



ANNUAL REPORT 2025

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel

Citizen Review Panel

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FOREWORD

Citizen Review Panels

The Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) is one of Maine's three Citizen Review Panels for child welfare which, together, act to ensure Maine meets federal mandates for citizen oversight of the child welfare system.¹ Citizen Review Panels are groups of professionals and private citizens who are responsible for determining whether state and local agencies are effectively discharging child protective and child welfare responsibilities and making recommendations for system improvement. In Maine, the other two Citizen Review Panels, which each have specialized focus are the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel (CDSIRP), which focuses on case reviews, and the Justice for Children Task Force (JCTF), which is convened by the Maine Judicial Branch. More information on Maine's Citizen Review Panels can be found on our website, at www.mecitizenreviewpanels.com.

Who We Are

MCWAP members are volunteers who are representative of the community, including private citizens and professionals who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect, and those who have personal experience with the child welfare system. The Panel works to maintain a broad and diverse representation of the community. Our membership includes, but is not limited to: foster, adoptive and kinship parents; domestic violence services; former youth in care; representatives from Maine's courts; Guardians ad Litem; disabilities

specialists; legislators; community-based support services; law enforcement; medical and mental health professionals; sexual assault services; those with expertise in substance use treatment; tribal representatives; and members of the community at large with professional or personal experience with child protective services. All MCWAP meetings are co-chaired by two citizen members of the Panel.



The Department of Health and Human Services - Office of Child and Family Services (DHHS-OCFS) Associate Director of Child Welfare attends most Panel meetings as a non-voting member. DHHS-OCFS also provides support for the Panel with a Coordinator position that provides organization and task management assistance to all three citizen review panels. The Panel seeks regular participation of several other DHHS-OCFS staff who have subject area expertise and appreciates when these staff are made available to the Panel to participate in standing subcommittees or meetings of the full Panel as appropriate.

¹ MCWAP meets federal mandates under the Child Abuse Treatment and Prevention Act (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, as amended, 42 U.S.C. §5106a.(c)) and Children's Justice Act. (Sec. 107. GRANTS TO STATES FOR PROGRAMS RELATING TO INVESTIGATION AND PROSECUTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT CASES. [42 U.S.C. 5106c])

What We Do

The federal Child Abuse Protection and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and the Children's Justice Act (CJA) require all states to establish Citizen Review Panels. MCWAP fulfills requirements from both statutes, including mandates to:

- ➔ Examine the policies, procedures, and practices of state and local child protection agencies, and evaluate the extent to which the agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities;
- ➔ Provide for public outreach and comment to assess the impact of current procedures and practices upon children and families in the community;
- ➔ Review and evaluate State investigative, administrative, and judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect;
- ➔ Make policy and training recommendations;
- ➔ Prepare an annual report complete with a summary of activities and recommendations for the improvement of the child protective services system.

The **mission** of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel is to assure that the state child welfare 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.

Contact Information

Jenna Joeckel, LCSW, LADC, CCS

CAPTA/CJA Panel Coordinator

Jenna.L.Joeckel@maine.gov

www.mecitizenreviewpanels.com

Overview

Citizen Review Panels work to ensure the people who are most affected by the child welfare system are part of assessing system efficacy and making recommendations for improvement. Those who have personal experience with child protective services and those who work within the broad child welfare system often have the perspective and insight to create innovative solutions when systems need to be improved.

In 2025, the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) implemented a modified meeting schedule to hold fewer meetings of the full Panel in recognition of the scope and breadth of discussion and collaboration that was happening in subcommittees and to allow more members to participate in those smaller and more detail-oriented spaces. Monthly meetings of the full Panel were held in February, March, June, September, October and December. Except for a full-day annual meeting held in-person at the Capitol Judicial Center in September, all other meetings of the full Panel are held over a virtual platform for two hours on the first Friday morning of the month.

All MCWAP members strictly volunteer their time or are able to participate only as a result of the organization at which they are regularly employed providing compensation for their participation, except for the Panel Coordinator, who helps administratively support the work of both the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel and the Maine Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel (CDSIRP). As a result, the scope and volume of the Panel's work in any given year is significantly dependent on the capacity of its members. In 2025, MCWAP adjusted to the resignation of multiple members who had historically contributed significant time, effort and leadership to the work of the Panel. Understanding that capacity could not be immediately recouped, the Panel made a strategic decision to deviate from what has become its traditional practice each year of developing new recommendations for stakeholders in the child welfare system to consider. Instead, MCWAP committed to a review of recommendations the Panel has made over the course of the last five years with the goals of: (1) identifying any progress that has been made in moving those recommendations forward; and (2) determining whether the Panel should revisit and reinvigorate any of those prior recommendations in the upcoming years.

