

**Minutes**  
**Maine Justice for Children Task Force**  
**March 17, 2026, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.**  
**Via Zoom**

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Justice Rick Lawrence, Judge Duddy, Emilie Swenson, Sarah Branch, Dulcey Laberge, Norma Saulis, Randall Liberty, Jamie Brooks, Betsy Boardman, Xi Chen, Mary Bonauto, Liam Shaw, Erika Simonson, Jeny Hinson, Chelsea Peters, Courtney Beer, Chris Bicknell, Carlie Fisher, Andrea Mancuso, Ariel Piers-Gamble, Cassie Rogers, Bobbi Johnson, Shawna Lund, Hunter Umphrey, Michael Dixon, Michael Sauschuck, Julianna Flewelling, Travis Bryant, Caroline Jova, Kaela Scott, and Joanna Davis

**Welcome** - Hon. Rick Lawrence, Associate Justice, Maine Supreme Judicial Court

- **Review of December 16, 2025 meeting minutes** - Approved.

**Presentation: “Nothing About Youth Without Youth: Elevating Youth Voice in the Courtroom”** - Julianna Morningstar (Youth Leadership Advisory Team), Judge Michael Duddy, Dulcey Laberge, OCFS Youth Transition Services Program Manager, Emilie Swenson, Youth Leadership Advisory Team, Taylor Kilgore, Guardian Ad Litem

- **Introduction:**
  - Emilie Swenson from YLAT introduced the panel members and provided a brief background about the project. The panel acknowledged the work of Betsy Boardman with this initiative, prior to her transition to her current position.
  - Judge Duddy is a District Court Judge in Biddeford District Court, who focuses primarily on the child protection docket in that court. He participated as a partner in this project. Judge Duddy shared that collaboration with YLAT and CIP projects around engagement of youth has changed his perception on child participation in child protection hearings. Prior to this project, he had a concern that participation of children in the child protection hearing could result in retraumatization. This project shifted this view for him, and he now believes participation of youth in the appropriate ways in their child protection matters advances justice and youth voice in these cases.
  - Julianna Morningstar was a youth in care during high school and had a guardian ad litem that strongly advocated for her. She is excited to be on this project to help encourage youth to participate in the court system.
  - Dulcey Laberge, Youth Transition Program Manager, with OCFS, is encouraged by this project because it’s important to OCFS that young people are included in the decisions that are being made about their lives. They want to continue to build public support for youth voices.
- **Provided Materials:**
  - See Attachment A, presentation slidedeck
  - See Attachments B, “Make Youth Count” tool
  - See attachment Cm “Know your Rights” flyer
  - Additional information is also available at: <https://www.ylat.org/>
- **Discussion:**
  - OCFS now uses the “Make Youth Count” tool for training and interaction with youth.

- In September 2025, the law changed to require OCFS to notify youth 14 and older of court events in their cases and that they are welcome to go to court.
- Next steps:
  - Continue to share recordings (there is also a slightly longer version of the recorded interview).
  - Additional court visits to acclimate youth to the courthouse
  - Other future opportunities:
    - Maintaining communication with the courts; and
    - Working with the CASA/GAL program.
- Meeting participants discussed how this video could be further shared in an effort to ensure as much of a wraparound approach for the youth as possible, such as if the youth also has an ongoing juvenile case, or the youth is empowered with knowledge of who does what in their case (such as the role of the AAG).
- Regarding additional court visits, the group considered whether judges from another location or retired judges could participate so as to avoid conflict with presiding judicial officers. Any additional future visits would include conversations with the youth, parties, court staff, and judicial officers ahead of time to ensure there is no conflict or uncomfortability.

