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Child Welfare Annual Report

Calendar Year 2023

Submitted May 28, 2024

Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Child and Family Services

Introduction

While 2023 brought the end of the federal public health emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, it saw the continuation and, in some cases, exacerbation of ongoing challenges for the State's child welfare system and Maine children and families. Record low unemployment has created staffing challenges across industries and throughout the state, which have had a significant impact on the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) workforce and its partners in the broader system. These impacts include, but are not limited to, providers struggling to hire staff to meet the need for behavioral health and substance use treatment services, the shrinking roster of attorneys and Guardians ad Litem to serve in child protection cases, and the courts working to maintain an adequate number of judicial marshals to ensure safety. At the same time, children and families who depend on these systems are facing complex mental health and substance use issues, economic insecurity tied to rising costs for basic necessities, and a lack of affordable housing in many areas of the state.

In the face of these challenges, OCFS staff continues to work with community partners to ensure safe and loving homes for every child in Maine. OCFS is proud of these staff, and leadership is committed to engaging with them to better understand their challenges, listening to their ideas for improvement, and partnering on solutions that will benefit staff and in turn those they serve.

Prevention Efforts

In 2023, with the support of the Legislature, the Department hired a Special Projects Manager for Child and Family Well-Being within the Commissioner's Office. This position has been a key part of the Department-wide efforts to ensure Maine is meeting the needs of families long before the need for child welfare involvement arises. These efforts include the establishment of the State's first Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan, which includes strategies and outlines primary and secondary prevention initiatives spearheaded by the Department, other state partners, and community providers to reach a goal of creating a Child Safety and Family Well Being System that will keep children safe by making families strong. Version 1.0 of the plan was released in the spring of 2023, and it continues to evolve into a larger plan of how this system will be developed, with an update scheduled for release in the coming year.

The Plan builds on collaboration across state agencies by the Maine Children's Cabinet and the State Agency Partnership for Prevention to improve and promote the healthy development of children and youth in Maine. There is particular focus in this work on collaboration with providers who deliver direct services to children and families, while also incorporating the voices of those with lived experience as the state works towards developing a Child Safety and Family Well-Being System.

Another prevention strategy OCFS is engaged in is conducting a small-scale gap analysis of Maine's service array for families. In collaboration with Chapin Hall, the state has collected a significant amount of data including through the 211 Maine Resource Directory and through a statewide survey of community programs



Maine Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan

Version 1.0 - May 9, 2023

Prepared by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services
in Partnership with the Maine Child Welfare Action Network



supporting families conducted in November 2023. In late spring 2024, the gap analysis will be completed to identify district-level gaps in services and inform strategic planning.

Additionally, OCFS has made contingency funding available to assist families involved in a child protective investigation or in the trial home placement phase of a child welfare case, as allocated by the Legislature. In the first six months of 2023, 18 families used the contingency funding with an average expenditure of \$1,291.42 per family, and in the second half of the year, 27 families used the funding with an average expenditure of \$1,005.28. These funds have been used for housing-related costs, utility bills, auto repairs, life/safety improvements to homes, safe sleep accommodations and furniture, and heating costs. It is OCFS' experience that sometimes even a small bit of financial assistance helps bridge a gap for a family to ensure child safety and allow continuity of care for children to remain safely in their home with their parents.

Family First Prevention Services Act

OCFS continues to implement the Federal Family First Prevention Services Act and corresponding plan, which earned federal approval in 2021 by directing evidence-based services to families at risk of having their child removed with the goal of keeping children safely in their home.

In early 2023, the federal government approved an amendment to the plan. The amendment included an expansion of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) model implemented by the Maine Families Home Visiting program to serve more families engaged in child welfare services to prevent the removal of a child from the home. During 2023, OCFS began statewide implementation of the program with virtual training opportunities for Districts to learn about the program and referrals process. Concurrently, OCFS refined a one-page information sheet for OCFS staff on the PAT expansion and referral process, developed information to share with families about expanded eligibility for home visiting through Family First, and conducted ongoing check-ins with District staff to create a feedback loop on program implementation.

