Miles, Sarah Branch, Jamie Brooks, Hannah Hussey, Michael Dixon, Esther Anne, Christine Thibeault, Chris Bicknell, Norma Saulis, Travis Bryant, Todd Crawford, and Joanna Davis (guest).

**Welcome** - Justice Rick Lawrence

- **Review of September 16, 2025 meeting minutes**
  - Minutes unanimously approved.

**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
  - An invitation has been sent to panel members to attend the Safety Collaborative's presentation on Safety Science on Friday, January 2nd from 12:30 to 2 p.m. Panel members should reach out to Erika if they are interested in attending.
  - The Panel is also doing a 15-year lookback on recommendations and see what implementation or action has been taken on those recommendations.
  - The Panel will also be reviewing its membership bylaws, and how the Panel considers requests to join the Panel.
  - The Panel will be releasing its next annual report in March 2026.
- **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 September 2025 all-day meeting was used as a reset due to leading members of the committee moving on to other positions or retirement in this past year.
  - The October 2025 meeting was largely focused on the Panel subcommittees.
  - Beginning in 2026, it is anticipated that a panel member will participate in DHHS policy workgroups.
  - The December 2025 meeting had two presentations on: (1) the use of the state's contingency fund, the fact that the funds have not been spent down in the last couple of years, and that the funds are used disparately across the state, and (2) the Family First Prevention Services Act and what services have been put in place in response to that Act.
  - The Panel is also doing a review of prior recommendations, and that will be the focus of its next annual report, which should be available in January 2026.
  - The next Panel meeting is February 2026.

**Organizational Updates**

- **Maine Supreme Judicial Court** - Hon. Rick Lawrence, Associate Justice, Maine Supreme Judicial Court
  - Maine eCourts update: The next implementation of Maine eCourts and eFiling is coming to Judicial Region 4, comprising Kennebec County Superior Court, Augusta District Court, Waterville District Court, Somerset County Superior Court, and Skowhegan District Court. All case types—civil, family, juvenile and criminal cases—will be included in the transition from paper filing to electronic filing, beginning February 2, 2026. As of that date, all mandatory electronic filers will be required to eFile documents in these courts.
  - For more information about Maine eCourts, including training and important announcements, visit: <https://www.courts.maine.gov/ecourts/index.html>
  
- **Maine Judicial Branch** - Carolina Jova on behalf of Hon. Brent Davis, Chief Judge, Maine District Court
  - **Child Protective and Juvenile Specialist Position:**
    - The MJB has posted for the Child Protective and Juvenile Specialist Position, vacant since Betsy Boardman’s departure in June 2025. Those interested in the position should review the posting on the MJB’s website and contact Caroline with any questions.
  - **PC Filings Update:**
    - From January 1, 2025, to November 7, 2025, there were a total of 725 new child protection filings statewide. For the same time-period during 2024, there were 788 new filings. This represents about an 8% decrease in new filings.
  - **GAL/CASA Update:**
    - The annual core training for new GALs took place during the fall administrative week (October 19 – 24, 2025).
    - There were 24 trainees, representing all 8 court regions.
  - **GAL Mentor Program:**
    - As you know, on May 9th, the Judicial Branch launched a GAL mentor program pilot project for GALs appointed to child protection matters. Under this project, child protection GALs can submit a request to the Family Division for an initial one hour of mentor services, and experienced GALs, who are selected by the Chief Judge to be rostered as mentors following an application process, are compensated at \$150 per hour to provide the mentoring services. The project is funded by the Court Improvement Program federal grant, so the pilot project is limited to child protection cases at this time.
    - Since the pilot program commenced, there have been 6 requests for mentor services. We highlighted the opportunity for mentor services to the new GALs during the core training in late October, and we anticipate as they become rostered, they may utilize this service.
  
- **Office of the Attorney General** - Ariel Piers-Gamble, Esq., Assistant Attorney General, Chief of the Child Protective Division
  - The Child Protective Division currently has 26 trial attorneys carrying 2000 cases statewide.
  - AAG Piers-Gamble wanted to note some significant anniversaries for years of service of the child protective AAGs. Lisa Wagner is celebrating 29 years with the division today and Mike Carney will have 25 years in April 2026, among others coming up in 2026 with significant years of service.

