



Child Welfare Annual Report

Calendar Year 2024

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Office of Child and Family Services

Introduction

In 2024, Maine's child welfare system saw the ongoing influence of extrinsic factors that have had significant impact on the system for several years, including workforce issues that unquestionably impacted OCFS staff, provider staff and the availability of qualified parent attorneys; the complexity of social factors related to issues such as housing, substance use, domestic violence, and mental health concerns; and capacity challenges among all types of service providers who support parents to safely meet the needs of their children. While these issues continue to be challenging, OCFS remains focused on its mission and statutory mandate to protect children who have been abused or neglected or who are in circumstances that present substantial risk of abuse and neglect.

Significant organizational work was completed in 2024. The Office worked directly with Public Consulting Group (PCG) to conduct an assessment that led to a redesign of the leadership structure within the child welfare division. These changes, particularly the realignment of the child welfare Regional Associate Director positions, helped child welfare focus and advance work related to updating policies and training, providing supportive programs and services for both families involved in the child welfare system and resource families, and ensure consistent statewide practice between each of the eight district offices.

OCFS' top priority going into 2024 was stabilization of the OCFS workforce and continuing to improve professional development and policy/procedural support for staff. While OCFS' caseworker vacancies dropped from 18 percent in November 2023 to 10.8 percent in November 2024, it should be noted that a significant portion of OCFS' workforce is relatively new to their work. As a result, much work remains to provide support to these staff and more time is needed to allow them to grow and develop in this field. OCFS' entire district workforce continues to feel the strain of the lack of community resources for children in OCFS' care. During district visits this was a theme that continued to be raised by staff and allowed OCFS' leadership to continue to seek new and innovative solutions to both individual issues and larger system challenges.

Prevention Efforts

In 2024, OCFS continued its work under the [Federal Family First Prevention Services Act](#) and the corresponding [Maine Family First Prevention Services State Plan](#). This plan was approved initially in 2021, with an amendment in 2023, and includes Maine's plan for implementation of evidence-based services funded through state and federal Title IV-E funds that are designed to specifically support families at risk of having their child(ren) removed with the goal of keeping children safely in their home.

Since 2021, Maine has implemented two programs under Family First (Parents as Teachers (PAT) and Homebuilders) to meet an overarching goal to strengthen families and prevent the need for removal due to abuse and/or neglect. Through Family First, Maine expanded the Maine Families Home Visiting (MFHV) program (which provides the PAT curriculum) to serve more child welfare involved families with children up to the age of 5. The standard program accepts referrals for children prenatal to 3.5 months old and can serve the child until they are 3 years old. With expansion, children aged 4 months to 4.5 years can be referred to the program and served until the age of 5 years. Since the early spring of 2022, there have been 87 children served in this expansion program under Family First.

OCFS has implemented the Homebuilders Intensive Family Preservation and Reunification Program statewide through a contract with Bethany Christian Services of Northern New England (BCSNNE). Homebuilders is an evidenced based intensive, in-home counseling, skill building and support service for families who have children (0-18 years old) at imminent risk of out-of-home placement or who are in placement and cannot be reunified without intensive in-home services. The Homebuilders program is being implemented statewide,

although the building of teams is an ongoing challenge as, like many other programs in Maine, BCSNNE has had some difficulty hiring staff. To date, the Homebuilders program has served 152 families impacting 301 children and has worked to not only prevent the need for removal but also served several families as they safely reunified.

Preliminary evaluation findings have shown that these two interventions are working to prevent the need for removal from the home and placement in foster care, yet the work of Family First is still relatively new. OCFS continues to examine and explore other programs that can be supported under Family First federal funding to work towards strengthening and supporting Maine's continuum of Family First Prevention Services to keep children safely at home and prevent entry into foster care. Currently, OCFS is using Family First Transition Grant funding to test the Intercept model with child welfare involved families in three counties in the state with the goal of sustaining the program and expanding it statewide in the future under Family First. Intercept is designed to work with families where children are at high risk of entering state custody or have already entered state custody by providing intensive support, new parenting and communication skills, and evidence-based strengths-focused mental health services.