The structure of the 2025 Annual Report is as follows:

- **Panel Development and Governance.** In this section, MCWAP provides an overview of any changes to leadership and membership within the Panel, collaboration MCWAP engaged in throughout the previous year with other child welfare stakeholders, and any work MCWAP engaged in to improve our processes.
- **Citizen Input.** In this section, MCWAP will review the structure in place for obtaining feedback from interested parties as well as any information that came to the Panel from outside of regularly scheduled Panel meetings or subcommittee meetings in the previous

year.

- **Child Welfare Policy Review.** One of MCWAP’s core functions is to review and provide feedback on the policies and practices of the Office of Child and Family Services governing the State agency’s child welfare response. In this section, MCWAP will denote all policies that were provided to the Panel for review and feedback and any other information relevant to the Panel’s ongoing role in child welfare policy review.
- **Legislative Activity.** In this section, MCWAP will disclose any engagement with the Maine Legislature in the preceding year.
- **Review of Prior Recommendations.** In lieu of our “Looking Ahead” section wherein MCWAP typically will put forward a collection of recommendations for improvement of Maine’s child welfare response, this year’s report will contain a backwards glance at some of the Panel’s prior years’ recommendations, together with any relevant updates the Panel is aware of related to a given recommendation.
- **Summary of Full Panel Meetings.** This section of the Annual Report provides a high level overview of each monthly meeting of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel and any particular areas for potential Panel follow up identified by members during these meetings.

Panel Development and Governance

The Panel’s bylaws call for an Executive Committee, which is made up of both co-chairs and three other citizen members of the Panel, who meet monthly with the Panel Coordinator and the Associate Director of Child Welfare to address any emerging issues, make membership recommendations, and develop the agenda for the next full Panel meeting. Though having welcomed a new member to the Executive Committee in 2025, to fill a vacancy left by a member who departed in 2024, MCWAP ended 2025 with two new vacancies on the Executive Committee, due to the resignations of two members. Recruiting replacement Executive Committee membership has been a challenge, given the additional time commitment. The Panel hopes to fill these vacancies in 2026.

The chairs or designees of all three citizen review panels (MCWAP, CDSIRP, and the JCTF) continued to meet quarterly to ensure high-level information sharing and understanding of focus areas and recommendations for systems improvements. Agendas for these quarterly meetings continue to include general panel updates, sharing any new data that has come to any of the panels, and coordinating the quarterly check-in with the Maine Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

Throughout the course of any given year, MCWAP invites presentation of annual reports from the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel, the Justice for Children Task Force, the Office of Child and Family Services and the Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman. Beyond those presentations in 2025, several other resources were shared with the Panel, including the Maine Child Welfare Action Network’s [2025 Strategic Priorities](#), the [Child Safety and Family Well-being Plan](#), the Office of Child and Family Services [Strategic Plan](#), and a [report](#) from the National Association of Counsel for Children

on State Utilization of Title IV-E Funding to Support High Quality Legal Representation.

During 2025, MCWAP also continued to make improvements to the webpage that hosts our “Contact Us” page. In 2024, that webpage was updated to alert individuals sending information that the information sent to the Panel is not confidential and to encourage anyone with an open child welfare case to seek legal advice before sharing any information about their case. In 2025, MCWAP further updated this page to ensure that anyone submitting information to the Panel understands that responses to all inquiries are made monthly, and so a response to their outreach may be delayed by several weeks.

As noted above, MCWAP’s work is supported by several subcommittees. MCWAP began 2025 with three subcommittees: Family Centered Policy and Practice, Citizen Engagement and Family Team Meetings. Departing members in 2025 included two consistent participants in the Citizen Engagement subcommittee, one of whom was also co-chairing the Family Centered Policy and Practice subcommittee and the other who co-chaired the Family Team Meeting subcommittee. The Panel was delighted that two new members stepped forward to take on leadership of the Family Centered Policy and Practice subcommittee, which tends to be the Panel’s most active. However, identifying new leadership of the Family Team Meeting subcommittee was less successful. Given capacity of MCWAP members and challenges with the consistency of engagement with OCFS representatives, the Panel decided to fold further exploration of issues concerning Family Team Meetings into the Family Centered Policy and Practice subcommittee.

Citizen Input

In addition to ongoing feedback about the broad child welfare system that is available to the Panel through its large and diverse membership, the Panel has two primary mechanisms to receive additional input and feedback: surveys to parents/custodians and community providers; and through members of the public who have contacted the panel directly, usually through our website’s [Contact Us](#) page.

Parent & Provider Surveys

CJA requires the Panel to actively seek input and feedback on the child welfare system from parents/custodians as well as community members whose work intersects with the child welfare system. MCWAP meets this requirement through two triennially issued surveys: one to parents and one to community providers. Though the survey to parents has been continuously open for the last two years, the Panel has observed that there has not been a sufficient volume of responses to warrant pulling and synthesizing the information provided in 2025. The Panel will need to update the provider survey in 2026 and looks forward to exploring how outreach around that feedback occasion may also present new opportunities to encourage more responses to the parent survey as well.