OCFS also rolled out the Homebuilders Family Preservation and Reunification Program statewide in 2023. As with most service providers, the provider for this program, Bethany Christian Services of New England (BCSNE) has experienced difficulty hiring staff yet has been able to provide services to all OCFS District offices. In several cases referred to the program, the need for entry into care was prevented and safe reunification of children with their families occurred. OCFS has also developed information for families about Homebuilders, conducted training with OCFS staff as the service has become available in each District, and trained BCSNE staff on OCFS' policies and procedures.

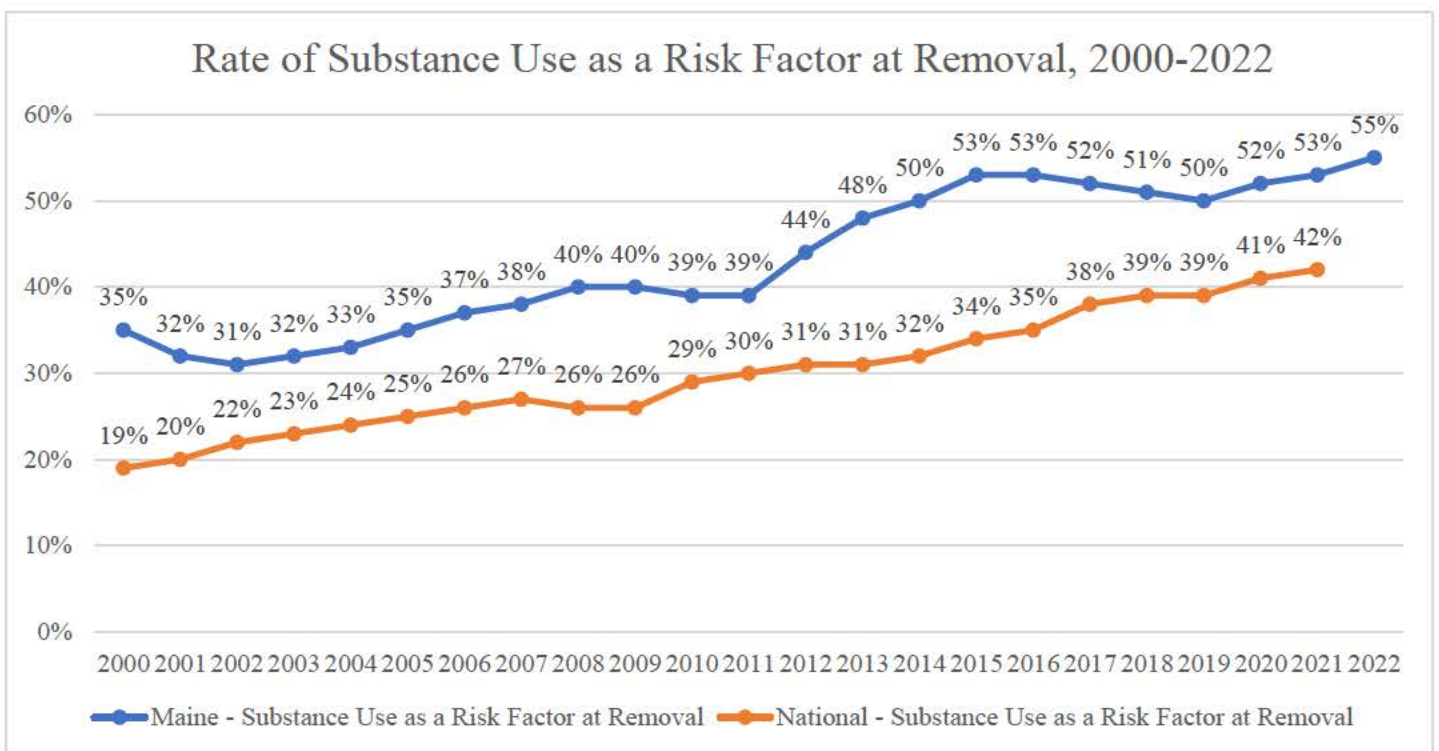
Substance Use

Substance use plays a significant role in the lives of families involved with child protective services. In 2022, 55% of child removals in Maine had substance use as a risk factor at removal. Maine, unfortunately, outpaces the national average in this area which was 42% in 2021 (the most recent year for which data is available).