OCFS also continues to manage [Access Maine](#) which is an online resource guide that outlines state level programs and resources available to families in Maine. Access Maine was developed as a goal under Family First to raise awareness of existing resources that can support children and families. Access Maine compliments Maine's 211 system, which provides a directory of community-based programs in that the two effectively provide the public with information on how to locate services and support for families in Maine. More information can be found on [this fact sheet](#).

OCFS remains dedicated to not only keeping children safely in their home and preventing the need for foster care after a child welfare intervention (tertiary prevention), but also supporting them before families encounter or even need child welfare services through primary and secondary prevention efforts. OCFS has partnered with the Maine Children's Trust since 2022 to implement a bi-monthly [Prevention Webinar Series](#) to share strategies and opportunities for action that everyone can do to strengthen and support families in order to keep children safe.

In other primary and secondary prevention efforts, OCFS has been a partner in the development of the [Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan](#) which is Maine's plan to keep children safe by keeping families strong. Developed in partnership between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Maine Child Welfare Action Network (MCWAN), the plan establishes shared responsibility for supporting families and preventing child maltreatment. It calls on state and community partners to work together to strengthen economic and concrete supports, increase access to services, build partnerships with families, promote supportive communities, and improve coordination. The Office of Child and Family Services has partnered on implementation of several key initiatives in the plan, including:

- ❖ [Be There for ME](#) - a new campaign to support parents and caregivers in Maine. It was developed by DHHS and MCWAN in partnership with a diverse group of parents and caregivers. The campaign and accompanying website aim to reduce the stigma of asking for help and provide a judgement-free place for parents and caregivers to start to find support.
- ❖ Funding a one-year initiative on community spaces for families with Maine Children's Trust and the Maine Prevention Councils. Through a collective impact approach, the Prevention Councils convened partners, including parents, caregivers, and youth. Together, they mapped the existing spaces in each of their communities where families build social connections and access low-barrier supports without

