



Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel

CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

Annual Report | 2019

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Panel Description

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. The other two citizen review panels that meet specialized requirements are the Justice for Children Task Force and the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel.

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 CAPTA and CJA that mandate 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; and
- 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.

MCWAP first convened in December of 2015, following the merger of several community advisory groups. 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.

Panel members work to maintain a broad and diverse representation of the community including, but not limited to, biological parents; former youth in care; researchers; 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 members serve as non-voting members of the Panel. In addition to members, the Panel recruits presenters and ad hoc participants who have expertise in areas of focus.

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel Membership 2019

Panel Co-Chair:

Debra Dunlap

Regional Director Southern Maine
Community Partnerships for Protecting Children

Panel Co-Chair:

Bobbi Johnson, LMSW

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

Panel Coordinator:

Stephanie Barrett

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

Christine Alberi, Esq.

Executive Director
Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman

Esther Anne

Policy Associate II
University of Southern Maine

Chris Bicknell

Executive Director
New Beginnings

Betsy Boardman

Child Protection and Juvenile Process Specialist
Maine Judicial Branch

Jamie Brooks

Parent Partner
The Opportunity Alliance

Marie Briggs

Executive Director
BeLoved

Travis Bryant

Executive Director
Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine

Ahmen Belanger Cabral, LMSW

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

Adrienne Carmack

Pediatrician
Penobscot Community Health Care

Lyn Carter

Rural Grant Program Coordinator
Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence

Susan Clardy

Research Assistant
Maine Attorney General's Office

Kelly Dell'Aquila

Parents as Partners Program Coordinator
The Opportunity Alliance

Debbie Dembski, LCSW

Citizen and Grandparent

Lanelle Freeman

Social Services Director
Kennebec Valley Community Action Program

Brie Gutierrez

Communication and Compliance Director
Office of Child and Family Services
Dept. of Health and Human Services

Christine Hufnagel

Director of Family Services
Community Concepts, Inc.

Dr. James Jacobs
Psychologist, Edmund Ervin
Maine General Medical Center

Alana Jones
Supervised Visitation Program Manager
Home Counselors Inc.

Caroline Jova
Family Division Manager
Maine Courts

Annette Macaluso
Children's Advocacy Center Network Coordinator
Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA)

Elizabeth McCullum
Assistant Attorney General
Office of the Maine Attorney General

Debra McSweeney
Licensed Physical Therapist
Maine General Medical Center

Sarah Minzy
Family Services Director
Home Counselors, Inc.

Alivia Moore
Community Member
Tribal Representative

Cindy Seekins
Director
GEAR Parent Network

Nora Sosnoff
Chief, Child Protection Division
Office of the Maine Attorney General

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

Erin Witham
Performance Management Coordinator
Maine Children's Trust

Jean Youde
Programs Coordinator
Maine General Medical Center

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

Destie Hohman Sprague
Former Co-Chair
Former Associate Director
Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Tracy Cooley
Director
Safe Families- Safe Homes National Training Project

Elissa Wynne
Former Interim Director
Office of Child and Family Services
Department of Health and Human Services

Meg Hatch
CAC Network Coordinator
Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

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

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.

Executive Summary

The Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) schedules ten meetings per year, from September through June. In 2019, the Panel held nine meetings and joined the Justice for Children Task Force at the Maine Judicial Branch child welfare for the tenth meeting.

Throughout the year, MCWAP received reports and provided feedback to the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) on a variety of issues. Topics reviewed included OCFS strategic priorities, the federal Child Family Services Review-Program Improvement Plan, child investigations policies, expert medical opinions, and safety standards for licensure of adoptive and foster families. The Panel also conducted community and parent surveys as part of a three-year system assessment process.

MCWAP continued to act on a commitment to improve form and function of panel activities, in an effort to create a more transparent and independent advisory role. The Panel added more volunteer leaders to the Executive Committee and expanded the use of formal subcommittees and ad hoc workgroups to complete research and tasks outside of monthly meetings. MCWAP held the first annual planning retreat for the panel in the fall of 2019 and reaffirmed a commitment to participate in national infrastructure by sending representation to the annual Citizen Review Panel conference.