Substance use by caregivers can have a significant impact on the safety of children in their care. In response to these concerns, OCFS has partnered both within the Department and with community partners on several initiatives, including:

- Drug Recognition Training for staff in partnership with the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency (MDEA).
- A staff training by the Northern New England Poison Control Center on ingestions, alcohol, and drug screening.
- The distribution of lockboxes and lock bags to families for safe storage of substances and medications.

- Convening of an Opioid Clinical Consultation Workgroup to review policies, practices, tools, and training available to child welfare staff related to substance use disorder.
- The establishment of Peer Recovery Coaches in Maine’s Family Recovery Courts using Opioid Prevention Treatment Funds (OTPF).
- Creation of contracted Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Clinical Consultant positions co-located in each OCFS district to provide direct support to staff working with families impacted by SUD.
- Establishment of a new mandatory training for staff entitled *Planning for Safety in Cases When Parental Substance Use is Present* which explores and reinforces SUD-specific knowledge and skills when assessing child safety throughout the life of the case (including after case closure).
- Development of a plan to distribute Narcan to child welfare staff on a voluntary basis; and
- Ongoing work with MaineCare on the 1115 Waiver which provides four pilot sites for MaineCare-enrolled parents with SUD who are involved with or at risk of involvement with child protective services.



OCFS is also working to improve the response to substance exposed infants through its oversight of the Plan of Safe Care (POSC). The Plan of Safe Care ensures support for the ongoing safety, well-being, and best possible long-term health and developmental outcomes for substance exposed infants, their mothers, and other caregivers. The Department provides a form for providers that outlines family strengths and needs, beneficial resources, and potential actions to best support the family. The Plan of Safe Care may include direct referrals to services or facilitating connections for families to follow-up on independently. In the fall of 2023, the Department transitioned from paper forms to a new online POSC Portal. The OCFS POSC Nurse ensures that each substance exposed infant reported to OCFS receives a Plan of Safe Care and that caregivers are connected to resources to meet their identified needs.

Collaborative Safety Recommendations

2023 saw the completion of the recommendations that resulted from the 2021 system review of child protective services’ involvement in four families where child fatalities occurred in 2021. This review was conducted by

Collaborative Safety LLC and Casey Family Programs using the Safety Science Model and resulted in seven distinct recommendations.

Recommendation	Implementation
<i>Work with a coalition of providers to support effective coordination with child welfare staff (e.g., supporting families, court and Family Team Meeting participation, sharing information, etc.) and address any identified barriers.</i>	OCFS issued guidance to providers and continues to work collaboratively within and outside the Department to address any newly identified barriers or issues (this work is done in collaboration with the Office of Behavioral Health (OBH)).
<i>Establish joint protocol agreements between Law Enforcement, Hospitals and Child Welfare staff when there is suspected abuse or neglect to support communication and coordination.</i>	OCFS developed and sought passage of LD 474 in 2023. This bill was passed and implemented in October of 2023 and gives explicit authority to medical providers to provide information to law enforcement when law enforcement is investigating a report of child abuse or neglect.
<i>Explore ways to support consistent practices, including role clarity and ongoing support for Family Team Meetings.</i>	OCFS updated its FTM policy and staff training based on best practices.
<i>Explore ways to support engagement between parents and the child welfare system, such as parent partner/parent mentor programs.</i>	<p>OCFS modified its Cooperative Agreement with the Catherine Cutler Institute to add two parents with lived experience to the team at the Institute that provides support to OCFS related to policy and training development and updates. These individuals provide invaluable insight that benefits child welfare practice.</p> <p>OCFS has also partnered with OBH to establish Peer Recovery Coaches in Maine’s Family Recovery Courts.</p>
<i>Continue to examine national best practices regarding standby and after-hours practices.</i>	OCFS created the Children’s Emergency Services (CES) Program dedicated to providing after-hours coverage with the support of the Legislature’s allocation which funded positions. In 2024, OCFS is further expanding this program to fully meet the State’s needs for child protective services coverage after-hours.
<i>Examine national best practices for assessment timeframes and ensure that whatever timeframe is selected, it is compatible with the expected workload.</i>	In 2023, OCFS revised the Child Protection Investigation Policy and made corresponding enhancements to the Katahdin information system to implement changes based on recommendations of a workgroup made up of child welfare staff, including expanding the investigation timeframe from 35 to 45 days. Work is ongoing to evaluate current work tasks to ensure they are streamlined and focused on child safety, well-being, and permanency.
<i>Conduct an analysis of current work tasks required in an assessment and remove any unnecessary and/or redundant tasks.</i>	

