

# Maine Child Welfare Action Network

## Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

A Public Health Approach Could Reduce Child Maltreatment in Maine

July 2021

### Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to another public health crisis in Maine: a rising number of child deaths from abuse and neglect. Policymakers and advocates are focusing on improvements to the child protective agency, but this is only part of the picture. Maine's child protective services are being overwhelmed by maltreatment reports. The majority of these children are experiencing neglect, not physical abuse.<sup>1</sup> There is substantial evidence that investment in services to stabilize families can prevent abuse and neglect and decrease the need for child protective intervention.<sup>2</sup>

### Problem

During the month of June 2021, four Maine children died from abuse and neglect. That month there were 2,181 children in state custody, a 30% increase from January 2018.<sup>3</sup> The Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) has added over 50 caseworker positions within child protective services, but a workload analysis in December 2020 showed the need for 42.5 additional caseworkers to meet demand.<sup>4</sup> High numbers of new hires have contributed to a decrease in the overall experience level in staff who have direct contact with families.<sup>5</sup> Increased investment, resources and training are needed to continue to improve the efficacy of interventions by the state child protective agency.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing attention and resources solely on improving child protective services will not reduce the number of children entering the system. State leaders will also need to find ways to address the sustained number of families in need of intervention. This will require coordinated strategies and investments by public and private entities in communities across the state.<sup>6</sup>

### Policy Recommendations

**County and Municipal Leaders** should invest American Rescue Plan funds in community-based universal support for families, i.e., [Family Resource Centers](#).

**Healthcare Leaders** should develop enhanced primary care initiatives to build protective factors in families, i.e., [HealthySteps](#).

**State Leaders** should assess home visiting access, utilization, and coordination across programs.

**State Leaders and Policy Makers** should build infrastructure and outcome measures for an effective public health approach to prevent child maltreatment.

**State Leaders and Policy Makers** should invest in all levels of the child welfare workforce including statewide leadership capacity.

**State Leaders and Policy Makers** should develop and monitor measures of progress in child welfare system reforms.

**Policy Makers** should direct investments toward family supportive services including mental and behavioral healthcare.

## MAINE CHILD WELFARE Priority Reform Recommendations



AUTHORS: PAMELA DAY, DEBRA DUNLAP, MELISSA HACKETT, RICHARD A. HODGS WATMAN, C. SHAWN YARDLEY

## A Framework for Child Welfare Reform

Strategic Priorities for Maine: A Call to Action

January 2022

### Issue

Maine's child protective services are being overwhelmed by maltreatment reports. The state is reckoning with an unprecedented number of tragedies in a short time. Many efforts are focused on improvements to the child protective agency, but this is only part of the picture. The current crisis for Maine's children and families cannot be the responsibility of the state child welfare agency alone.

From June through August 2021, four Maine children died in cases where parents have been charged with abuse or neglect. As of November 2021, there were 2,282 children in state custody, a 25% increase from July 2018.<sup>1</sup> These children lack the safety and stability of a permanent home and family. Improving the state child welfare system will require sustained focus and investments. However, focusing attention and resources only on improving the state agency will not reduce the number of children entering the system.

There is currently no coordinated system for preventing child maltreatment in Maine. Reports assessing the state child welfare agency, including the most recent one conducted by Casey Family Programs and Collaborative Safety LLC, have all identified the need to improve collaboration with community providers that serve the same families. The pandemic has increased the need for concrete and economic supports for families.

All stakeholders need to work together to find ways to stabilize families in our communities and reduce the number of children who experience maltreatment. This will require immediate, coordinated investments and actions by public and private partners in communities across the state.<sup>2</sup>

Our nation's child welfare system only responds to maltreatment after it occurs, rather than supporting families to safely care for their children. When intervention occurs, it disproportionately involves families living in deep poverty and communities of color. This has long-term implications for youth mental health, connection to education, and other systems involvement. Real reform can occur only if Maine moves away from our reliance on the child protection system and moves toward a framework of child well-being and healthy families.

### Priority Actions

**The State** should assume authority and responsibility for leading the development, implementation, and oversight of a comprehensive statewide prevention plan

**The State and Philanthropy** should invest in building the infrastructure for cross-system collaboration between public systems and community service providers

**The Legislature and State** should work together to build state child welfare leadership and caseworker capacity

**Community Leaders, Philanthropy, and the State** should work together to invest in community-based supports for families

**The Legislature and the Child Welfare Ombudsman's office** should provide ongoing oversight of child welfare system improvement recommendations, plans, and implementation