As part of these expanded efforts, the executive committee created a process guide to establish group practice agreements in more detail than the by-laws. Content included a standard agenda, annual activity calendar, and form for workgroups to report activities back to the full Panel. MCWAP selected specific topic areas for focused study and recommendation in 2020 and developed a work plan to ensure commitments and deadlines are met.

The Panel also identified the need to improve collaboration among the many groups who are working on child welfare systems improvements. Panel members worked with State Legislators to pass LD192, *An Act to Require an Annual Report on the Activities of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel*, to improve communication with the legislature. MCWAP also took the lead on integrating website updates for Maine's three citizen review panels and began efforts to improve regular communication and collaboration among the panels.

MCWAP is committed to bringing more citizen voices to the table. In 2019, the Panel initiated specific efforts to increase community participation, including creating a citizen engagement subcommittee, updating the website, and developing community provider and parent surveys.

The Panel's continued goal is to ensure the people who are most impacted by the child welfare system are part of creating solutions. In the coming year, MCWAP will continue to improve the ways the Panel works together with State partners to assure that the child welfare system is effectively serving Maine's most vulnerable children, youth and families.

2019 Panel Activities

January

- Updated community survey.
- Developed a parent survey to provide for direct feedback from parents involved with the child protective system.
- Elected two new members to the Executive Committee for 3-year terms.

February

- Administered the 3 Year Assessment Community Survey and collected 590 responses.
- Voted to submit a letter in support of LD192, *An Act to Require an Annual Report on the Activities of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel*.
- Co-chairs provided testimony in support of LD192.

March

- Reviewed updated child investigations policies and observed need for continued efforts to improve response times, supervision and support.
- Reviewed community survey data and observed need for more training and resources related to children with developmental and behavioral needs.
- Recommended designating panel funds for members to attend the national Citizen Review Panel conference.
- Discussed ways to bring more citizen voices to the table.

April

- Reviewed changes to OCFS safety planning practices.
- Observed the increase in kinship families and the need for resources for kinship placements.
- Reviewed MCWAP website updates.
- Identified topics for the first annual MCWAP retreat.

May

- Attended the Justice for Children Task Force's annual Judicial Symposium: *Substance Use Disorders and the Child Welfare System*.
- Joined over 400 professionals involved in Maine's child welfare community, including judges, attorneys, Guardians Ad Litem, caseworkers and supervisors, and community professionals.



Strategies

Safety

> Address Intake processes and improve staffing

> Re-assess the Alternative Response Program

> Enhance Assessment Processes

Permanency

> Develop a Permanency Review Process

> Monitor the Family Visit Coaching pilot to develop best practices

> Improve SDM tool consistency

Well-being

> Develop family engagement tools and training

> Improve resource parent outreach and support

Staff Training and Support

> Develop policy and training plan for new processes and tools

> Establish workforce wellness teams and education

> Update caseload size, standards, and ratios

> Procure MACWIS replacement

> Indicates effort underway

June

- Joined by new Office of Child and Family Services Director, Dr. Todd Landry.
- Reviewed OCFS strategies and process for prioritizing formal recommendations (see side bar).
- Reviewed fire safety standards for foster home licensing.

September

- Reviewed initial parent survey results from 65 respondents.
- Workgroup on Expert and Second Medical Opinions summarized preliminary activities and suggested topics to be further discussed for potential action.
- Panel members who attended National Citizen Review Panel Conference provided updates and resources.

October

- Held first annual panel retreat.
- Established a Citizen Engagement subcommittee.
- Developed panel Process Guide.
- Voted to move to calendar year for panel recommendations and reporting.

November

- Website workgroup reported plans to represent all three Citizen Review Panels on new website to continue to improve cohesion among the groups.
- Approved new Executive Committee members and elected a new citizen co-chair.

December

- Adopted two topic areas for Panel focus in 2020:
 - o *Education and support services to foster parents, caseworkers, and providers re: children with developmental and behavioral health issues*
 - o *Family quality engagement policy and practice related to fathers and other legally recognized family structures.*

Policy and Practice Recommendations

1. Child Investigations Policy

Panel Recommendation

The Panel recommends that CPS continue their current efforts to explore options to meet 24-hour response timelines, which may include more staff, different staff structures (such as a weekend team), and appropriate supervision and support.