OCFS also continued to implement Maine’s Safety Science Model of critical incident review, including issuing the first annual report based on this work earlier this year. The insight provided through these retrospective reviews, which center around examining the system and circumstances in which staff interact with families, instead of placing blame, has been invaluable and OCFS is grateful for the staff who have taken part in these reviews over the last year.

Key Findings and Opportunities for Improvement from the Safety Science Model Report

- Staff knowledge and skill building
- Timeframes
- Safety planning
- Vacancies/workload
- Structured Decision Making (SDM)
- Katahdin

Action Steps Based on Findings and Opportunities

- Implementation of the Supervision Framework
- Ongoing policy and practice updates
- Development of a Safety Planning Workgroup
- Implementing recommendations of the Investigation Workgroup
- Further development of the CES program
- Ongoing evaluation of training and support for staff
- Ongoing Katahdin enhancements and training

Katahdin

Katahdin is Maine's Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System, which was implemented in 2022. While 2022 was devoted primarily to initial implementation, the work evolved in 2023 to further system refinement and enhancement. This included over 40 system enhancements released in 2023 based on changes identified from groups such as the Caseworker and Supervisor Advisory Teams that recommended screen changes to increase the ability of staff to understand and evaluate a clients' CPS history.

One of the major improvements in 2023 was the development and implementation of a new Discovery Print format which was released on November 7, 2023. This update did not change the content of the Discovery Print, but instead significantly enhanced the format of these documents. Prior to the update, the OCFS' Technology and Support Team and Child Welfare leadership solicited feedback about the framework and organization of the print and user needs. This included engagement with frontline staff, parent attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, Assistant Attorney Generals and other stakeholders. The new Discovery Print reorganizes information into chronological order versus the previous categorical order, modified the layout of the information from columns to a standard left to right read across the page, and incorporated person information into the print instead of as a separate document. These changes resulted in a more user-friendly interface.

The Katahdin team works diligently to engage with staff and stakeholders to identify areas of improvement and ongoing training needs. Efforts include District visits twice a year, statewide surveys conducted twice per year, bi-weekly meetings with the District Superuser group, ongoing participation in the Statewide Caseworker and Supervisor Advisory Teams, quarterly meetings with the Data Quality Team, an online Katahdin Suggestion Box, and development of monthly drop-in trainings for staff to both ask questions and learn about planned topics for future enhancements.

Policy and Training Updates

OCFS continued its work with the Catherine Cutler Institute to both update existing policies and training opportunities and establish new policies and trainings. The following policies were updated in 2023 with many policies combining several older policies to streamline access to information:

- Domestic Abuse and Violence
- Entry into Care
- Resource Home Licensing
- Youth Transition Services
- Child Protective Investigation
- Indian Child Welfare (ICW)
- Missing and Runaway Youth
- LGBTQIA+
- Supervision

Currently there are 14 additional policies in the review and revision process including the legal policy which will combine 25 existing policies into one comprehensive source of information and guidance. A primary focus of the Policy and Training team in 2024 is the development of OCFS' policy related to safety planning and subsequent training for staff. A workgroup has been convened and has met several times that includes staff (representative of all levels – caseworkers, supervisors, program administrators, and quality assurance), community partners, individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system, and the Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman. This group will examine opportunities to strengthen the current safety planning practices and review national best practices as well as the specific factors impacting safety planning for Maine children and families.

