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ANNUAL REPORT 2020

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel

Citizen Review Panel

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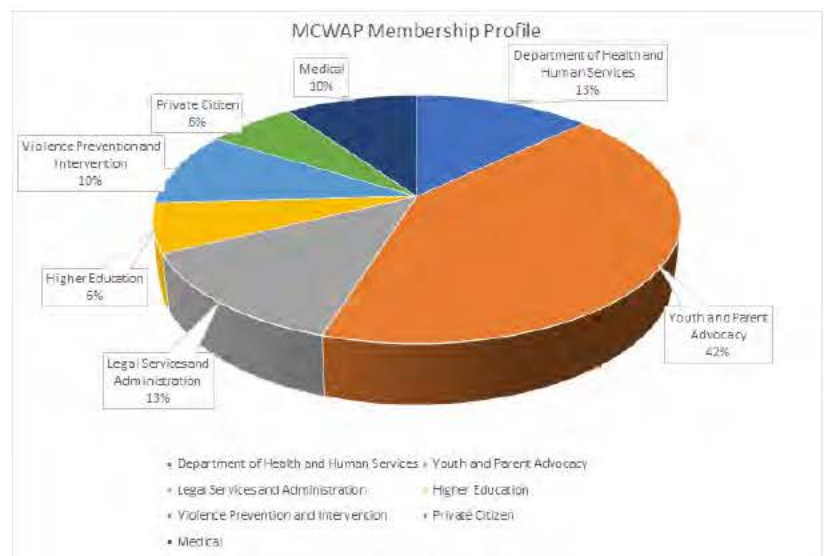
FOREWORD

Citizen Review Panels

The Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) is one of Maine's three Citizen Review Panels for child welfare. Citizen Review Panels are federally mandated groups of professional and private citizens who are responsible for determining whether state and local agencies are effectively discharging child protective and child welfare responsibilities. In Maine, the other two Citizen Review Panels that consider specialized requirements are the Justice for Children Task Force and the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel.

Who We Are

MCWAP members are volunteers who are broadly representative of the community, including those who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect, and those who have personal experience with the child welfare system. We work to maintain a broad and diverse representation of the community including, but not limited



to, biological parents; former youth in care; foster, adoptive and kinship parents; domestic violence professionals; law enforcement; mental health therapists; clergy; Court Appointed Special Advocates; disabilities specialists; teachers; medical professionals; tribal representatives; and members of the community at large. The Department of Health and Human Services - Office of Child and Family Services (DHHS-OCFS), Associate Director of Child Welfare serves as a liaison to the Panel, and co-chairs the Panel with a citizen member. OCFS staff serve as non-voting and coordinating members of the Panel. MCWAP also recruits presenters and ad hoc participants who have expertise in focus areas.

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 addresses requirements from both mandates that instruct the panel 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 both civil and criminal judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect;
- Make policy and training recommendations; and
- Prepare an annual report complete with a summary of activities and recommendations for the improvement of the child protective services system.

***"When things aren't working the way you want them to,
don't give up and run away. Reach for something better."
– Youth, 17***

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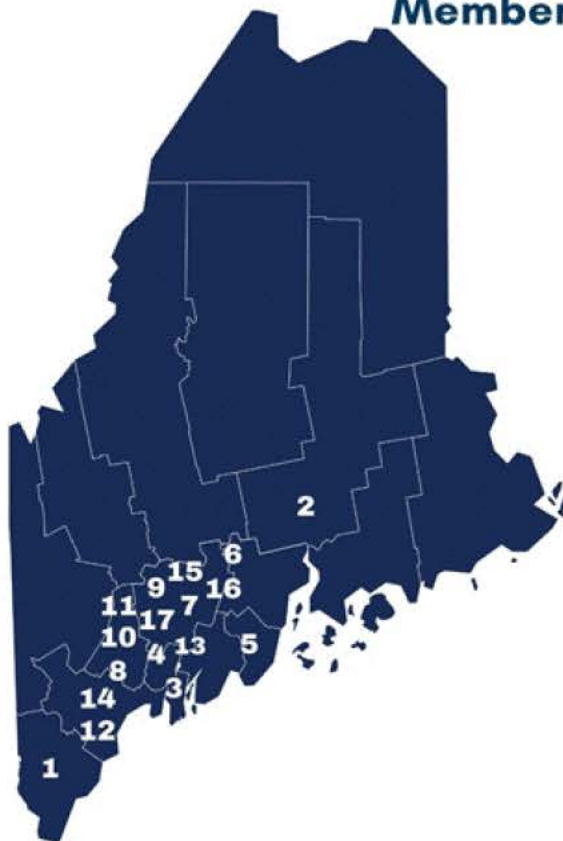
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MISSION STATEMENT

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, case reviews, advocacy, and greater citizen involvement. Our goal is to promote child safety and quality services for children, youth, and families.