Outreach from Citizens

The Panel also provides an opportunity for individual citizens to offer public comment through our website and/or direct contact with the Panel co-chairs. In response to outreach through the website or to a Panel co-chair, a member of the Panel's Executive Committee will connect with the citizen to receive the input, ask questions, and get additional information that may be helpful to the Panel in reviewing and discussing the citizen input. The Panel co-chair then reviews the input with all members at a full Panel meeting. Members can reflect on their own related observations of the child welfare system response, ask questions, and seek additional information from DHHS-OCFS, other members and/or non-member stakeholders, up to and including referring a particular aspect of the identified issue to a subcommittee for further review, discussion and possible recommendations.

In 2025, the Panel received five submissions through the website. One of these individuals was reaching out to inquire as to the process for joining the Panel and one was hoping for direct assistance with an ongoing guardianship case. The other three individuals did not respond to attempts to follow up. Therefore, the Panel did not substantively discuss any individual citizen feedback in 2025.

Child Welfare Policy Review

To assist the Panel in discharging its obligations under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), to examine the policies, procedures, and practices of the State to evaluate whether child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities, the Office of Child and Family Services periodically provides new or revised policy proposals to the Panel for feedback.

Historically, policies that OCFS has chosen to share with the Panel have been provided very near the end of OCFS' policy adoption process, providing little time for collaborative discussion and adoption of recommended changes. In recent years, the Panel has worked with OCFS to try and improve that process, attempting to provide more space and time for meaningful feedback to be provided by the Panel and incorporated into the final version. Collaboration between MCWAP and OCFS regarding feedback on proposed new or revised policies continues to be a work in progress.

In 2025, OCFS provided MCWAP with four draft policies for review. These included: Children's Emergency Services, Psychotropic Medications for Children; Adoption; and Safety Planning. The Panel Coordinator scheduled a virtual meeting for any interested Panel members to join to discuss and offer feedback, which was aggregated by the Panel Coordinator and forwarded to OCFS' Policy & Training Team. This approach of Panel members coming together to discuss a proposed policy was a new approach to create space for collaborative review and learning from different perspectives. Previously, all Panel members would be provided with a copy of the proposed policy and directed to provide individual feedback to OCFS through the Panel Coordinator. A key challenge to that past process was a lack of opportunity for Panel discussion. Therefore, feedback provided did not benefit from the multi-disciplinary lens that is the strength of the Panel. This new approach provided an opportunity for more cross-discipline dialogue. However, there were still challenges identified in the process that the Panel continues to work on with OCFS.

In reflecting on the new approach that was implemented for these policy reviews in 2025, Panel members identified the following difficulties:

- The initial timeline requested by OCFS for Panel review and feedback on a policy that has been in development for many months is most frequently one to two weeks. This consistently requires the Panel Coordinator to request additional time for the Panel to review.
- An abbreviated timeframe for policy review makes it difficult for Panel members to rearrange schedules on short notice to create availability and capacity to join a discussion meeting and contribute meaningful feedback.
- OCFS' practice of providing just the current version of the new or revised policy, without any tracked changes or information as to specific points, makes it difficult for Panel members to understand what, if any, substantive policy and practice change choices are proposed by OCFS. This challenge is compounded by the fact that a representative from OCFS has not participated in the Panel's discussion and feedback session. So, when Panel members have questions, there is not a well-defined process for obtaining a clear and timely answer.
- There is no mechanism in place for the Panel to receive back information from OCFS as to whether any of the feedback provided by the Panel was ultimately incorporated into the final policy. Nor is there a mechanism for the Panel to understand, if feedback is not incorporated, why that feedback was not incorporated.

To respond to these challenges around the Panel carrying out one of its core functions, Panel leadership met with representatives from the Policy & Training team within OCFS to explore continued modification of the process for Panel review and feedback on proposed new and revised child welfare policies. As a result of these conversations, **the Panel and OCFS have agreed to the following collaborative policy review process:**

- OCFS will provide to the Panel a 2026 Policy Review Schedule in early 2026, with the understanding that the schedule may be modified as needed throughout the year if circumstances arise that may require a reprioritization of policy development/revision work.¹
- MCWAP will be permitted to assign a Panel member, as a representative of MCWAP, to participate on OCFS' policy development/revision working group.
- The expectation of a Panel representative to an OCFS policy development/revision working group will be that the Panel representative will keep the Panel informed along the way, such that the Panel can offer feedback during the development/revision process, as opposed to within a constricted timeline once a draft policy is in its final stages of approval.

The Panel hopes that this process will allow for a more collaborative and meaningful dialogue between the Panel and OCFS around what is one of the Panel's core statutory functions.

¹ As of April 15, 2026, DHHS-OCFS has not made the 2026 Policy Review Schedule available to the Panel.

