

The mission of MCWAP is to assure that the state system is meeting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families through assessment, research, advocacy, and greater citizen involvement. Our goal is to promote child safety and quality services for children, youth, and families.

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel

June 7, 2024; 9 a.m. - 11 a.m.

Co-Chairs: Ahmen Cabral; Andrea Mancuso

Panel Coordinator: Jenna Joeckel

Minutes

9:00 a.m. Opening Statement:

Members shared the opening statement.

We are a federally mandated group of professionals and private citizens who are responsible for determining whether state and local agencies are effectively discharging child protective and child welfare responsibilities. The mission of the panel is to assure that the state system is meeting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families through assessment, research, advocacy, and greater citizen involvement. Each of us brings to this table a different set of experiences and opinions. Every voice is valued, and all perspectives are needed. Our shared goal is to promote child safety and quality services for children, youth, and families. This is the task to which we continually commit ourselves, and we hold our relationships in trust.

9:05 a.m. – MCWAP Values:

Members reviewed the MCWAP Values.

9:05 a.m. - Welcome and Introductions:

Attendance: Andrea Mancuso, Ahmen Cabral, Jenna Joeckel, Senator Donna Bailey, Tammy Roy, Abbie Rohde, Christine Hufnagel, Erika Simonson, Julie Smyth, Maura Keaveney, Travis Bryant, Taylor Kilgore, Kelly Dell'Aquila, Betsy Boardman, Kathryn Brice, Heidi Aajker, Bobbi Johnson, Melissa Hackett, Ashley Perry, Jim Billings, Michelle Westbrook, Melissa Martin, Esther Anne, Chelsea Peters

*Guest of the Panel – Darcy Fisher, Allison Foster

9:10 a.m. – MCWAP Housekeeping:

The panel voted on and approved the May minutes.

Prior to the meeting, panel members were sent an electronic vote regarding bylaw amendments. The amendments were approved by the panel vote. The updated bylaws have been uploaded to ShareFile.

Prior to the meeting, panel members were sent an electronic vote regarding the membership of Jim Billings, Executive Director of the Maine Commission on Public Defense Services. His membership was approved by the panel vote.

The panel is exploring an alternative meeting schedule. Discussions about the proposed meeting schedule are taking place in the Executive Committee and a proposed schedule will be brought to the panel for a vote.

9:15 a.m. Annual MCWAP Meeting

Each year the panel holds an annual meeting to discuss recommendations that each subcommittee has developed. The annual MCWAP meeting will take place on September 13, 2024, from 9a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Capital Judicial Center in Augusta, ME. All members are encouraged to attend the meeting. A subcommittee is being formed for planning the annual meeting and members that are interested in being a part of the subcommittee are encouraged to reach out to the panel co-chairs and/or panel coordinator.

9:20 a.m. Subcommittee Updates

Family Team Meeting Subcommittee: [L.D. 857](#) was not signed by the Governor and was pocket vetoed. Subcommittee members met in May to determine next steps including partnering with OCFS regarding existing frameworks for FTMs. Subcommittee members are drafting a letter to OCFS and the Governor to express their intention of moving forward with the shared work and will be trying to gather information about what other states are using for data collection.

Family Policy and Practice Subcommittee: The subcommittee has defined potential recommendations and completed research into those topics. The subcommittee continues to focus on goals for the panel and goals for outside project partners within their recommendations.

Citizen Engagement Subcommittee: The Parent survey is live until August 2024. To date, only 20 responses have been recorded. Panel members are encouraged to share it with families they work with who have had involvement with CPS. The subcommittee is now focusing their work on development of the provider survey and is going to be exploring other state practices.

9:30 a.m. OCFS Update

Bobbi Johnson, Director of the Office of Child and Family Services provided an annual OCFS update presentation to the Panel. The presentation included information about the Practice Model and the observation that the Practice Model could be strengthened to include language that reflects a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Additionally, the presentation included information about prior MCWAP recommendations made to OCFS and the progress that has been made on those recommendations. Director Johnson provided a Contingency Funding update and reviewed the new OCFS leadership structure that includes Jean Haynes as the new Associate Director of Child Welfare Strategy and Services. The strategic priorities were reviewed, which included a focus on hiring and training qualified staff within child welfare. Director Johnson highlighted the decline in staff vacancies by 40% between January 2024 and May 2024. Part of the strategic priorities and implementation of new leadership support is to build trust and empower district staff to make decisions. A barrier that has been identified for staff is the public's perception of child welfare. The current perception and culture have created mistrust from families, misinformation being shared, and difficult working conditions in the community for staff. OCFS is working to build stronger collaborations and partnerships to change the culture.

There has been a focus on providing support to families with substance use disorder. OCFS has implemented peer recovery coaches and SUD clinical consultants within the districts to support this goal. Additionally, Director Johnson attended the CJA Grantees meeting this week and it was recommended that Citizen Review Panels consider focusing on kinship care, which is a national focus and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). A copy of Director Johnson's presentation is attached to the minutes.

Panel Discussion:

Panel discussion centered around the reports of children in hotel or district offices. Members suggested an expansion of data collection to include why children are in those situations. OCFS has started to utilize community sitters in some districts and are developing support homes to provide an opportunity for

children to stabilize with one set of caregivers. Additionally, the Children in Hospital policy is in the queue to be reviewed/revise. It was originally created to address expectations when children are hospitalized for medical reasons and needs to be expanded to include the current reasons for children being hospitalized.

The Panel also discussed the Homebuilders Program implementation. The program was slow to expand across the state. Data shows that the program helps to prevent the removal of children.

Panel members discussed the use of the contingency funds. Director Johnson shared that most of the families utilizing the funding are involved in the investigation phase with OCFS. Members discussed the contingency funding data collection, and a suggestion was made to track requests that are made and not approved so gaps in resources can be identified. Clarification was provided regarding some of the criteria for funding, including reimbursement directly to a business. At times, requests have been denied as it did not meet eligibility criteria or because the request included reimbursement directly to a family member instead of the vendor. In these circumstances, the Department has attempted to assist a family with other expenses. Contingency funding has also been utilized to purchase sleep environments for children including twin beds and bunk beds. A suggestion was made to include a presentation about the Cribs for Kids program during a future MCWAP meeting.

One member made a suggestion to breakdown housing related costs in the data. The contingency funding program has received some requests for hotel stays from families, yet housing costs have primarily been utilized for long term housing such as rent and mortgage payments. Members note the importance of understanding what other resources can meet the needs of families and to ensure that families and community partners are aware of those resources.

Panel members requested to review outcome data when it is available regarding successful reunification rates and how the contingency funding was used to support reunification.

The Panel discussed changes regarding recruitment and retention of OCFS staff. Members expressed being impressed with the new foundations training. The legislature approved eight Supervisor Coache positions that will be part of each district office. These positions are available to hire on August 9, 2024, and can be posted prior to that date.

Next Panel Meeting: September 13, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. in person