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel Membership Organizations



- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 BeLoved | 8 Community Concepts |
| 2 Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine | 9 Kennebec Valley Community Action Program |
| 3 Maine Children's Trust | 10 New Beginnings |
| 4 GEAR Parent Network | 11 Maine Attorney General's Office |
| 5 Home Counselors, Inc. | 12 University of Southern Maine |
| 6 Maine General Medical Center | 13 Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault |
| 7 Maine Judicial Branch | 14 Opportunity Alliance |
| | 15 Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence |
| | 16 Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman |
| | 17 Office of Child and Family Services- Dept. of Health and Human Services |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) schedules ten meetings per year, from September through June. In 2020, the Panel held nine meetings, including an extended planning retreat in September. With the rest of the nation, MCWAP had to pivot to a virtual platform in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The group utilized virtual platforms to meet and propel work forward. A primary focus of 2020 was to figure out the role and function of our Citizens Panel as a separate entity from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) that is informed by the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and driven by the voices of key stakeholders.

MCWAP's overarching goal is to ensure the people who are most impacted by the child welfare system are part of creating solutions. Those who have direct experience as a parent, child, caregiver, or professional working within the system have the perspective and insight to create the most innovative solutions.

Parent Experience

On January 31st, 2020, MCWAP released a final report of a parent survey which was administered as part of a three-year system assessment process. Between March and June of 2019, a total of 65 parents responded from thirteen counties in Maine. Of the total respondents, 21 were currently involved with CPS, 16 were involved within the last year, 16 were involved one to three years ago, and 12 were involved over three years ago.

The Panel voted to use the survey results in the following ways:

- Share the results with parents, caregivers, and OCFS staff;
- Examine current OCFS policies and practices around communication strategies and expectations, inclusion of parent/caregiver voice and perspective, and parents and other caregivers' understanding of their rights;
- Gather information about how OCFS conducts quality assurance to better understand how parents and other caregivers are involved in the case process, the areas of improvement that have been identified internally, and efforts to address challenges; and
- Determine the best schedule to continue to administer the parent survey moving forward.

CITIZEN

PANEL

MEMBERS

"I am encouraged to see that Maine's children's system of care is moving toward being more family-driven with shared decision making and responsibility."

"In partnering with families, you send a strong message to families and providers."

"It's been a pleasure to participate with so many caring and passionate folks who have had a voice in that shift in practice!"

Informed by the survey, the Panel has provided clear recommendations to OCFS to promote sustainable change toward more positive relationships with families and safety for children.

Family First Prevention Services Act

Planning for the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) continued to be a specific area where youth, parent and citizen voice was especially vital. FFPSA includes child welfare reforms such as increased federal financial support for prevention services for families that focus on mental health, substance use prevention and treatment, and in-home skill-based parenting support, all of which aim to maintain a child safely in their home when it is safe to do so. Panel members participated in multiple stakeholder groups to provide input to OCFS in creating the Maine FFPSA plan. Maine intends to submit the state plan for federal approval in early 2021 for implementation in October, 2021.

Father-Focused Practices

In their 2020-2024 Child and Family Services Plan, OCFS committed to focus on outreach to fathers and the paternal side of the child's family as part of a larger family engagement goal. Working alongside OCFS staff, MCWAP also began examining Maine's father-focused child welfare practices and developed formal recommendations outlined later in this report.

“The collective impact of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel is invaluable to improving the child protection system for families in Maine, and representative of the diverse experiences and perspectives of panel members.”

- Bobbi L. Johnson, LMSW

Associate Director of Child Welfare Services

Citizen Review Panel Development

MCWAP held its second annual retreat in September and hosted Keynote speaker Blake Jones, Ph.D., from the University of Kentucky and National Citizen Review Panels. Blake provided a historical context of Citizen Review Panels and the opportunities that committees have to pursue positive change in their state. The retreat was held in a hybrid format with some members gathered in person and the rest joined via Zoom. The retreat included time for subcommittees to meet and develop strategic goals for the year.