Legislative Activity

MCWAP is required by state statute² to give quarterly reports to the joint standing committee of the Maine Legislature having jurisdiction of Health and Human Services (HHS) matters. These quarterly reports require a summary of the Panel's observations regarding efforts by OCFS to improve the child welfare system, a summary of the collaboration between the three citizen review panels, and any recommendations on how to further protect the State's children through department policy, rulemaking, and legislation. These reports are required to be presented by a citizen member of the Panel. In 2025, a Panel Co-Chair provided reports to the Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services in January, July and September.

Additionally, the Maine Legislature considered several policy proposals that were either a result of MCWAP's prior recommendations or a noted area of interest from the Panel in prior report years. These were LD 2078, "An Act to Increase Participation by the Department of Health and Human Services Regarding Federal Benefits for Which Children in the Custody of the Department Are Eligible" and LD 52, Resolve, Requiring the Department of Health and Human Services to Study Options for Allowing Children in the Department's Custody to Receive Federal Benefits and LD 1544, An Act to Support Families by Improving the Court Process for Child Protection Cases.

LD 2078 proposed that the Department discontinue the practice of using Social Security benefits of youth in state custody to pay for the cost of their care. LD 52 proposed that the Department study the cost and technical assistance needed to implement such a change in practice. In 2023, MCWAP had begun a conversation about the need to ensure that children who age-out of state custody have sufficient economic resources to be successfully independent as young adults, and had noted Social Security benefits obtained and retained by the Department as a possible key source of resources to support this need. As the 132nd Legislature adjourns, the Panel observes that the State has taken action to eliminate reliance on these Social Security benefits to support foster care expenses. Instead, going forward, these resources will be maintained for the affected child.

LD 1544 advanced three court process-related recommendations from MCWAP's 2024 Report. These included the repeal of a prior involuntary termination of parental rights as an aggravating factor that can justify the Department in not supporting any rehabilitation or reunification services; a requirement that the Department articulate its consideration of the harm to a child that comes from removing the child from their family of origin and how that has been balanced against the alleged risk of serious harm were a child to remain with their family; and to codify the Department's state and federal obligation to provide rehabilitation and reunification efforts in each case as a required element for termination of parental rights. This proposal received substantial bipartisan support in the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary in the 132nd Legislature's first session. It was waylaid on the appropriations table as a result of the Department's perspective that, had they been required to prove

¹ Title 22, Section 4010-D.

reasonable efforts in each of the parental rights termination proceedings that had been handled the year before, each of those subject children would have needed to have remained in state custody for an additional three months. The Department estimated that would have cost more than \$2M annually. As the 2nd session wound down, the bill sponsor of this proposal, Senator Donna Bailey, worked with legislative colleagues to amend the bill to remove the proposal around reasonable efforts to eliminate the need to appropriate additional funds. As a result, the first two recommendations, concerning repeal of the aggravating factor and consideration of the trauma of removal were enacted in late April.

Reflection and Update on Prior Recommendations

As noted above, this year's annual report will contain a backwards glance at some of the Panel's prior years' recommendations, together with any relevant updates the Panel is aware of related to a given recommendation. Not all prior recommendations from the past five years are included here, though an attempt has been made to offer a collection of recommendations for which there has been either ongoing work or some level of action taken to progress.

Assessing and Improving Family Team Meetings

Family Team Meetings (FTMs) play an essential role in ensuring that all staff, families, providers and supporters are regularly communicating with each other throughout the child protective process. They are also essential to ensuring that all family members have access to what they need to be safe and stable and to timely addressing any new or ongoing concerns or needs. The Panel has, over a number of years, extensively reviewed the Department's FTM policies. In prior reports, the Panel has noted that the written policy and written protocols for FTMs are generally strong. However, the Panel has also consistently discussed observations that FTM practice frequently does not align with policy and continues to be an area of Maine's child welfare response that warrants attention and improvement. As a result, the Panel has made several recommendations over the years to try to encourage improvement of practice connected to these critical components of the child protection response, and also to increase oversight and transparency around progress. Most recently, the Panel recommended a comprehensive external assessment and that the Department implement a mechanism to collect ongoing feedback from staff, partners, and families on their experiences with the FTM model. The Panel asked DHHS-OCFS to commit to updating the Panel on the progress towards these recommendations no less than quarterly.

A bill to provide funding for an external review and support of practice improvement was heard in the 131st Legislature and received broad bipartisan support in the HHS Committee. However, it failed to receive needed appropriations and died at adjournment. Subsequently, DHHS-OCFS informed the Panel that, in 2025, it would conduct an internal evaluation related to the quality and consistency

Prior Annual Reports from the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel can be found on our website and are linked below.

- [MCWAP Annual Report 2021](#)
- [MCWAP Annual Report 2022](#)
- [MCWAP Annual Report 2023](#)
- [MCWAP Annual Report 2024](#)

Requests for any additional information on the status of prior years' recommendations can be made through our [Contact Us](#) page.

of FTMs statewide, which will include feedback from participants and a review of related data.