In November 2023, two new trainings for staff were released that focus on services and supports for families in Maine related to substance use and mental health services and resources, resources to help families meet their basic needs, and programs providing parenting support. These trainings were part of OCFS' efforts to continue to educate staff on services and support beyond just the direct services offered by OCFS' child welfare division. During these trainings local community providers and statewide programs presented directly to OCFS staff on their work, referral processes and other relevant program information. Following the training staff also received a comprehensive resource sheet with information on all of the presenters and programs from their geographic area.

OCFS continues to survey new caseworkers after the completion of the Foundations Training to identify opportunities to improve the training to better meet the needs of those just beginning their careers in child protective services. As a result of this feedback, OCFS and the Catherine Cutler Institute incorporated additional field simulation activities and job shadowing as new staff have overwhelmingly reported that these activities provide the most effective skill building for their roles.

The policy and training work has benefitted greatly over the last year from the establishment of the Family Engagement Specialists, two individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system within the team at the Catherine Cutler Institute. These individuals provide invaluable insight into the experience of parents interacting with the child protective system and provide a perspective for stakeholders engaging in this work that is often under-represented. OCFS is grateful for the commitment of these individuals to improve the system of care for children and families in the years ahead.

Permanency Review Teams (PRT) require that all children in state custody for 6+ months have an internal case review regarding their permanency status. The review team is comprised of the caseworker, supervisor, program administrator, a notetaker and a facilitator (a supervisor not associated with the case) and others as deemed necessary. The review is an opportunity for staff to discuss the current permanency goal, efforts of the family to achieve reunification and if not, steps being taken to ensure a permanent home for the child. A plan with specific actions steps is developed from these meetings that ensures permanency for the child is at the

forefront of the case process and barriers to meeting permanency goal are addressed. The plan from the PRT is followed up on during supervision to ensure action steps are completed in a timely manner.

Staffing

Like for many organizations across Maine and the nation, one of the biggest challenges faced by OCFS in 2023 and into 2024 is staffing. OCFS has many dedicated and committed staff but also has seen a significant increase in its staff vacancy rate in the last year, as illustrated below.

CPS Caseworker Staffing

Point in Time	Nov 2018	Nov 2019	Nov 2020	Nov 2021	Nov 2022	Nov 2023	May 2024*	Net Change 2018-2024
Total Positions	351	365	398	414	445	445	445	+94/ +27%
# Filled	327	348	382	384	388	365	397	+70/ +21%
# Vacancies	24	17	16	30	57	80	48	
% Vacancies	6.8%	4.7%	4.0%	7.5%	12.8%	18.0%	10.8%	

*Given the concern and focus on vacancies, OCFS has included an update from May 2024 to provide additional context.

OCFS has taken a number of steps to address recruitment and retention of staff, including:

- Further building out the Children’s Emergency Services (CES) program to expand after-hours coverage resources.
- Developing new/updated policies related to CES, safety planning, and placement of children with a key focus on workgroups that include frontline staff, community partners, and individuals with lived experience in the child protective system.
- Reviewing caseworker practice expectations to ensure they are streamlined and focused on the core tenants of child safety, well-being and permanency.
- Implementing the supervision framework and beginning implementation of a corresponding caseworker framework to support adherence to policy and practice, as well as ongoing staff development and support.
- Engaged Public Consulting Group (PCG) to conduct an updated time study to capture the policy and procedure changes impacting the caseload and workload analysis.
- Conducting District visits to discuss the results of a staff survey completed in November and engage with staff to build solutions to identified concerns.
- Ensuring a response to all child welfare staff suggestions received through the Suggestion Box.
- Meeting with Districts supervising a child in a hotel to ensure all staff voices are heard and considered as OCFS seeks solutions to staffing that provide consistent care of children when the use of a hotel is necessary.
- Hiring a dedicated coordinator to assist the Districts with scheduling coverage for youth in hotels and hospitals. The coordinator has also been working to increase the roster of community sitters for this work. The Department recently increased the stipend for this work and began reimbursing for travel time and mileage.
- Engaging a management expert to work directly with the Lewiston District Office (which has the highest vacancy rate statewide) to understand the challenges in that office, explore how to improve the experience of staff, and develop recommendations for improvements; and