Looking Ahead

As a result of the retreat, the Panel decided to streamline subcommittees and develop a new plan for the coming year. Each workgroup committed to inform their work and recommendations by engaging stakeholders including birth families, resource parents, youth, alumni, and OCFS staff. Leveraging the voices of the individuals who have been most closely connected to the child welfare system will keep each workgroup grounded in citizen engagement rather than focusing on it as the work of a separate subcommittee. The Panel created three groups that will continue their work through 2021:

Family-Centered Policy and Practice Workgroup: to identify strategies that are supporting family engagement and make recommendations where it can be strengthened. The group is focused in a few key areas that include father engagement, parent surveys, enhancing processes for case endings, and addressing co-parenting where there may be domestic violence issues.

Effective Communication/Coordination Workgroup: to identify strategies that can increase access to pertinent health and educational information for children and youth in care. The group is working in partnership with OCFS leadership and resource parents to identify a tool that will provide updated information for caregivers, providers, parents, and older youth who may be navigating their own health care providers.

Child Welfare Staff Training Workgroup: to review the existing training provided to new and experienced child welfare caseworkers and supervisors, and identify gaps in workforce education. The group is considering the results from the parent survey, the results and recommendations from the father engagement work, and other training topics that are key to supporting Family First and prevention of children entering the foster care system.



YOUTH VOICES

"Trust someone. You have to start somewhere."

Youth, age 17

"Siblings can bring support to each other, especially during trauma."

Youth, age 15

"If you're scared, it's OK. You're not the only one."

Youth, age 17

"Life in foster care is challenging. Success is derived from challenges."

Youth, age 19

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Among several areas studied by MCWAP during 2020, two resulted in recommendations voted on and approved by the full Panel: father engagement and workforce development.

FATHER ENGAGEMENT

The Panel recommends that OCFS engage in a concerted and sustained effort to improve the Department's ability to effectively engage the fathers of children involved with OCFS. This effort should include a system-wide evaluation of current father engagement strategies, an exploration of existing national best practices that can be adopted or modified to meet Maine's unique needs, and a plan for evaluating new strategies on a biannual basis to ensure Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). The Panel has identified multiple levels of system performance to be evaluated and modified if the current system of father engagement is to be improved.

Meet Fathers Where They Are

Following the Citizen Review Panel's mandate to provide for public outreach and comment regarding the child welfare system, MCWAP is ready to support community engagement strategies to meet fathers where they are. The Panel recommends OCFS partner with MCWAP to facilitate statewide listening sessions with current and former fathers of children involved with OCFS. These listening sessions should focus on determining why father engagement is not happening at higher rates in Maine. OCFS should use feedback from the listening sessions to provide supports for fathers that meet their needs as parents. There may also be significant value to asking mothers and other caregivers of children in care how to improve father engagement.

"Start by treating people with respect." – Parent Survey

Make Engaging Fathers a Core Value

OCFS should include father engagement as a core value in training for all new caseworkers, the curriculum for the Field Instruction Unit, ongoing staff development opportunities for existing child welfare staff, and presentations at the annual Judicial Child Welfare Conference. External stakeholders should have father engagement values built into all child welfare contracted service expectations, such as family visitation.

Invest Resources

There have been efforts in Maine in the past to improve father engagement, but they were limited in scope and lacked the necessary financial and personnel resources to be effective as a statewide strategy. OCFS should build capacity to fully address statewide father engagement practice improvement by investing time, money, and personnel. The Panel recommends OCFS seek funding to create a position under the Associate Director of Child Welfare Services specifically for father engagement.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Parents and caregivers shared their experiences with child welfare through a statewide survey in 2019, and the Panel completed review of the findings in 2020. Based on the feedback from caregivers, the Panel recommends that OCFS review and identify opportunities to strengthen current training and professional development for caseworkers and supervisors on:

- 1 Working with all caregivers with respect.
- 2 Clear and timely communication.
- 3 Sharing information with caregivers about their rights and responsibilities.

OCFS should build on the areas where more caregivers reported positive experiences, including engaging families in the development of their family plan and in the court process.

The Panel further recommends OCFS build on the successful incorporation of parent experience into new caseworker training, and identify ways to extend the inclusion of parents' perspectives on an ongoing basis into professional development for all child welfare staff and leaders.

“Improve communication with parents and progress can be made much faster.”

- Parent Survey

DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

The Office of Child and Family Services responds to all formal recommendations by MCWAP. Following are the responses to the Panel's 2020 Policy and Practice Recommendations.