# Abuse and Neglect Definitions

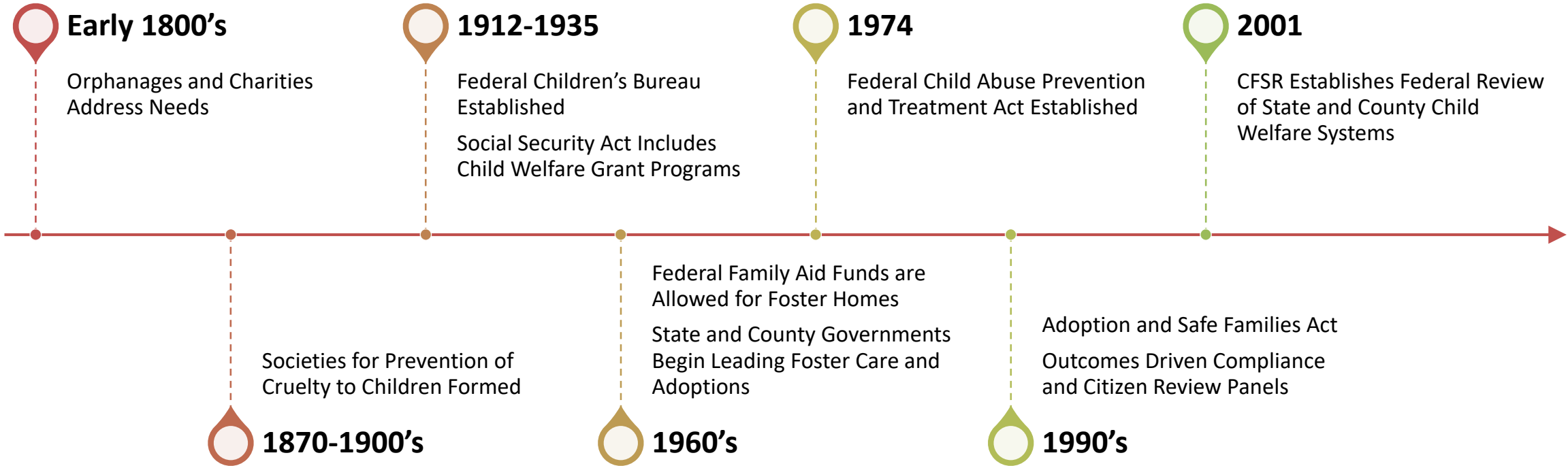
## Abuse

- Physical injury or impairment
- Sexual abuse or exploitation
- Emotional or mental injury or impairment

## Neglect

- Deprivation of essential needs: adequate food, clothing, shelter, supervision, care, health care, and education
- Lack of protection: abandonment of child or absence of any person responsible for the child

# Child Welfare System Background



# Child Welfare Programs and Funding

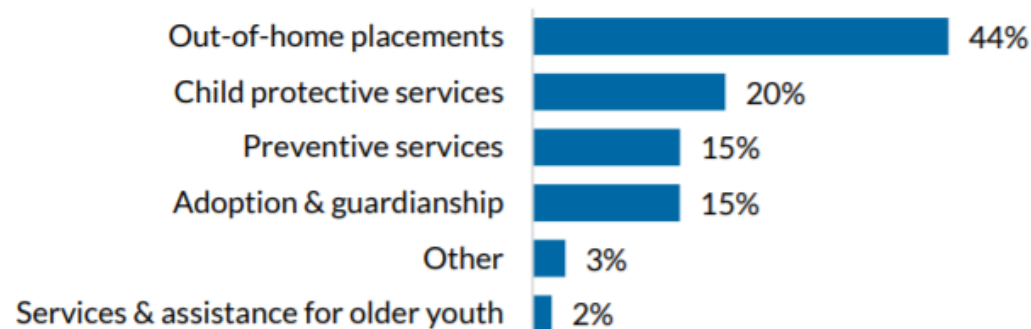
## States bear primary responsibility

- Each state or county has a public agency responsible for receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect and providing needed services to families

## Federally administered by the Children's Bureau

- Key programs
  - Child Abuse and Prevention Act (CAPTA)
  - Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act (SSA)

Almost **half** of state and local funds were used to finance **out-of-home placement** costs.<sup>7</sup>



Central  
Debate

Child Removal vs. Family Preservation

Prevention vs. Intervention

# What We Know About Child Abuse and Neglect: Risk and Protective Factors

## Risk Factors

- Caregivers with substance use disorders
- Caregivers with untreated mental health issues
- Domestic violence
- High poverty rates
- Communities with low social connectivity

## Protective Factors

- Economic security
- Basic needs are met (food, housing, health, education)
- Access to health care (including mental and behavioral health services)
- Strong social support networks

# CONTINUUM OF CHILD SAFETY



## **THRIVING**

A family is thriving when they have the internal and external resources and relationships needed to cope with stress and bounce back from adversity.

## **AT RISK**

A family is at risk when they are experiencing high levels of stress and low levels of resource.

## **UNSAFE**

A family is unsafe when there is evidence or an immediate threat of serious harm.

# CONTINUUM OF CHILD SAFETY



Community  
Resources

Support and  
Treatment  
Services

Child  
Protective  
Intervention



# CONTINUUM OF CHILD SAFETY



## COMMUNITY RESOURCES

High quality childcare  
Affordable secure housing  
Healthy food  
Healthcare access  
Education  
Transportation  
Family friendly workforce  
development  
Family resource centers

## SUPPORT AND TREATMENT SERVICES

Childcare assistance  
Children's behavioral health services  
Economic supports  
Housing supports  
Substance use disorder treatment  
Recovery resource centers  
Adult mental health treatment  
Domestic violence services

## CHILD PROTECTIVE INTERVENTION

Child welfare workforce  
Kinship support  
Resource families  
Family legal counsel  
Family visit coaching  
Peer supports  
Family reunification services

# Maine Child Welfare Action Network Framework for Reform

## Prioritize Prevention

- Restructure Maine's prevention system
- Develop and implement statewide prevention plan

## Invest in Supportive Services

- Concrete and economic supports for families
- Substance use and mental health treatment and recovery for caregivers

## Build State Agency Capacity

- State and regional leadership
- Caseworkers

## Improve Cross System Collaboration

- Infrastructure for effective teamwork between child welfare and community providers

## Ensure Effective Oversight

- Legislative and Ombudsman roles

We have an obligation and an opportunity to improve the way our child welfare system serves Maine children, youth, and families.