- Taking a teamwork approach to fieldwork with the hiring of a new staff person to seek solutions for children and youth who are difficult to place.
- Initiating a reclassification of child welfare caseworkers and supervisors to ensure that the compensation properly reflects the difficulty and complexity of the work over the long run. This adds to the stipend increase for child welfare workers from \$5 per hour to \$7.50 per hour that became effective in February 2024, the pay increase for child welfare case aides of 10 percent that was effective in October, and the overall 24 percent pay increase for State workers since 2019.

Children’s Emergency Services

The Children’s Emergency Services (CES) Unit has been in place since January of 2023. Originally there were 3 CES supervisors and 16 CES caseworkers. In early 2024, OCFS repurposed 8 vacant Child Protective Services Caseworker lines and 1 Caseworker Supervisor line to expand the capacity of the CES unit, for a total of 24 caseworkers and 4 supervisors. This will allow for greater capacity to respond to after-hours emergency situations, thereby reducing the demands on regular district staff. This change was made after a careful review of the CES program. In addition, OCFS continues to seek innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining CES staff, ensuring adequate afterhours coverage to limit the impact of afterhours work to District staff, and strengthening the system to build long-term sustainability and comprehensive support for this critical work.

System Improvement Efforts

2023 was a year marked by significant strain on OCFS staff due to high vacancy rates in some offices, lack of sufficient service providers to meet the needs of children and families, and organizational struggles related to communication and implementation. During 2023, the Legislature’s Government Oversight Committee (GOC) continued to closely evaluate OCFS and provided a forum for public input from staff, community partners, and others. OCFS listened closely to these conversations and appreciates the time and dedication of staff and partners who provided thoughtful input and recommendations. While considering this input, the new OCFS Director, Bobbi Johnson (appointed in January 2024) was also conducting in-person meetings with each District to hear about their concerns, successes, and feedback on a more local and individualized scale. The result of this work manifested itself in several new initiatives as outlined below.

<p>Rapid Management Audit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examining the organizational structure of child welfare • Considering communication process, culture, and leadership support • Resulted in a "roadmap" for OCFS leadership
<p>Recruitment and Retention Payments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted to incentivize prospective employees to work for OCFS as well as incentivizing current employees to remain with child welfare • Includes three \$1,000 payments (total of \$3,000) spaced across 2024 for those employed with OCFS at the point in time of the payment
<p>Supplemental Budget</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$1.3 million for full implementation of TFC-O • \$1.1 million for additional positions in child welfare • \$3.1 million for reclassification of child welfare caseworkers and supervisors

Resource Parents

Over the past year, OCFS continued to focus on supporting resource parents as they provide loving and supportive homes for children in state custody. Initiatives included an increase to the amount paid to resource parents for the care of children which was implemented in two phases during 2023; continued efforts to ensure on-time reimbursement to resource parents for expenses outside the standard room and board rate; and work to review and update the Resource Parent Bill of Rights.

Resolve 2023, Ch. 62, introduce as LD 594, *Resolve, to Review the Resource Parent Bill of Rights*, directed OCFS to convene a stakeholder group to review the Bill of Rights and ensure it adequately supports foster, adoptive, and kinship families as active participants in the State's efforts to care for children in need of out-of-home placement. Stakeholders involved included representatives of a wide range of backgrounds, expertise, and viewpoints, including many with lived experience as resource, adoptive, and/or kinship placements, as well as those with lived experience in the child welfare system as birth family of children in care. The stakeholder group met in 2023 to review the current Bill of Rights. The group quickly came to the consensus that the content of the Bill of Rights was not lacking but there was a need for more effective communication and implementation of the Resource Parent Bill of Rights. The group also identified the need to better ensure pathways for resource families to follow when they have questions or unmet needs. The group identified five domains of practice including, resources, supports, services, resource family involvement, and communication.

