

Presentation on the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel to the
Government Oversight Committee of the 130th Legislature
September 8, 2021

Good morning, Senator Libby, Representative McDonald, and members of the Committee. My name is Debra Dunlap, and I am the citizen co-chair of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP).

MCWAP is one of Maine's three Citizen Review Panels for child welfare that is mandated under the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). This panel is a group of 22 professionals and private citizens who evaluate the overall effectiveness of the state child protective agencies. The other two Citizen Review Panels focus on specialized areas:

- the Justice for Children Task Force focuses on the judicial aspects of child welfare, and
- the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel conducts in-depth case reviews of child deaths and serious injuries.

There are representatives from the two other citizen review panels who serve on MCWAP. There are also 4 non-voting panel members from the Office of Child and Family Services, as well a CAPTA Coordinator who provides support for the activities of the Panel. Other Panel members represent medical, behavioral and mental health services; the courts; Maine Tribes; children's disability services; foster, adoptive, and kinship families; domestic violence and sexual assault services; youth advocates and homeless youth services; parent groups; and child abuse and neglect councils. The Panel currently has open seats for representatives from: the legislature; early childhood and schools, substance use treatment/recovery; and parents who have been personally involved with the child welfare system.

The full Panel meets for two hours each month- 10 times annually- to review the policies, procedures, and practices of the state child protection agency. Over the past two years, the Panel has also established working subcommittees to examine areas of interest in-depth. These groups work between meetings and present their findings to the full panel. Current subcommittees are focused on Family-Centered Policy and Practice, Coordination of Care for Children Entering the System, and Father Engagement.

The Panel also provides for public outreach to assess the impact that current practices are having on children and families in the community. This is done every three years through surveys of service providers who work with families involved with the child welfare system. In 2018, the Panel established a parent survey to receive input directly from families, and has started to receive direct feedback from parents through the newly updated website. Building capacity for expanded public outreach is a primary focus of the Panel this year.

The Panel uses the information from surveys and evaluations to make formal recommendations for training, policies, and practices. These are issued in an annual report each January that includes responses from the Department. It is important to note that the role of citizen review panels is to provide evaluation and recommendations; none of the three panels have the authority to mandate change.

MCWAP has been focused over the past several years on clarifying the panel's role and responsibilities, and updating the ways we work to meet our federal mandates. The history of this panel and the supporting infrastructure provides some important background.

In 2015, there were three different groups that served a similar purpose of evaluating and making recommendations to improve child welfare agencies: the Citizen Review Panel (CRP), Child Abuse Action Network (CAAN) and Child Welfare Steering Committee (CWSC). In September 2015, the Office of Child and Family Services notified all three groups that administrative support was ending for the Citizen Review Panel and Child Welfare Steering Committee. Members of these groups were invited to join the Child Abuse Action Network to form a single group. The new entity that formed in December 2015 included members of all three former groups, and was renamed the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel.

The new Panel was charged with meeting all of the citizen review panel requirements outlined under CAPTA Sec. 106c:

- 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;
- To provide for public outreach and comment to assess the impact of current procedures and practices on children and families in the community; and
- To prepare an annual report containing a summary of the activities of the panel and recommendations to improve the child protective services system, and to make this report available to the public.

MCWAP was also charged with meeting some of the requirements under the Federal Children's Justice Act. This includes conducting a comprehensive three-year assessment of the child welfare system as a whole, and making recommendations based on this assessment related to:

- the handling of cases of child abuse and neglect and the impact on children and families;
- experimental, model, and demonstration programs for testing innovative approaches;
- and reforming laws, policies, protocols, and procedures.

In 2016, a majority of the Panel members weren't aware of these federal mandates. When the three groups were merging, many former members left, and many new members joined. Just after MCWAP was formed, there were also administrative changes in the Office of Child and Family Services. At that time, the CAPTA Coordinator position within OCFS took responsibility for the Panel. With an OCFS position convening and facilitating meetings, most members didn't understand they were part of a citizen review panel where members should be taking the lead on evaluations, and on issuing annual reports with formal recommendations. Instead, panel members made real-time recommendations to OCFS leaders during meetings, and the CAPTA Coordinator position wrote the annual reports based on the recommendations that had been made during meetings throughout the year.

In 2017, the panel identified the need to create new bylaws and to clearly define role and structure. This resulted in a review of the CAPTA and CJA statute by members, and a new understanding of the role and responsibilities of the panel. In 2018, the panel updated bylaws, created a Process Guide to clarify practices, and established an annual retreat. The panel moved

meeting facilitation duties away from OCFS staff over to the Citizen Co-Chair, and members started to take the lead on conducting evaluations and writing the Annual Report. The panel also reconnected with the national Citizen Review Panel Peer Group through the Capacity Building Center for States, and one of their consultants provided training and technical support related to the panel's role and responsibilities at the 2019 retreat.

Also in 2019, Panel members worked with State Legislators to pass LD 192, *An Act to Require an Annual Report on the Activities of the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel*, to improve the Panel's communication with the legislature.

In the past few years, recommendations in the Panel's annual reports have been aligned with PCG, OPEGA, the Child Welfare Ombudsman reports. Some themes include:

- Training and support for the child welfare workforce
- How the state child protective agency coordinates with other parts of the whole child protective system (including law enforcement, health care providers, community based organizations); and
- Improving casework and engagement with families

MCWAP's annual reports from 2016-2020 are available on the website that is shared with the two other citizen review panels: <https://www.mecitizenreviewpanels.com/>. As required by LD 192, MCWAP's reports are also presented to the Health and Human Services Committee annually.

On behalf of the panel, thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee today.