Department Response

OCFS has implemented the following strategies to improve practice related to timely investigation of child protection reports of suspected abuse and neglect:

- The Legislature authorized and OCFS hired additional child protection casework staff in intake and the districts to better meet workload demands.
- Implemented the use of new call center software in the OCFS Child Protection Intake Program to increase the number of calls answered live and decreased caller wait times.
- Updated the Structured Decision-Making (SDM) Intake Tool and Intake Policy which guides decision making regarding the appropriateness of assignment to OCFS or ARP and the response timeframe (up to 24 or 72 hours).
- Provided coaching to child protection supervisors by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) to build increased consistency and fidelity in the use of SDM Safety and Risk Assessment tools.
- Monitored implementation of assessment timeframes as defined in the Child Welfare Investigation Policy based on QA reviews, feedback from stakeholders and data reports.

2. Strategic Reform Priorities

Panel Recommendation

The Panel recommends that OCFS prioritize and implement the recommendations of the PCG and OPEGA assessments.

Department Response

OCFS engaged in an initiative mapping process that included families, youth, community partners, staff, and national experts to prioritize and develop a strategic plan for implementing the recommendations of PCG, OPEGA, the Child Welfare Ombudsman, provider associations, and others. Through this process, 12 priorities were identified in addition to others outlined in the Child and Family Services Program Improvement Plan. OCFS finalized and publicly released the [initiative map](#) and strategies in September 2019, and, since then, has been focused on the early stages of implementation.

3. Court Cases

Panel Recommendation

The Panel recommends that OCFS continue to collaborate with Maine Courts to increase timeliness of court cases.

Department Response

OCFS has continued to build strong partnership with the Maine Judicial Branch through participation in the collaborative, multidisciplinary Justice for Children Task Force chaired by the Chief Justice, collaboration on the development of the OCFS Program Improvement Plan (PIP) and regular quarterly meetings. Efforts are focused on the goals of increasing engagement of families in the court/reunification process and improving timeliness to permanency.

4. Collaboration

Panel Recommendation

The Panel recommends that OCFS create opportunities for relationship building between law enforcement, district staff, and forensic medical experts at the local level.

Department Response

OCFS continues to partner with stakeholders to provide opportunities for law enforcement, forensic medical experts, and district staff to build relationships and understanding of the specific roles each has in serving families involved with child protection services. Some of these examples include:

- Participation on the Multi-Disciplinary Teams for the Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) in each district;
- Attendance at the Annual New England Maltreatment Conference hosted by Spurwink Services; and
- Consideration of hosting a Cops and Caseworker Conference, as has been done in previous years, focused on a topic of mutual interest/need for law enforcement and CPS staff.

5. Workforce Development

Panel Recommendation

The Panel recommends that OCFS increase the child welfare workforce knowledge base regarding children and adults with disabilities.

Department Response

OCFS, in partnership with MCWAP and the Cutler Institute - Muskie School of Public Service is identifying needs associated with this area of practice and integrating information into the Foundations training curriculum for new caseworkers. Additional activities will include the development of training for experienced OCFS staff, resource parents and community partners.

Acknowledgements

In 2018, MCWAP recommended that OCFS take specific action steps to provide supervision and support related to child protective caseworkers' vicarious trauma. Since this recommendation, the Department has established clinical support services in each district office to provide case consultation and worker clinical support. The Panel applauds both the Legislature for approving funds for this support, and the Department for taking swift action to effectively address this critical workforce need.

MCWAP members would also like to thank the Maine Legislature for their interest in and commitment to the work of this panel, as reflected in the passage of LD192, *An Act to Require an Annual Report on the Activities of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel*. The Panel looks forward to working together to continue to strengthen Maine's child welfare system.

Finally, the Panel would like to acknowledge the leaders, supervisors, and caseworkers of Maine's Office of Child and Family Services, Child Welfare Department. Their dedication to our most vulnerable children, youth and families is evident, and the Panel expresses deep gratitude for the service, care and attention provided every day under the most difficult circumstances.

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).