The Panel was provided with limited information in the Fall of 2025 that some of the preliminary conclusions drawn from this work were a need to explore retaining FTM facilitators and improving tools that would create efficiencies in the scheduling of FTMs amongst all case participants. In early 2026, Panel members were invited to participate in a stakeholder group listening session about FTM practice. No additional information has been provided to the Panel regarding steps that have been taken by OCFS to augment, adjust or further support FTM practices. The quality of FTMs and the alignment of practices with FTM policy continues to be of significant interest and concern for the Panel, and we look forward to hearing from DHHS-OCFS in greater detail around the conclusions made through its internal auditing process and what changes can be expected as a result.

Discretionary Funds to Support Family Safety and Stability – DHHS-OCFS Contingency Fund

In 2021, MCWAP recommended that funds be appropriated to the Office of Child and Family Services to implement a process through which either caseworkers or an external community partner had the discretion to authorize up to a certain amount of flexible funds to a family at risk of having children removed in order to support efforts to keep affected children safely and stably with their family of origin. The Maine Legislature carried forward this recommendation and has, for the past three fiscal years, provided \$200,000 to a Contingency Fund. OCFS has contracted with Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine to oversee the administration of this fund and has created an internal process whereby requests to access these funds can be approved.

The Panel has received two annual updates on the use of the Contingency Fund, the last as recently as December 2025. These presentations spurred extensive discussion amongst Panel members, as Panel members continue to observe that families involved with the child welfare system have significant support needs. Of primary concern for members in the Panel's December 2025 discussion was that amounts in the fund have not been fully expended in any given year and there are significant discrepancies with respect to which Districts are and are not utilizing the Contingency Fund. Some of Maine's most rural Districts are clearly not taking advantage of this resource for the families who are involved with their offices. In particular, District 7 (Hancock and Washington) has extremely limited use of the funds, with one year showing no requests to the fund. Observations by Panel members focused on three primary issues:

- The eligibility criteria and administrative process created for accessing the Contingency Fund are much narrower than what the enabling legislation allows for;
- The under-utilization of the Contingency Fund in each year suggests that eligibility criteria and administrative process requirements should be re-examined; and
- There is a clear need for additional education and training for staff to ensure available resources are getting to families as intended, and that this also likely calls for a greater degree of monitoring and oversight by DHHS-OCFS leadership.

The Panel appreciated the Associate Director's candid and engaged participation in the Panel's dialogue about the Contingency Fund usage. In particular, DHHS-OCFS shared that, when the fund was

initially created, there was a concern amongst Department leadership that this would be an over-utilized and ultimately scarce resource that would require careful guardrails to ensure it was used most effectively across the state and amongst all families who might need it. These concerns drove the current eligibility and administrative process requirements. Given that the fund has not been fully expended in any year, the Associate Director acknowledged that it would be appropriate to reconsider the strict parameters that have been put in place. The Panel looks forward to continued conversations with our state agency partners to help support the full usage of this critical resource.

Improving Legal Representation for Families

Seeking improvements to both the quality and quantity of legal representation available for all family members has been a frequent topic of review and discussion by the Panel in the last several years. Some of the specific recommendations made by the Panel have benefited from some forward progress, while others have not. This is a policy and practice area where MCWAP has greatly appreciated the collaboration we have with the Justice for Children Task Force and also the increased partnership in the work of the Panel by the Parent Council Division and Resource Counsel within the Maine Commission on Public Defense Services.

Improving Recruitment and Retention of Parent Attorneys

In 2022, the Panel expressed significant concern at the growing list of families who had experienced child removal but were still awaiting appointment of counsel. With the benefit of perspective from the Panel's parent attorney and guardian ad litem members, the Panel ultimately recommended that an Office of Parent Counsel be created in the state to support parent attorneys and that these parent attorneys be compensated on par with other appointed counsel and counsel for the State. In the last three years, the Maine Commission on Public Defense Services has created a parent counsel division and now has staff attorneys engaged in this work in multiple areas of the state. The Chief of the Parent Counsel Division participates in the Panel and has also been a collaborative partner on legislative and policy efforts. Additionally, discussions around methods and strategies for improved retention and recruitment of both parent attorneys and guardians ad litem have been an area of strong collaboration between MCWAP and the Justice for Children Task Force. The JCTF has created a subcommittee, which includes several Panel members, and that subcommittee has been working on this issue for several years. Several recommendations that have come out of those discussion have been actioned, including a stronger partnership with the Maine Law School. Despite this good work, there remains a list of unrepresented parents who are awaiting appointed counsel. That is of continued concern, particularly given the constitutional rights at issue.

Developing Pre-Petition Legal Representation for Families

In 2021, MCWAP recommended that legal advice and representation be made available to help support families prior to child removal through the development of a pre-petition legal representation program. Many states now have thriving pre-petition legal representation programs, created to help address safety and stability issues upstream to prevent the need for child removal and thus reduce trauma and long-term effects of child welfare system intervention on children. More than half of the country now

draws down Title IV-E funds for legal representation, which is helping to support programs like this in other states.

