

Janet T. Mills
Governor

Sara Gagné-Holmes
Commissioner



Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Child and Family Services
11 State House Station
2 Anthony Avenue
Augusta, Maine 04333-0011
Tel.: (207) 624-7900; Toll Free: (877) 680-5866
TTY: Dial 711 (Maine Relay); Fax: (207) 287-5282

OCFS Response to 2024 Ombudsman Recommendations

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Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Child and Family Services

OCFS is grateful for the work of the Child Welfare Ombudsman and other system partners who collaborate with the Department to achieve ongoing system improvements. OCFS appreciates the Ombudsman's analysis of the 80 cases reviewed this year. During this period, OCFS assigned over 9,942 reports and cases for investigation, and was responsible for an average of 2,541 children in care. As always, the recommendations and information provided by the Ombudsman's office will serve to influence and improve policy and practice at OCFS and benefit our shared work to keep children safe. In response to the Child Welfare Ombudsman's recommendations in the 2024 Annual Report, OCFS offers the following brief responses:

A serious shortage of children's behavioral health and mental health services, both in-patient and out-patient, is causing harm to children who need the services, and a drain on child welfare staff time and resources. Additionally, this shortage can cause placement disruptions and increased trauma for children in state custody. This issue must be addressed at all levels of children's behavioral health with substantial additional resources.

Despite the Department of Health and Human services substantial investments in behavioral health rates and services over the last several years, OCFS concurs that the current challenges related to service accessibility for families directly affect both the child welfare system and parents' ability to meet their children's needs, as well as prevent or mitigate safety and well-being risks. OCFS continues to partner with the Office of Behavioral Health and MaineCare to improve service accessibility statewide.

The Department should continue the current efforts to improve practice and increase staff retention. These efforts include the hiring of training supervisors statewide, continuing to work with Collaborative Safety LLC to implement safety science reviews and practices throughout the state, and to clarify policies and procedures where necessary. Training in basic best practice for both investigations and reunification cases should continue to be provided to staff.

OCFS agrees with this recommendation. The hiring of eight Training Supervisor positions this year creates new opportunities to enhance the quality and consistency of practice tailored to district-specific needs and circumstances. These positions are expected to boost the confidence and competence of new staff during the onboarding and training process by providing additional support as they integrate Foundations learnings into casework practice. Combined with recent

increases in compensation, these measures aim to improve retention. Additionally, OCFS recognizes that expansion and integration of safety science principals throughout the organization is essential. To this end, OCFS continues to partner with Collaborative Safety, LLC to conduct training and Leadership Labs among district-level staff – initiatives that have been well-received.

The child welfare information system, Katahdin, has continued to be difficult and time consuming to use despite multiple repairs made by Department staff. Clear documentation policy and improvements to make the system more streamlined and effective are fundamentally necessary to effective child welfare practice.

While the initial implementation of Katahdin was challenging, OCFS is now completing its third-year post-implementation, having made significant investments of time and resources to refine and improve the system based on user feedback. Katahdin is a substantial upgrade from the previous 20+ year old system, and the transition was difficult for some staff accustomed to the old system. Acknowledging these challenges and committed to continuous quality improvement, OCFS' Information Services Team continues to actively gather feedback through district-level meetings, surveys, and individual help desk tickets to identify opportunities for increasing the system's efficiency and effectiveness. OCFS also recognizes that updating the Documentation Policy will benefit staff by providing clear and concise guidance that aligns with Katahdin's capabilities. Currently, a workgroup of district staff is being formed to review and contribute to these policy updates.

The shortage of children's behavioral and mental health services, shortage of professional visit supervisors, ongoing issues with Katahdin, and the significant shortage of defense attorneys are having the greatest impact on child welfare staff. These systems must be strengthened in order for child welfare staff to have the space and time to improve child welfare practice, which in turn is necessary to ensure the safety of children.

OCFS agrees that workforce challenges among providers, attorneys, and other sectors, continue to challenge the child welfare system. While each area faces different factors contributing to shortages, providers have identified the primary issue as a lack of qualified individuals, which affects both the availability and cost of services. OCFS experiences this challenge directly and remains dedicated to tirelessly recruiting new staff. Despite significant increases to rates, paid training opportunities, and investments in recruitment and retention efforts, providers still struggle with this issue. Nonetheless, OCFS is committed to collaborating with any and all stakeholders to seek effective solutions in this area because it is not one that OCFS can resolve independently.

Prevention and community support services need to be strengthened both to prevent children from becoming so unsafe that they need to enter state custody and to support families after reunification so that no further child welfare involvement is necessary.

OCFS agrees that prevention is essential to reducing the need for child welfare involvement and avoiding the trauma associated with removing a child from their home. Maine was one of the first states to receive approval for a federal Family First Prevention Services State Plan and has devoted significant resources to developing and implementing new and expanded services under this plan. The Legislature established and the Department implemented a Special Projects Manager for Child and Family Well-Being to focus on prevention efforts. Collaboratively with non-state partners, the Department developed the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan. This plan represents a comprehensive set of strategies designed to keep children in Maine safe by keeping families strong. Released in 2023, the plan was developed with significant input from community and state partners and outlines a framework and opportunities for action aimed at strengthening families. In 2024, work continued to refine and expand the plan, with an updated version expected in the coming months.

While the statutory purpose of *child welfare* is to protect and assist children experiencing abuse and neglect, children in circumstances that present a substantial risk of abuse and neglect, and their families, OCFS has invested and will continue to invest time and resources in collaboration with the Special Projects Manager for Child and Family Well-Being and other partners, to build a system of services and supports that minimizes the need for child welfare intervention. Thereby, empowering parents and families to safely and appropriately meet the needs of the children in their care.