

Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel Annual Update

Report to the Health and Human Services Committee
June 23, 2026

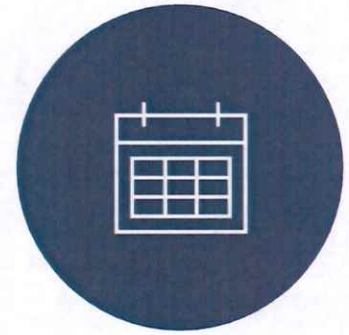
Panel Overview



CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS



MEMBERS



SCHEDULE

Recommendations
on how to further
protect the State's
children through
DHHS policy and
rulemaking and
through legislation

2025 Annual Report

Focused on review of prior:

- System recommendations
- Panel goals

Previous System Recommendation

Provide Discretionary Funds to Support Family Safety and Stability

In 2021, the Maine Legislature created the Contingency Fund, which provides \$200k of non-lapsing funds for OCFS to disperse flexible, emergency resources to ensure family safety and stability.

- **Execution Barriers:** Despite high family needs, the fund is under-expended, likely due to narrow eligibility criteria and a lack of awareness among staff and partners.
- **Strategic Realignment:** The Panel discussed with OCFS the need for a comprehensive relaunch with clarified guidelines and robust training to ensure funds effectively reach families in crisis.

Previous System Recommendation

Assessing and Improving Family Team Meetings

- **Essential Function:** FTMs are critical for ensuring family safety and stability by addressing concerns and opportunities through collaborative meetings.
- **Implementation Gap:** OCFS maintains strong written policies, but the Panel has consistently observed a divergence between policy and practice.
- **Actionable Reform:** The Panel recommended a comprehensive external assessment and new, ongoing stakeholder feedback loops with requirements for quarterly progress reporting.

Previous System Recommendation Improving Legal Representation for Families

- **Legal Representation Shortages:** There remains a waiting list of unrepresented parents, but concrete steps have been taken to address this.
- **Pre-Petition Pilot Program:** To provide concrete supports to address safety concerns and prevent child removal, pre-petition legal representation has grown across the country. A pilot project was launched in October 2025 in Androscoggin and Aroostook Counties, specifically targeting survivors of domestic abuse, and MCPDS has started their own small pilot project focused in Cumberland County.
- **Barriers to Children's Representation:** Structural challenges, capacity issues, and a lack of institutional buy-in continue to prevent the routine appointment of client-directed attorneys for children, though the Judicial Branch has implemented a new protection hearing bench guide that has promise to increase child voice.

Panel Goals

- **Education:** Members reviewed all OCFS-provided parent/caregiver rights documents and received a presentation on the allowable uses of Title IV-E funds from OCFS staff.
- **Project-Based Capacity Challenges:** The Panel has struggled with capacity to lead project-based work to implement recommendations; for instance, no member stepped forward to lead a deeper review of supports for families upon case closure, leaving that unaddressed.
- **Shifting to System Oversight:** Over the last few years, the Panel has evolved into a broader oversight entity as outlined by state and federal statutes.
- **Strategic Trade-offs:** Shifting to a wider lens on Maine's overall child welfare system response has impacted the Panel's ability to dive deeply into or oversee progress on specific issues.

Looking Ahead in 2026

Citizen Engagement Subcommittee

- Develop Outreach & Implementation Plan for Parent & Provider Survey

Family Centered Policy & Practice Subcommittee

- Prior recommendations – Next Steps
- Exploring challenges to BH provider engagement with OCFS

Strengthen structures that support MCWAP members to provide input and recommendations in OCFS Policy



Questions?

Thank you for your interest in the activities of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP).

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