#### **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
  - Panel has been working on the annual report, due to be released at the end of this month.
  - Dr. Miles, vice-chair, completes his two-year term this spring. He has expressed interest in maintaining his position, but that will be confirmed at a later time.
  - Three joint review panels with the homicide review panel. Unlike prior joint review, CDSIRP will do its own independent review ahead of those joint panels.
  - Panel has completed its lookback on its recommendations to 2010 and determined that most of those recommendations have been implemented. Panel is reviewing patterns in its recommendations over those years, such as dissemination of information regarding safe sleep, and the impact of that information getting out into the community.
  - There is a specific recommendation in the annual report regarding supervised visitation and courts taking more opportunities to order supervised visitation in appropriate cases. However, the panel acknowledges the lack of supervised visitation services across the state and that will be considered in making the recommendation.
- **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 has met twice since the last Task Force update. The meeting time has focused on trainings and receiving presentations from other panels across the state:
    - In February, there were two presentations: one on the annual report from the Child Welfare Ombudsman, Christine Alberi, and another by Director Johnson on OCFS's fatality data dashboard and provide more information on that resource.

- In March, the panel heard from Dep. Director Hinson on the upcoming Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process, as well as Caroline Jova and Kaela Scott presenting on this Task Force's work.
- MCWAP has a tri-annual requirement to get feedback from parents, and the panel is gearing up for the next round of surveys.

## Organizational Updates

- **Maine Supreme Judicial Court** - Hon. Rick Lawrence, Associate Justice, Maine Supreme Judicial Court
  - **Maine eCourts Update:**
    - The Judicial Branch recently announced the implementation schedule of Maine eCourts and electronic filing (eFiling) in the remainder of Maine's trial courts. The next court to go live will be Biddeford District Court on March 30, 2026. The remaining regions will follow in quick succession until statewide implementation is completed in February of 2027.
    - For the press release with the detailed schedule, please visit the Maine Judicial Branch website at [www.courts.maine.gov](http://www.courts.maine.gov) and click on the "News and Announcements" tab.
    - Additional information about Maine eCourts, including training and important resources, is also available on the Judicial Branch website under the "Maine eCourts" tab.
  - **Child and Family Services Review (CFSR):**
    - As a reminder, the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Administration for Children & Families will be conducting its review of Maine's child welfare system. The CFSR occurs every five years and is a federal-state collaborative effort to monitor states' conformity with federal requirements and to enhance states' capacity to achieve improved outcomes for all children and families.
    - Maine's CFSR is scheduled to begin in April 2026 with the development of the statewide self-assessment by OCFS. Stakeholder feedback, including from judicial and legal professionals, is an important part of the CFSR process.
    - OCFS will be providing more information about stakeholder engagement and the CFSR process generally as part of their update, and we will continue to keep you informed at future quarterly meetings.
- **Maine Judicial Branch** - Caroline Jova on behalf of Hon. Brent Davis, Chief Judge, Maine District Court
  - **PC Filings Update:**
    - From January 1, 2026, to March 6, 2026, there were a total of 122 new child protection filings statewide. For the same time-period during 2025, there were 174 new filings. This represents about a 30% decrease in new filings.
  - **New Child Protective and Juvenile Process Specialist**
    - As you know, the Child Protective and Juvenile Process Specialist position has been vacant for several months. The Judicial Branch has hired Attorney Nici Carbone for this position, and she will start on March 23. Attorney Carbone

previously worked at the AOC, first as a Legal Services Advisor with Maine CASA and then as the Manager of the Office of Transcript Operations and Transcripts. She has been in private practice for several years focusing on juvenile defense work and guardian ad litem services. The Judicial Branch is thrilled that Attorney Carbone will be joining the Family Division and look forward to you meeting her.

