

OPEGA Information Brief: Child Protective Services Reunification



About Reunification

Reunification in child welfare is a system of parallel processes in the District Courts and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) designed to find permanent homes for children in state custody, with a preference for returning children to their biological parent(s). Federal law prioritizes reunifying families as the best outcome, if the circumstances that jeopardize the child’s health or welfare can be alleviated. The courts—through the work of judges, attorneys for parents and for OCFS, and child representatives—ultimately decide what parents need to do to reunify with their child and whether to restore parental custody or find another form of permanency like adoption. With respect to reunification, OCFS arranges foster placements for the child, supports resource families and kinship placements that provide foster care, provides social work to help children recover from maltreatment and prepare to return to their biological parent, and identifies needs and arranges services to help the parent alleviate the conditions that led to the child’s removal. OCFS also has responsibilities for achieving other methods of permanency for the child when reunification is no longer an option.

Our Approach

For this report, OPEGA: (1) examined relevant Maine statutes, federal law, agency rules, and OCFS policies; (2) conducted a total of 58 interviews with OCFS staff members, stakeholders in the court process, biological and resource parent representatives, and others; and (3) assessed OCFS reunification work by analyzing existing quality assurance data. OPEGA examined the 235 case reviews conducted from April 2017 to March 2023 that had reunification as the child’s permanency goal.

OPEGA identified four cross-cutting challenges that are prevalent in reunification casework.

1. Caseworker practices concerns
 - Assessment of parent’s substance use: Many cases did not meet the federal standard for regularly assessing parents’ substance use. OCFS staff named caseworker inexperience and issues with drug screening as challenges contributing to this concern.
 - Caseworker engagement with family: Casework tended to fall short of expectations on assessments of caseworker conversations with parents about their needs and case planning goals, as well as facilitation of family team meetings. Staff said that inadequate training and job shadowing contribute to this deficiency.

2. High workloads impacting safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes
 - Permanency caseworker vacancies: OCFS has struggled with high staff turnover and inability to fill vacant positions, with some district offices experiencing especially high vacancy rates. This causes high workloads and means that staff are relatively inexperienced, which contribute to many of the identified challenges.
 - Lack of support staff: Frontline staff reported that inadequate support with administrative and legal tasks exacerbates the challenge of high workloads and has a negative impact on casework quality.
 - Lack of visitation supervisors and transportation for families: OCFS contracts with agencies to provide supervision for parent and child visits, as well as transportation for families. Staff and parent representatives reported high demand and lack of availability of these crucial services.
3. Waitlists for evaluations and treatment: Case reviews and staff interviews suggest that progress toward reunification is often hindered by long waitlists for parents' required mental health evaluations, mental health treatment, and for substance use disorder treatment.
4. Timeliness of termination of parental filings and other legal concerns: Case reviews identified challenges with timeliness of filing termination of parental rights, leading to delays in permanency for children. Several factors may contribute to delays, including caseworker workload and the backlog of cases in the judicial system delaying hearings necessary for timely reunification.

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