The Maine Legislature created ([Resolve 2021, Chapter 181](#)) a Commission that looked at what a pre-petition legal representation pilot project could look like here in Maine. Ultimately, the crisis around appointed counsel in our State interfered with forward progress towards state funding for the recommended pilot. The Maine Commission on Public Defense Services continues to seek the support of the Office of Child and Family Services around how structures might be put in place, as they are in some other states, to enable Maine to draw down Title IV-E reimbursement funds for legal representation. The Panel heard from OCFS in 2025 that this is largely the only area where other states are taking advantage of Title IV-E drawdown potential while Maine is not.

In 2025, the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence shared that they secured a competitive federal grant to launch a pilot project around pre-petition legal representation in Androscoggin and Aroostook Counties, specific to survivors of domestic abuse and violence who become involved in the child welfare response. That pilot involves contracting with private counsel in the two pilot counties at a set hourly rate to provide holistic representation for survivors in a variety of possible matters, including protection from abuse, housing retention, filing a family court case, and advocacy with the Office of Child and Family Services. MCEDV has reported that the University of Maine Law School's Rural Practice Clinic is a referral partner, which has an added benefit of exposing law students to working with what are often some of the most complex cases in the child welfare system. The pilot is in its early stages, having started to accept cases in October 2025, and is expected to continue for two years. The recommendations from MCWAP and the subsequent legislatively driven commission work helped to secure the pilot funding, demonstrating the interest and need in the state.

Providing Client Directed Attorneys for Children

The Panel has also noted that Maine is an outlier in not providing client directed attorneys for children in state custody and made a recommendation in 2023 that the state take steps to not only require the appointment of client directed attorneys for children of certain ages but also for the Judicial Branch to develop guidance for judges on engaging youth in child welfare proceedings. Lack of institutional buy-in around the concept of appointing attorneys for children and also structural and capacity challenges around appointed representation in Maine have been barriers to any movement towards the appointment of client directed attorneys for children. However, the Judicial Branch created a bench guide for child protection judicial reviews and permanency hearings that includes examples of questions that the judge could ask youth who choose to attend court. The questions were developed in collaboration with the Youth Leadership Advisory Team. The Judicial Branch conducted a quality hearing pilot project, the results of which were shared at the Annual Child Welfare Conference in 2025. The Judicial Branch has indicated plans to expand the quality hearing work to other district courts.

Offering the National Child Welfare Law Specialist Certification for Child Protection Attorneys

Lastly, the Panel has previously recommended that Maine take steps to offer the National Child Welfare Law Specialist Certification for attorneys who practice in the child welfare system. Maine is one

of only a handful of states that does not currently offer this certification, which has been demonstrated to improve the quality of legal representation in child welfare cases. Achieving this certification would require action from the Maine Board of Bar Overseers, the entity in Maine that licenses all attorneys. Since MCWAP made this recommendation a few years ago, the recommendation has also been endorsed by the subcommittee of the Justice for Children Task Force examining strategies for increasing recruitment and retention of parent attorneys and child welfare guardians ad litem. Though no action has been taken on this recommendation by the Board of Bar Overseers, representatives of MCWAP, the Justice for Children Task Force and the Administrative Office of the Courts expect to meet with leadership at the Board in Spring 2026 to continue this important discussion.

MCWAP Panel Goals

In each of the last several years, MCWAP has set intentions for the Panel to delve deeper into some aspects of the child welfare response that were more lightly discussed during the prior year's conversations. These have included: development of a training focused on trauma-informed practices for working alongside individuals with lived experience of the child-welfare system; creating a subcommittee to review what types of supports and resources are provided to parents and youth once a case is closed or a child ages out of the system; review documents provided by the Department to parents/caregivers that explain their rights and the processes used by the Department to provide parents/caregivers this information; and more in depth education on the allowable uses for Title IV-E funds. Where these Panel goals involve education for Panel members, the Panel has been successful in meeting the goal. In 2025, the Panel had a presentation on Title IV-E funds from appropriate OCFS staff. The Panel has reviewed all information provided by OCFS that OCFS indicates is provided to parents/caregivers to explain their rights. Where the Panel goals involve taking a lead in moving forward project-based work, the Panel has consistently experienced capacity challenges. For example, with respect to the intention to look more closely at the supports and resources provided to families upon case closure, no Panel member stepped forward to take on leadership of that follow-up. To date, that has not happened. As the Panel has evolved over the last few years into the oversight entity that the federal and state statutes call for, the Panel had to reconcile the need to have a broader lens at how the child welfare system response in Maine is functioning and where it might be improved, that has in some respects come at the expense of the Panel being able to dig deeply into and carry forward progress on any one particular issue.



Looking Ahead

The Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel is committed to continuously improving the quality of this citizen review panel and its ability to make effective recommendations to improve the safety and wellbeing of children, youth and families in Maine.