- In the meantime, please continue to send any PC/JV process questions to the MJB's Family Division Manager, Caroline Jova.
- **CASA Update:**
  - Maine CASA held its pre-service training for new volunteers March 9 - 13.
  - There were 11 trainees, representing regions 1, 2, 5 and 6.
- **Office of the Attorney General** - Ariel Piers-Gamble, Esq., Assistant Attorney General, Chief of the Child Protective Division
  - The office is fully staffed, but remains concerned about the appellate backlog - there is a back-up of 40 cases due to lack of parent counsel. It has been taking about 7-8 months to find attorneys to take these cases. Some former Law Court clerks at private firms have taken some cases.
- **Office of Child and Family Services at DHHS** - Bobbi Johnson, Director, and Jenny Hinson, Deputy Director, Office of Child and Family Services
  - OCFS is continuing to see fewer kids in care.
  - Maine is part of a New England collaborative focusing on placing kids in kinship placements.
  - CFSR overview/update: see Attachment D for slidedeck.
- **Maine Commission on Public Defense Services** - Chelsea Peters on behalf of Frayla Tarpinian, Esq., Executive Director, Maine Commission on Public Defense Services
  - PDS is fully staffed with parent attorneys in Cumberland, Kennebec, Hancock, and Washington counties. PDS is waiting to hear about the supplemental budget, which will open up four additional experienced attorney positions throughout the state. There are ongoing discussions as to whether one of those positions would dedicate time to child protection appeals.
  - PDS has an upcoming three-day conference during the spring Administrative Week.
  - In February, PDS began a pre-petition pilot project with Maine Moms in Cumberland County. Chelsea Peters is the lead attorney on that pilot project for PDS. This is separate from the ongoing pilot project with MCEDV.
    - PDS is getting referrals directly from the Maine Moms program for mothers who are in various stages of substance use recovery (including pregnant individuals). The program is doing referrals to Chelsea for whomever is interested in meeting with her. Some clients are one-off consultation meetings or providing education on the child welfare process, and in other instances, it will be a limited retainer for full pre-filing representation. However, this representation does not extend to ancillary legal issues, such as protection from abuse cases.
    - MCDEV has a pilot project in Androscoggin and Aroostook counties to work with domestic violence victims connected with a domestic violence resource center who are in the assessment or investigation phase of the child welfare process.

There are attorneys in each of these counties who provide holistic services to these victims, including direct representation. This commonly involves representation in protection from abuse cases. Currently, the contracted attorneys are also doing some family matters representations for the clients. The project is in its second year of funding, and this spring MCEDV will seek an additional two years of funding (but the second two-year funding cycle is not competitive like the first two years).

## **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 Retention and Recruitment Subcommittee continues to meet monthly, with the goal of getting a better understanding of the status of each recommendation that was previously made to the Task Force, as well as identify any possible future recommendations. This review is ongoing.
- **Continuing Education Subcommittee** - Caroline Jova, Esq., Family Division Manager, Maine Judicial Branch
  - This year's conference will be a virtual trial skills interactive course taught by the National Institute of Trial Advocacy, in recognition that quality representation requires effective and fluent trial skills. NITA's courses are known for their learning-by-doing teaching philosophy. Participants will receive a mock fact pattern to review before the session. For each session, participants will be placed in breakout rooms with a 6:1 participant to faculty ratio. After a presentation by NITA faculty on best practices, participants will be invited to practice their trial skills and will then receive individualized feedback from NITA faculty on ways to improve their performance.
  - The MJB offered a similar course in partnership with NITA in 2021 and received very positive reviews, with many participants expressing appreciation for an opportunity to hone their trial skills.
  - This year's course will feature two 4-hour modules focused on essential trial skills: (1) direct/cross examination, and (2) exhibits and impeachment.
    - The first module on direct/cross examination will be offered on Thursday, April 2.
    - The second module on exhibits and impeachment will be offered on Friday, April 3.
    - There will be two tracks: one for more experienced attorneys, and one for attorneys newer to the practice.
  - Additionally, the conference will feature a virtual one-hour ethics course on Wednesday, April 1. The topic of the ethics course will be Artificial Intelligence in the context of a child welfare practice and will be taught by a panel of experts including Deputy Bar Counsel, Suzanne Thompson.
  - All sessions, including both the NITA modules and the ethics course, will be offered at no cost to participants.
  - Registration is now closed and the MJB is preparing the final logistics for the conference.

**Remaining 2026 Meeting Dates:** June 16, September 15, and December 15.

ADJOURNED at 11:35