



SEN. CRAIG V. HICKMAN, SENATE CHAIR
REP. JESSICA FAY, HOUSE CHAIR

MEMBERS:

SEN. LISA KEIM
SEN. MIKE TIPPING
SEN. RICHARD BENNETT
SEN. JILL C. DUSON
SEN. JEFFREY TIMBERLAKE
REP. AMY ARATA
REP. H. SAWIN MILLETT, JR.
REP. MARK BLIER
REP. ANNE MARIE MASTRACCIO
REP. MARGARET M. O'NEIL

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE
GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY
January 5, 2024

Call to Order

The Chair, Sen. Hickman, called the Government Oversight Committee to order at 9:30 a.m.

ATTENDANCE

Senators: Sen. Hickman, Sen. Keim, Sen. Duson, Sen. Bennett Sen. Tipping, Sen. Timberlake

Representatives: Rep. Fay, Rep Arata, Rep. Mastraccio, Rep. Millett, Rep. O'Neil, Rep. Blier

Legislative Officers and Staff: Peter Schleck, Director, OPEGA
Sabrina Carey, Secretary, OPEGA, GOC Clerk

Introduction of Committee Members

The members of the Committee introduced themselves.

New Business

(To watch this meeting - the recorded Live Stream can be viewed here: <https://legislature.maine.gov/Audio/#220>)

- **Meeting Summary**

Sen. Hickman mentioned that the previous meeting minutes are delayed, and will be submitted at a subsequent meeting.

- **Child Protective Services**

Senator Hickman opened this part of the meeting by saying that the Committee will now have an internal discussion to identify each GOC member's three top priorities in the realm of Child Protection based on what the Committee has heard in recent months. Each member's comments are listed below:

Senator Timberlake (at 9:40 of the recording)

1. Separate OCFS from DHHS and change the leadership
2. Revise Caseworker job description
3. Change OCFS culture/attitude
4. Establish family court system (Kentucky and Virginia examples)
5. Parent attorney availability through MCILS

Senator Bennett (at 9:51 of the recording)

1. Separate OCFS from DHHS
2. Fund more Case Aides and make the job more attractive
3. Address OCFS culture and improve communication
4. Family reunification: Address bias favoring mothers

Representative Blier (at 9:55 of the recording)

1. Residential options for children otherwise placed in hotels or hospitals
2. Improve caseworker retention, address job dissatisfaction

Representative Mastraccio (at 9:56 of the recording)

1. Review & assess OCFS policy changes; improve practice & address district office variation
2. Promote retention of Case Workers and Case Aides
3. Residential housing to eliminate hoteling and ER stays
4. Improve prevention services. Use opioid settlement funds for family intervention services pilot
5. Family court system
6. Put child safety first in family reunification [Later endorsed foster family rights statute review]

Representative Keim (at 10:00 of the recording)

1. Case Aide pilot program (emergency measure bill)
2. Market research on foster family needs, pay rates, etc.
3. Separate OCFS from DHHS, revise organizational structure, analyze administration needs to eliminate redundancy (Lean Six Sigma)
4. Invest upstream in family services, use opioid settlement

Representative Millett (at 10:10 of the recording)

- 1.Support Caseworkers with better training, hiring & retention. Career ladder. Team approach.
- 2.Improve support for foster families
- 3.Reunification: make safety of children top priority
- 4.Address workplace culture at OCFS
- 5.Put more resources into investigations
- 6.Further implement safety science and learning from tragedies
- 7.Consider a separate OCFS
- 8.IT review of Katahdin

Representative O'Neil (at 10:21 of the recording)

- 1.Invest in more prevention services, address Mental Health and Substance Use service needs
- 2.Court system investments
- 3.Support Caseworkers: vehicles, technology, Case Aides, coaching and mentoring
- 4.Specialization for complex cases

Senator Duson (at 10:26 of the recording)

- 1.Request that OCFS leadership create a management improvement plan with metrics (with input from CW and families); GOC to review periodically

Senator Tipping (at 10:34 of the recording)

- 1.Staffing: improve recruitment and retention
- 2.Reform MH, BH & SUD services systems and education to support families and prevention
- 3.Improve performance at handoff points

Representative Arata (at 10:38 of the recording)

- 1.Support caseworkers' quality of life. More case aides.
- 2.Support residential options, transitional housing
- 3.Katahdin [OPEGA should look at state software procurement]
- 4.Study commission about removing OCFS from DHHS, explore admin bottlenecks
- 5.Study impact of cannabis on child welfare

Representative Fay (at 10:42 of the recording)

- 1.Improve Case Worker job quality (training, pay, workload, team approach)
- 2.Support families with services before there's immediate risk of harm
- 3.More respect for CW casework

Senator Hickman (at 10:46 of the recording)

- 1.Improve support for foster families
- 2.Review child welfare statutes, including for foster parent rights and child's best interest

Sen. Timberlake reiterated that he would like to see the GOC take action to address CPS issues during this session, and not consider more studies and have the same discussions again next year. He also mentioned the lack of attorney availability through MCILS.

Rep. Fay spoke about how the GOC is going to organize their thoughts on this topic and move forward.

The GOC began a short break at 10:58 AM and resumed at 11:20 AM.

The Committee members discussed what they had heard earlier from everyone on the Committee, and considered next steps.

Rep. Mastraccio said that she agreed with the idea to review statute and Senator Hickman's ideas regarding foster families.

Sen. Hickman led a discussion of CPS-related bills currently before the legislature.

Rep O'Neil asked what the process was going to be going forward to get all these ideas organized. Sen Hickman said that the Chairs would discuss with the Director the best way to organize the material and move forward. Any final product will be voted on by the Committee.

Director Schleck mentioned that the Committee has requested some additional information from DHHS, which is forthcoming. Additionally, Rep. Fay noted that the Committee has not heard the judiciary's perspective. Sen Hickman said that would be appropriate at a future meeting.

Rep. Arata suggested that the Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman be asked to appear at the GOC to discuss some of these issues, especially regarding where the statute could be improved, and the Ombudsman's recent annual report.

Rep. Millet asked if there would be a summary of this discussion at the next meeting. Sen. Hickman said the chairs would discuss this with the Director.

Rep. Fay said that she would like to see added to the list of CPS bills, any other bills that may touch on some of these issues. Rep Fay also said she would like to hear from the Department at a future meeting. In particular, whether the Department was working on some of these issues.

Director's Report

Director Schleck provided the OPEGA annual report to the GOC.
(A copy of this Report can be found here: <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10533>)

No presentation was given but the Director asked the Committee members to look the report over and if there was anything anyone wanted follow up they could contact the Director or make it an agenda item at a future GOC meeting.

Sen. Hickman asked that now the session has started if the GOC needed permission from the Presiding Officers to meet days other than those already scheduled for every other Friday.
Director Schleck said that his understanding was that since the Legislature was back in session he should check on that, which he agreed to do.

Sen. Tipping asked for the schedule of GOC meetings going forward.

Unfinished Business

None.

Next GOC meeting date and planning

The next GOC Meeting will be held on January 12, 2024 at 9:30 AM.

Adjourn

The Chair, Sen. Hickman, adjourned the Government Oversight Committee meeting at 1:30 PM on a motion by Sen. Bennett, Second by Rep. O'Neil.