Father Engagement

The Office of Child and Family Services values the voices of those individuals in need of child welfare intervention and support, including fathers, mothers, and youth. It is equally important to leverage the voices of and understand the experiences that each has with the system and strategies they may recommend for improvement. Through collaboration with the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel, OCFS will convene listening sessions specific to understanding the needs of fathers involved with the child welfare system. OCFS has consulted with other states, coordinated by the Capacity Building Center for States, to learn about successful father engagement strategies and will continue to research national best practices. As a result of these activities, OCFS will identify strategies to improve outcomes in this area that will be integrated into child welfare policy, practice, training, and contracts.

Workforce Development

OCFS, through a cooperative agreement with the Muskie School of Public Service, Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy, has begun to conduct a comprehensive review of child welfare policies, update training for child welfare staff and resource parents, and develop a framework for a Field Instruction Unit. These activities have included research on national best practices, integration of the perspectives of staff and stakeholders, and consideration of factors, such as racial equity and justice. These efforts will improve the knowledge and skills of staff, and therefore their ability to engage with families to work toward changes to improve child safety.

Other efforts to strengthen workforce have included the allocation of new child welfare staff positions, implementation of the Structured Decision Making (SDM) tools and the procurement of clinical support services for each district office. OCFS also continues to partner with the Attorney General's Office and the Maine Judicial Branch (MJB) to improve the experience of families in the court process. This work includes the implementation of a transformational zone to increase engagement during court events, sharing information with parents about their rights and responsibilities through OCFS and MJB resource guides, and providing business cards with information about the MJB in notifications to caregivers of upcoming court hearings. This collaboration will continue to improve outcomes for children and families.

SUMMARY OF PANEL ACTIVITIES 2020

January

Members reviewed the Child Protection Investigation Policy and recommended that OCFS continue in their efforts to meet 24-hour response timeframes. The Panel discussed the importance of working collaboratively with the other Citizen Review Panels (Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel and Children's Justice Taskforce) and suggested that regular updates be provided by members who serve on both MCWAP and another Citizen Review Panel. The group split into two subcommittees to work on topics selected in December. One group focused on the support services offered to foster parents, caseworkers, and providers regarding children with developmental and behavioral issues. The second group focused on family quality engagement policy and practice related to fathers and other legally recognized family structures.

February

No meeting; winter storm cancellation

“We have more work to do...however, we know that change doesn't happen all at once and these changes will add up to a big difference.”

CITIZEN PANEL MEMBER

March

The Panel received the preliminary report from the Citizen Engagement subcommittee, which was tasked with exploring ways in which community members could offer feedback about current child welfare practices. The Panel also reviewed and approved the recommendations from the Parent Survey workgroup's final report, which ultimately identified three opportunities for improvement: demonstrating respect and empathy for families, communication from caseworkers, and family knowledge of rights. The group discussed further Panel activities based on the Parent Survey findings, including sharing survey results; incorporating parent voice into reports, determining the best schedule for administering future surveys, and examining practices related to communication with parents and caregivers.

April

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Panel agreed to hold the April and future meetings on a virtual platform. Members heard updates from OCFS regarding how the pandemic impacted practices and systems, as well as the temporary changes made to ensure the health and safety of youth, family, and workers. The workgroups convened into breakout groups on the virtual platform to continue working on their topics. The Panel then came back as a group and reviewed the documentation provided to families by OCFS during the investigation process, as well as the 'Guide for Families in Child Protection Cases' (distributed by the court), and the ICWA 'Protect the Children' document.

May

Between meetings, the Panel approved the MCWAP 2019 Annual Report via email. In May, the group received updated information from OCFS and community Panel members about changes to the child welfare system due to the pandemic, including continued virtual family visitation through the end of the month; remote work for the majority (90%) of OCFS staff; updates on uncontested Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)/Adoption hearings; acceleration of the e-Discovery process; improved ability for family court participation through video; and decreases in the child protection report volumes, which appeared to similar to the typical numbers seen during summer months when children are out of school.

June

The Panel received COVID-19 updates from Dr. Todd Landry, Director of OCFS, and Dr. Adrienne Carmack, Medical Director of OCFS. Members learned that the rates of positive tests for youth in care was low and there had not yet been any hospitalizations in this population. OCFS described efforts to provide additional support to resource parents, open childcare centers, provide essential workers with childcare subsidies and increase funds for infant care. The Panel acknowledged that OCFS was continuing to implement systems improvements while navigating the challenges of the pandemic. Members discussed the summer recess in July and August, and subcommittees agreed to continue to hold sessions during this time to bring recommendations for review to the retreat in September.

July - August

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

Research tells us that citizen review panels do better when they are part of a thoughtful, well-defined process rather than a feel-good exercise.

