

Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman
Government Oversight Committee
Presentation of Annual Report
January 10, 2025

Good morning, Senator Hickman, Representative Mastraccio, and members of the Government Oversight Committee. Thank you for having me here today. My name is Christine Alberi, and I am the Child Welfare Ombudsman for Maine. I am here today to present the 2024 Child Welfare Ombudsman's Annual Report.

Analysis of case specific reviews for this fiscal year has continued to show significant struggles in child welfare practice, especially during initial investigations and reunification of families, negatively impacting child safety. Fortunately, this year has also featured a reset of the relationship between the Department and the Ombudsman featuring an increase in collaboration and cooperation between our two offices. The Department has implemented a number of structural changes in upper management and added important positions to the districts. Work continues to effectively implement safety science, and policy work is ongoing. The Department has been receptive to recommendations from stakeholders and staff and has a clear idea what practice and policy issues need to be addressed. The work of improvement is difficult and will not happen overnight, but currently appears to be started on the right path.

Unfortunately, child welfare staff continue to operate under enormous pressure. The systems that surround child welfare are currently unable to support children and families in the way that they should. Most urgently, finding a safe place for a child who is unsafe with parents is an unsustainable drain on staff resources. Child welfare staff spend days and nights in hotels and in hospital emergency rooms with children in state custody. This immediate need takes staff away from crucial casework—either casework to investigate new complaints of child abuse and neglect, or casework to provide good faith reunification services to families.

Additionally, mental and behavioral health resources, especially the more intensive resources, are not readily available to help children who have already experienced significant trauma. This can cause placement disruption and lack of support to kinship placements and foster parents. Also, a shortage of professional visit supervisors causes hardship to families with children in state custody and takes case aids and caseworkers away from other important work.

Staff time is also eaten away by the demands of the new child welfare database, Katahdin. Despite ongoing fixes and enhancements, the system is still inefficient both when reviewing a family's history, and when entering information. Finally, the shortage of defense attorneys for parents has caused weeks and months-long delays in the progress of reunification cases, harming children, parents, and increasing staff workload.

There are other pressures on staff, but 1) lack of mental and behavioral health services for children, 2) lack of professional visit supervisors, 3) ongoing issues with Katahdin, and 4) a significant shortage of defense attorneys are having the most significant impact on the Department's ability to improve casework practice. In order to improve child welfare practice, staff need time to learn and to plan, and to help families prevent future child abuse and neglect.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to page 15 of this report, positive findings. I am going to read aloud one of my favorites taken verbatim from one of our case-specific reviews.

“This case is a stellar example of thorough, supportive, detailed, and thoughtful permanency work by the caseworker. The caseworker regularly attended family recovery court with the parent and kept in touch with all providers, checking in regularly before family team meetings. The parents were met with in their home face to face when possible and the caseworker went over concerns clearly and frequently throughout the case. A petition to terminate rights was filed less than a year into the case, but the caseworker had developed such a good relationship with the parents that they did not give up on reunification.”