SUMMARY OF PANEL ACTIVITIES 2025

MCWAP meetings continued to be held on a virtual platform in 2025, with an in-person annual meeting held in September. Most meetings include a presentation to the full panel with an opportunity for panel members to ask questions, participate in discussion, and identify additional information that would be helpful or potential future discussion topics.

FEBRUARY

The Panel was provided with information and updates from the quarterly Justice for Children Task Force meeting in January, including the anticipated launch of a guardian ad litem mentoring program and that the Office of Child and Family Services and the Office of the Attorney General have decided that their staff will not participate in the annual Child Welfare Conference hosted by the Judicial Branch in April. The Panel received a presentation on the [Child Safety and Family Well-being Plan](#), a collaboration between the Maine Child Welfare Action Network (MCWAN) and OCFS. MCWAN's [2025 Strategic Priorities](#) were shared. The Panel also was presented with the 2024 Child Welfare Ombudsman's [Report](#) and the OCFS [Responses](#).

Members discussed collaboration barriers between community mental health providers and OCFS that impact the number of providers 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 relationships

between community providers and OCFS.

MARCH

The Panel had presentations of several annual reports, including the annual report of the Justice for Children Task Force, the 2024 Child Advocacy Center Annual Report, and the 2023-2024 Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel Annual Report. Panel members engaged in a discussion about the referral process for Child Advocacy Centers and sought clarification about eligibility. The CDSIRP report sparked a discussion about the recommendation to strengthen statutory requirements for protective headgear. OCFS provided an informal update, to include information on the status of the OCFS Strategic Plan, the process underway to update the OCFS safety? decision-making framework, and the new release of the Resource Parents Bill of Rights. Policies that have been finalized include: Caseworker Contact, Period of Purple Crying and Safe Sleep, and the Use of Expert Consultation When Investigating Child Abuse and/or Neglect. More updates will be provided at the June Panel Meeting. The Panel welcomed two new members, expanding valuable perspective from parents with lived experience of the child welfare system response and substance use peer recovery supports.

JUNE

The Panel received a presentation from OCFS on Title IV-E funding. Title IV-E Funding includes several purpose areas:

- Foster care and adoption maintenance

- Funding and administrative activities
- Funding for Training Activities

When a child leaves a placement and returns home to their parents, including trial home placement, eligibility for the Title IV-E claim is no longer met. While the child may be eligible, the ability to draw federal funds under Title IV-E funds changes based on placement eligibility. OCFS reports approximately 40% of the children in care are eligible for Title IV-E reimbursement, and OCFS is covering approximately 60% of the costs for those cases with Title IV-E reimbursement. Title IV-E reimbursement has been increasingly less valuable (15% drop in last several years) because the threshold is connected to 1980 TANF amounts, federally. This has been identified as a challenge in multiple states. Maine does not currently claim for Funding for Allowable Administrative Costs of Legal Representation. OCFS reported that to implement additional Title IV-E Funding around the Funding for Allowable Administrative Costs of Legal Representation, additional infrastructure would be needed on the Public Defense Services level. However, Public Defense

Services reported that the staff have assessed current information reporting/billing detail from parent attorneys and concluded the current tracking system sets them up well to be able to provide the needed data to be able to draw down funds?

OCFS provided an update to the Panel, including announcing a new Deputy Director of OCFS had been hired. Director Johnson discussed the OCFS Strategic Plan process and provided information as to how OCFS is responding to Public Consulting Group (PCG) recommendations related to OCFS management structure. The Strategic Plan will be based on Federal and State measures with two addendums including over 200 recommendations. A Dashboard is also being implemented to reflect performance progress and outcomes. The importance of relationship building, collaboration, and communication was emphasized as part of a common goal including partnering with family members and community providers. The timeframe for the rollout of the OCFS Strategic Plan is not finalized, but OCFS is aiming for July 1st.



JULY AND AUGUST

Panel summer break. Subcommittees continued to convene virtually to work on their topics.



OCTOBER

Members spent the meeting time in breakout rooms in Panel subcommittees reviewing and updating past recommendations.

SEPTEMBER

The Panel hosted its 2025 Annual Meeting in person. The focus of the Annual Meeting was:

- Providing an understanding of the Panel's role and the roles of individual members on the Panel
- Creating connections to benefit the work of the Panel
- Supporting the planning and work of 2026

Panel subcommittees will review and update past recommendations in the coming months.

DECEMBER

Family First Prevention Services Program Manager, Christine Theriault, from the Office of Child and Family Services, provided a presentation on Family First Prevention Services Act Updates. This included a brief overview of the Family First Prevention Services Act, information about programs that have been implemented and broadened, prevention implementation, data, lessons learned, important intersections with community partners and plans, and next steps towards goals. There was some discussion by the Panel about the regional limitations on available programming. For example, some of the programming, like the Intercept Program, is only available in Southern Maine. The Panel also had a presentation from OCFS on the use of the Contingency Fund over the last two years. Extensive discussion was had amongst Panel members on this topic, which is conveyed in an earlier section of this report.