- **Office of Child and Family Services at DHHS** - Bobbi Johnson, Director, Office of Child and Family Services, DHHS
    - District Visits
      - Opportunity to share information and to elicit feedback from staff (safety, retention of staff)
      - Drop-in call with the Director
      - Monthly OCFS Bulletin
      - OCFS Executive Management Team (EMT) Advisory Group
    - Kin-First Placements
      - Work convened by the New England Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors supported by Casey Family Program
    - Psychotropic Medication Agreement
      - Revised the policy, created a practice guide and responsibility chart
      - Updating the Making a Choice Handbook for youth with youth in care
      - Disseminated guidance to medical providers
      - Trained OCFS staff and resource parents
      - Using the Informed Consent Form
      - Began prospective and retrospective reviews
      - Appeal to the RFP for the Implementation Reviewer, which has been reposted and will close on 12/30/25
    - Permanency
      - Steady decrease in the number of children in care which is a product of both entries into care and exits
        - FFY23 2542, 12/16/25 2055, includes young adults on a Voluntary Extended Care Agreement (138 young adults)
    - Barriers for families
      - Services, including visitation and transportation
    - Child and Family Services Review (CFSR)
      - October 2026 Statewide Assessment, includes focus groups
      - Continue to monitor federal guidance / executive orders in consultation with the OAG
  - Discussion:
    - (1)
    - (2) There is a new kinship approval process that will loosen some of the prior health and safety requirements for approving such placements (such as requiring the child to have a separate bedroom).
- **Maine Commission on Public Defense Services** - Frayla Tarpinian, 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 is still onboarding new staff attorneys.
  - The next parent attorney training is spring administrative week.
  - PDS is currently streamlining process to connect people with lawyers.
  - PDS is also looking at the appellate attorney list and trying to help solve the delays currently experienced by parties, including possibly a dedicated PC appellate attorney.

## Strategic Plan Updates

- **Parent Attorney/GAL Retention and Recruitment Subcommittee** - Kaela Scott, Esq. GAL/CASA Services Coordinator, Maine Judicial Branch
  - The parent attorney and GAL recruitment and retention subcommittee of this task force continues to meet monthly, on the first Monday of each month from 10am to 11am. As members may recall, the subcommittee presented 8 recommendations to the Task Force in late 2024/early 2025. The subcommittee thought it would be helpful to share brief updates about some of the recommendations that have moved forward, in whole or in part:
    - *“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 GAL exit survey has been created, and will be disseminated to GALs who request to resign from the roster. The results of the GAL exit survey will be shared annually with this Task Force.
      - The survey has also been shared with PDS, they have also expressed interest in an exit survey. We understand that the Office of the Attorney General is exploring their exit interview protocol.
    - *“The Maine Supreme Judicial Court should amend the civil and criminal court rules to allow students of an ABA-accredited law school to receive student practice authorization for internships and externships with contract counsel supervised by PDS.”*
      - The Maine Supreme Judicial Court launched 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.
    - *“The MJB should prioritize implementation of an electronic billing system for guardian ad litem billing.”*
      - 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 at the MJB using ShareFile.
      - 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 Information Technology department due to the statewide implementation of Maine eCourts.
    - *“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.”*
      - 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- The subcommittee continues to meet, and will bring forward discussion items and updates to this task force as appropriate.
- **Continuing Education Subcommittee** - Caroline Jova, Esq., Family Division Manager, Maine Judicial Branch
  - Provided the contract is approved, the 2026 conference will be a virtual trial skills interactive course taught by the National Institute of Trial Advocacy, in recognition quality representation requires effective and fluent trial skills. Participants would attend two four-hour sessions—one on Thursday, April 2, and one on Friday April 3. One session would be on direct and cross examination, and the second session would be on exhibits and impeachment. There will be two tracks: one for more experienced attorneys, and one for attorneys newer to the practice. The MJB offered a similar course in 2021 and received very positive reviews, with many participants expressing appreciation for an opportunity to hone their trial skills. The course would, as per usual, be offered at no cost to participants. The Save the Date will be emailed once we receive approval from Procurement.
  - We will also be offering a one-hour ethics course on Artificial Intelligence in the context of a child welfare practice taught by Deputy Bar Counsel, Suzanne Thompson.
  - The subcommittee discussed also offering a two-hour course for GALs to satisfy their annual domestic violence training. However, after further consultation with MCEDV, the decision has been made to not offer this as part of the conference because the GAL Review Board has numerous opportunities for GALs to satisfy this requirement posted on their website. MCEDV also received a grant to offer more opportunities in the spring of 2026.

#### **Other Updates**

- **MCEDV, Pilot Project for Pre-Filing Representation** - Andrea Mancuso, Esq., Public Policy Director, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence
  - MCDEV's PowerPoint presentation is attached.

#### **2026 Meeting Dates**

- The Task Force will continue to meet in 2026 from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on the third Tuesday of March, June, September, and December.
  - The dates for the 2026 meetings are: March 17, June 16, September 15, and December 15.

- You will receive a calendar invite with the Zoom link.