Blake Jones, Ph.D.

September

Annual retreat hybrid meeting on video platform and some in person. Welcomed Blake Jones, Ph.D., University of Kentucky, College of Social Work as guest host for the annual retreat. The Panel heard from OCFS about recent trends and the efforts that will be prioritized in the coming year, including topics around safety, permanency and wellbeing, and staff training and support. Dr. Jones provided an overview of the history, challenges, research, and best practices around Citizen Review Panels. Three topics were selected for further exploration of the Panel and subcommittees broke into groups to begin strategic planning. The topics include Case Endings and Planning for Co-Parenting/DV Issues, Effective Communication/Coordination for the Care of Children Entering the System, and Child Welfare Training

October

October's meeting resumed the Panel's virtual format. Members debriefed the retreat and discussed if/how to incorporate last year's subcommittee topics into the three new topics identified in September. In the end, the Panel opted to slightly modify the topics that will be explored moving forward: Family-Centered Policy and Practice; Effective Communication/Coordination for the Care of Children Entering the System; and Child Welfare Staff Training. Members of the Panel voted to adopt recommendations for the annual report, and a subcommittee charged with writing the report was formed. The Panel heard updates from OCFS, as well as updates regarding the status of Maine's Citizen Review Panel website.

November

In November, the Panel welcomed guest attendee Julie McShane, Training Team Lead for the Child Welfare Cooperative Project at the Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy. Ms. McShane discussed the curriculum of the Foundations training that is provided to new OCFS caseworkers, and answered questions about its format and content, as well as the expectations for trainees. Subcommittees split off into breakout rooms to continue work on their topics, and then rejoined the entire group to report out on their efforts and plans. OCFS provided the Panel with updates, and Maine's CRP website was discussed.

December

The Panel heard from Julia Simmons, OCFS Policy and Training Specialist, and Gina Googins, Regional Associate Director, about the training that is offered to OCFS staff. The Panel discussed the importance of providing adequate training to resource families as well, and OCFS shared the work that is happening to improve what is currently offered. The subcommittees joined breakout rooms with their group members to continue work on their topics. After reporting out to the main group about the status of their efforts, the Panel heard from OCFS about what has been done in response to the Panel's 2019 recommendations. OCFS also discussed the impact of COVID-19 and the work that is being done to ensure that the agency's activities are being preserved, while also keeping children, families, and staff safe.



PANEL MEMBERS 2020

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Citizen
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The Panel would like to thank the following former members for their contributions:

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Former Panel Coordinator
Office of Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

Caroline Jova
Family Division Manager
Maine Courts

Alivia Moore
Community Member
Tribal Representative

Elizabeth Ward-Saxl
Executive Director
Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2019, MCWAP recommended that OCFS take specific action steps to prioritize and implement the recommendations of the Public Consulting Group (PCG) and Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability (OPEGA) assessments to address policy, practice, and workforce issues. The Panel also recommended that OCFS strengthen collaboration with Maine Courts, local law enforcement and medical experts. Despite the unexpected and extreme pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has continued to advance policy and workforce improvements, stayed on course with strategic plans, and collaborated with the Courts to address unprecedented strains on the child welfare system. The Panel applauds the commitment and perseverance of OCFS leaders in their continued implementation of quality improvement strategies under the most difficult circumstances.

The Panel is deeply grateful for Maine parents, caregivers, and youth who have shared their experiences and the impact of Maine's child welfare system on their families during the course of this year. Their words continue to inform and guide the work of the Panel.

The Panel would like to thank Dr. Todd Landry, Director of Office of Child and Family Services, Department of Health and Human Services, for his participation in MCWAP meetings, and for his leadership and dedication to Maine's children, youth, and families.

The Panel would also like to thank Stephanie Barrett for her thoughtful coordination of the Panel during an important transition time. Stephanie's focused attention, clear vision, and commitment to helping members understand the role of Citizen Review Panels set this group on a path to strengthen process and practice and to reconnect with other CRPs across the nation.

Finally, the Panel would like to acknowledge the supervisors and caseworkers of Maine's Office of Child and Family Services, Child Welfare Department, whose dedication to child and family safety has remained steady during the past year of turbulence and challenge. The Panel expresses deep gratitude to all staff in Maine's child protective system for the service, care, and attention they provide each and every day to the most vulnerable children, youth, and families.

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Maine's Citizen Review Panels examine the policies, procedures, and practices of State and local agencies and where appropriate, specific cases, to evaluate the extent to which the state and local child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.

The Maine Child Welfare Panel is mandated through the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-320).