PANEL MEMBERS 2025

Panel Co-Chair:

Andrea Mancuso

Public Policy Director
Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence

Panel Co-Chair:

Ahmen Belanger Cabral, LMSW

Senior Policy Associate
Youth and Community Engagement Team
Muskie School of Public Service, USM

Panel Coordinator (non-voting):

Jenna Joeckel, LCSW, LADC, CCS

Office of Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

DHHS-OCFS Representatives (non-voting):

Bobbi Johnson, LMSW

Director of Child Welfare Office
Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

Jean Haynes

Associate Director for Child Welfare
Office of Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

Adrienne W. Carmack, MD

Medical Director
Office of Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

Brieanna Gutierrez

Communications and Compliance Manager
Office of Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

Panel Members:

Heidi Aakjer, MPA

Director Maine
Children's Trust

Christine Alberi, Esq.

Executive Director
Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman

Esther Anne

Policy Associate II
University of Southern Maine

Senator Donna Bailey

Member of Maine Legislature
Senate District 31

Betsy Boardman

Child Protection and Juvenile Process Specialist
Maine Judicial Branch
**Resigned in June 2025*

Travis Bryant

Executive Director
Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine

Kelly Dell'Aquila

Family Centered Support Coordinator
The Opportunity Alliance
**Resigned in June 2025*

Ariel Piers-Gamble, Esq.

Assistant Attorney General
Chief of the Child Protection Division
Maine Office of the Attorney General

Maura Keaveney, Esq.

Assistant Attorney General
Child Protection Division
Maine Office of the Attorney General

Sarah Heald-Langevin, PSS, CIPSS

Peer Support Specialist
Alternative Wellness Services
**Joined February 2025*

Jamie Brooks

Family Engagement Specialist
Catherine Cutler Institute

Michelle Westbrook

Family Engagement Specialist
Catherine Cutler Institute

Abbie Rohde, LCSW, CCS

Director of Behavioral Health
Alternative Wellness Services

Brent Beaulieu

Detective Lieutenant
Bangor Police Department

Melissa Hackett

Coordinator
Maine Child Welfare Action Network

Beth Gagnon

Assistant Director and Preschool Head Teacher
Heidi's House Child Care

Jennifer Needham, LSW

Director of Residential Services
Marian's Place Youth Shelter

Jim Billings, Esq.

Executive Director
Maine Commission on Public Defense Services
**Resigned in September 2025*

Melissa Martin

Public Policy and Legal Director
Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault
**Resigned in December 2025*

Julian Richter

Parent Attorney
Richter Law

Erika Simonson

Child & Family Programs Coordinator
Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence

Kathryn Brice

Assistant Ombudsman
Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman

Taylor Kilgore

Guardian Ad Litem

Julie Smyth

Director
Office of School and Student Supports
Dept of Education

Ashley Perry, Esq.

Guardian Ad Litem

Christine Hufnagel

Assistant NNE Branch Director
Families First/Homebuilders
Bethany Christian Services

Molly Owens (non-voting)

Parent Counsel Division Chief
Maine Commission on Public Defense
Services

Chelsea Peters, Esq

Parent Attorney
**Resigned in September 2025*

The Panel would like to thank the following former members for their thoughtful contributions and years of service to the Panel:

Jim Billings, Esq.

Executive Director
Maine Commission on Public Defense Services

Melissa Martin

Public Policy and Legal Director
Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Betsy Boardman

Child Protection and Juvenile Process Specialist
Maine Judicial Branch

Kelly Dell'Aquila

Family Centered Support Coordinator
The Opportunity Alliance

Chelsea Peters, Esq

Parent Attorney

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Panel is grateful to all of the Maine parents, caregivers, and youth who have shared their experiences and observations about the impact of the child welfare system on their families.

The Panel would like to thank the Maine Legislature, especially the Joint Standing Committees on Health and Human Services and Government Oversight, for their interest MCWAP's activities and recommendations. Members would also like to thank the other two citizen review panels, the Justice for Children Taskforce and the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel, for their continued collaboration with MCWAP in 2025, and for the shared commitment to communicating regularly and working effectively together.

The Office of Child and Family Services continues to collaborate and dedicate time and resources to ensure the success and independence of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel. Members are grateful for the technical support that Jenna Joeckel, CAPTA/CJA Coordinator provides for all Panel activities. The Panel would also like to thank those OCFS staff members who have regularly shared their expertise and perspective in panel subcommittees throughout the year.

There are many individuals and organizations working on the front lines every day to promote child safety and family well-being. The Panel would like to thank all of the caseworkers and supervisors of Maine's Office of Child and Family Services, Child Welfare Department, and the community providers who work alongside them in the broader child welfare system, for the service, care, and attention they provide each and every day to Maine's children, youth, and families.

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