Each domain was discussed in-depth with resource parents expressing their needs in each area. From this work one of the group's facilitators took information gathered during these discussions, reviewed similar documents from other states, and drafted an update to the Resource Parent Bill of Rights which was presented to the workgroup for consideration and edits. Those edits were incorporated into a new Resource Parent Bill of Rights.

Legislative and Budget Updates

Over the last year OCFS has implemented several budget initiatives directly and indirectly related to child welfare.

- OCFS has implemented a 5% rate increase for resource parents funded by the 131st Legislature.
- Increase funding and oversight for Court-Ordered Diagnostic Evaluations (CODEs) which are key to providing information on parental capacity and child safety in cases where children are in the Department's custody. OCFS is currently working in collaboration with State Forensic Service (SFS) to facilitate the transfer of the program which should be completed by mid-2024. OCFS has provided a short-term solution to rate inequity by increasing the rate for CODEs pending the transfer of the program to SFS.
- OCFS convened a stakeholder group in 2023 to gather and provide feedback for possible updates and changes to the current Resource Parent Bill of Rights. A report specific to that work was published earlier this year.
- OCFS enacted an updated policy related to Indian Children to correspond to the implementation of the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act passed in 2023.
- OCFS is in the process of developing a plan for implementation of one-time funding received in the last legislative session for Child Protective Services (CPS) 101 in State Fiscal Year 2025.
- OCFS has transitioned 48 Customer Representative Associate II positions to CPS Case Aides when funding became available in October, this increases the minimum pay for these positions from \$15.85 to \$17.42 per hour with the top step now paying \$23.32 per hour.

- OCFS' Children's Behavioral Health Services division is in the process of implementing budget initiatives recently approved by the Legislature. These initiatives will have direct and indirect impacts on all children across the state and are anticipated to be particularly impactful for youth involved with child protective services who often have behavioral health needs. These initiatives include:
 - Funding for High-Fidelity (Hi-Fi) Wraparound Services for children. Hi-Fi Wrap is targeted at children with complex behavioral health needs and works to help keep children safely in their homes and communities utilizing formal and informal supports.
 - Establishment of funding for public education regarding the State's behavioral health services for children.
 - Funding for Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) implementation while efforts are underway to implement the service within MaineCare. MDFT is a community-based treatment modality designed specifically to treat youth experiencing substance use and mental health concerns with a family-centered approach.
 - Additional funding for Behavioral Health Professional (BHP) training and certification.
 - Changes to the rate and model for Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) and implementation of the TFC-Oregon Model. The TFC-Oregon Model is an evidence-based model that is not specific to children in state custody and instead supports all youth with high behavioral health needs. It provides a team approach to supporting therapeutic resource families including family therapist, youth therapist, consultant/training, skills coaches, etc. Work is also being done with MaineCare to update the existing TFC reimbursement and establish a new rate for the evidence-based service.
 - Establishment of an independent behavioral health level-of-care assessment process using a standardized instrument for youth seeking behavioral health services. The single assessment is endorsed by the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and is facilitated by a master's level clinician who works as an independent assessor using a standardized assessment tool and process. Family and child voice are incorporated into the assessment that considers youth's clinical needs, environmental needs, and family situation to match youth with the appropriate service based on their level of care.

Path Forward

In the year to come, OCFS anticipates much work to overcome the challenges we are currently facing. With that also comes significant opportunities to improve the child welfare system and the way in which all individuals experience it. The Office looks forward to continuing to partner with providers, advocates, and other state agency offices to improve Maine's ability to meet the needs of children and families. The foundation of the child welfare system is made up of those who care deeply about Maine's children and families, including OCFS staff, resource parents, providers, and many other community partners. With continued investment of energy, attention, and resources, the child welfare system, including and beyond OCFS, will grow better and stronger. OCFS is grateful for these partnerships and each and every individual who contributes to this system and joins together to seek improvement.