



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
March 22, 2024

Call to Order

The Chair, Sen. Hickman, called the Government Oversight Committee to order at 10:00 a.m.

ATTENDANCE

Senators:	Sen. Hickman, Sen. Duson, Zoom: Sen. Bennett, Senator Tipping Absent: Sen. Keim, Sen. Timberlake
Representatives:	Rep. Fay, Rep. Arata, Rep. Mastraccio, Rep. Millett, Rep. O'Neil Absent: Rep. Blier
Legislative Staff:	Peter Schleck, Director, OPEGA Sabrina Carey, Secretary, OPEGA

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>)

Public Hearing – OPEGA Review of Child Protective Services Reunification

(A copy of all submitted written comments can be found here: <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10955>)

Victoria Vose – Warren

Ms. Vose shared the story of her grandson, Maddox Williams and his involvement with the Department and CPS as a child. She noted the OPEGA Report that details the last few months of her grandsons life. (A copy of the OPEGA Report referenced can be found here: <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/9997>)

Sen. Hickman asked what she thought the reason the biological mother was seeking custody?

Ms. Vose answered that she believed it was to receive more money.

Matthew Agren – Lewiston (Written comments start on pg.1 of link above)

Rep. Arata asked about an “anonymous person” in his testimony.

Mr. Agren answered that it was a Resource Parent.

Leona Freeman – Mechanic Falls (on behalf of her goddaughter)

Ms. Leeman shared the story of her goddaughter who wound up in State Custody. She emphasized that no child should have to go through what her goddaughter did.

Debora DeJulio – Ellsworth (Written comments start of pg. 4 of link above)

Rep. Arata asked how many children Ms. DeJulio had in her home.

Ms. DeJulio answered that she had 5 children currently living in her house as her four oldest have moved out.

Samantha Freeman – Otisfield (on behalf of her granddaughter)

Ms. Freeman shared her personal story of taking in her grandchildren. She explained that she had her grandchildren in her home as a resource parent through the department for two years. The department with no notice transferred and moved one of the children to Arizona to live with Ms. Freeman’s other daughter Caitlin (the grandchildren’s aunt). Ms. Freeman explained that she helped with the transition and move to Arizona and even stayed there for three weeks during the transition of guardianship. In the following five months, Ms. Freeman stated that the Department, nor the GAL contacted the aunt Caitlin to discuss the child at all. After five months, Ms. Freeman called the Department staff to let them know that the child had been asking to move back home with Ms. Freeman and that the family had a plan to bring her home, since the Department was not being helpful. The Department then accused the family of kidnapping and deemed them “dangerous” and moved the granddaughter in to the Paternal grandmothers’ house, where the child may have been previously assaulted at. Ms. Freeman stated that they now only get two hours a month with a child that they help raised / took care of for ten years.

Melanie Blair – Lisbon (Written comments start on pg. 7 of link above)

Sen. Hickman asked about “repeat offenders” of the Child Protective System and her suggestion for changes.

Ms. Blair recommended a shortened timeframe for repeat offenders.

Rep. Arata asked why TPR’s (Termination of Parental Rights) and asked for examples of why the Department might allow parents to have reunification without completing the other steps required.

Ms. Blair explained that she thought that the reunification with incomplete steps shouldn’t occur because what is the point of having the requirement in the first place if the Department won’t follow it.

Rep. Millett asked how he could get more information on the case shared in the last paragraph as he wanted more information.

Ms. Blair answered that an Ombudsman’s review of the case may give the Committee that information.

Betsey Grant – (Written comments start on pg. 9 of link above)

Melissa Hackett – Maine Child Welfare Action Network (MCWAN) (Written comments start on pg. 17 of link above)

Sen. Tipping asked for examples of the challenges in the system and any suggested changes for these challenges. Ms. Hackett answered that attorneys are not available. Reunification is an intense and long process and the staff needs more resources, especially in Legal.

Rep. O’Neil asked for further information on the requests in the budget and what’s on the table for non-appropriations members.

Ms. Hackett answered that she has been working with other folks in the Behavioral Health Field and the Housing Field to put together a comprehensive list of what are child safety and family stability provisions that could be supported. (<https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10956>)

Judy Brooks (Read by Melissa Hackett) – Center for Parent Leadership and Advocacy in Child Welfare (CPLA) (Written comments start on pg. 21 of link above)

Karlene Hafemann (Read by Melanie Blair) – (Written comments start on pg. 24 of link above)

Director Bobbi Johnson – OCFS, DHHS

Ms. Johnson thanked OPEGA for the staff’s dedicated and diligent work to understand the process of reunification and the factors that impact the practice and outcome. OCFS believes the brief accurately depicts the current strengths and challenges of the Child Welfare System and how the work is part of a broader system.

Rep. Millett asked if the requests for action that some folks are pleading for are appropriate and can be taken under her leadership and willing to move forward with specific steps?

Director Johnson answered that she thought all of the perspectives were important steps forward and the office has started to talk about issues and look at what they need to do in order to understand the issues at hand from the different perspectives to build strategies and partnerships to move those forward.

Sen. Hickman asked for a follow up response to the suggested concept of shortened timeframes for termination of parental rights filings for cases where parents have had previous issues with keeping children in their custody.

Director Johnson agreed she could do that.

Director’s Report

Director Schleck shared that there will be two upcoming Tax Reports to be presented at upcoming meetings that are ready or close to being finished for presentation.

Sen. Hickman asked what other projects the office is currently working on.

Director Schleck answered that the office is working on finishing the fourth CPS Casefile Review and the Maine Veterans Homes review report is underway.

Sen. Hickman confirmed that the current bill LD 803 does not have any changes for OPEGA or the staff.

Next GOC meeting date and planning

Rep. Mastraccio suggested not meeting during adjournment week as it will be very busy.

The Chairs requested the Committee Clerk poll the Committee members via email for dates for the next meeting.

Adjourn

Rep. Fay adjourned the Government Oversight Committee meeting at 11:49 a.m. on a motion by Rep Mastraccio seconded by Rep. Blier.