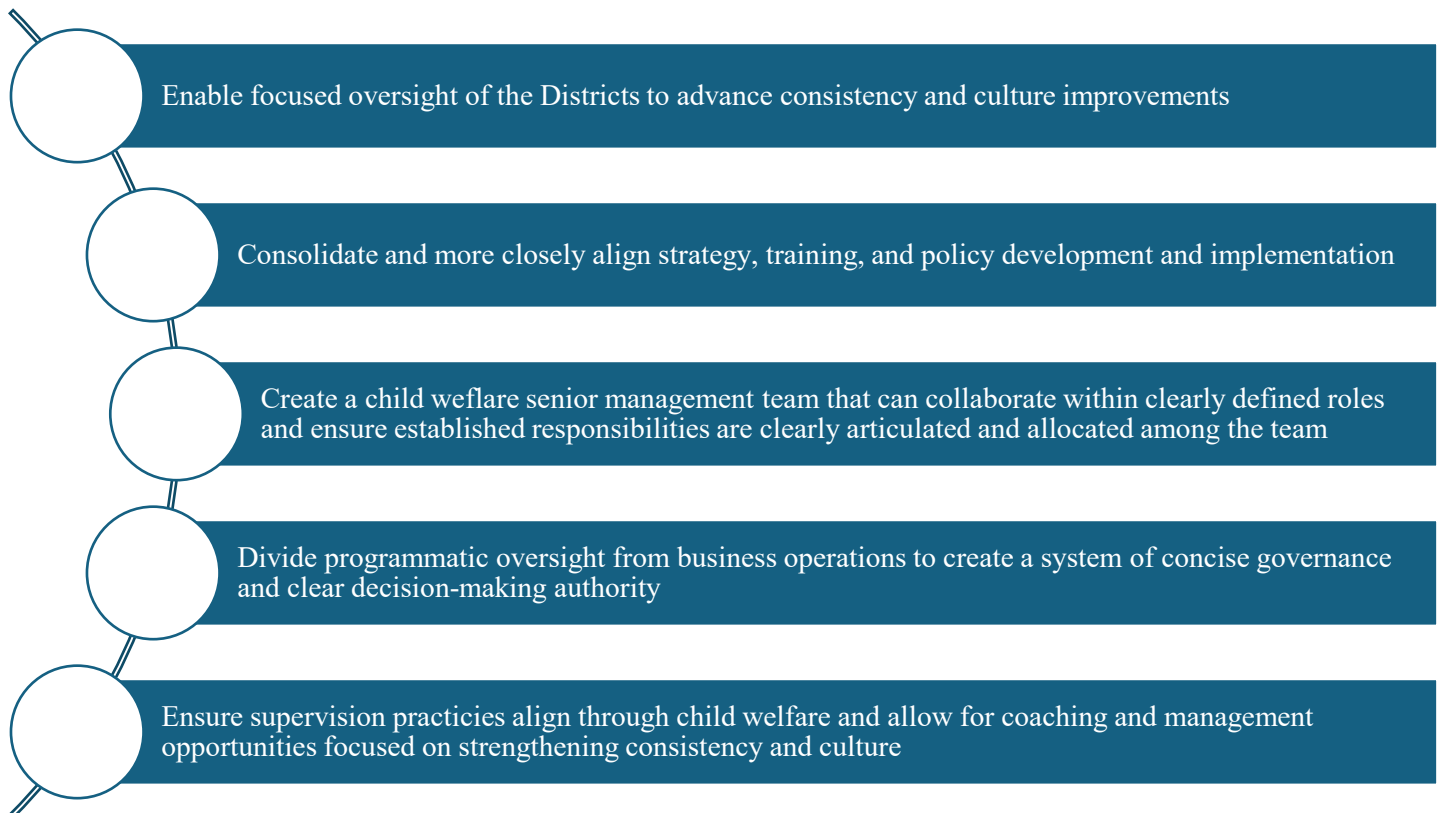
stigma and identified opportunities to enhance or expand these spaces to spark ongoing community collaboration.

- ❖ Since July 2024, representatives from OCFS and MCWAN have undertaken an effort to explore mandated reporting and community support for families in Maine. The work has involved the development of an advisory group, a survey of mandated reporters (which garnered over 900 responses), OCFS data analysis, and a variety of focus groups for parents/caregivers and child welfare staff. The work has also been supported by Casey Family Programs. Opportunities to respond to the information gleaned from this initiative to ensure families receive the most appropriate support are being considered.

OCFS will continue to be a partner in the current and ongoing work to update the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan with an updated version expected by early 2025.

Child Welfare Division Redesign

One of the primary focuses of the child welfare division in the early part of 2024 was a comprehensive management review and corresponding redesign of the child welfare division aimed at streamlining and clarifying roles, providing greater support for professional development, and improving connections and communication between leadership and frontline staff. The management review was [completed](#) by Public Consulting Group (PCG) in the spring of 2024 and in May OCFS [announced](#) and implemented its child welfare reorganization. The goals of the reorganization were focused on system improvement.



The primary changes included:

- ❖ A modernized charge for the Associate Director overseeing child welfare;
- ❖ Consolidation of the Regional Associate Director position into three manager positions, allowing for one individual to be focused on the primary operations in three different areas of child welfare - field operations, statewide programs, and strategy and policy implementation;
- ❖ Embedding the work under Family First within the strategy and policy arm of child welfare to ensure alignment of maltreatment prevention efforts with other OCFS initiatives; and
- ❖ Creation of a new Deputy Director position within OCFS to support the Director and Office in managing and coordinating the day-to-day operations and efforts directed towards achieving short- and long-term strategic priorities.

Staffing and Recruitment/Retention

Efforts to recruit and retain staff were a primary focus during the last year. In 2024, OCFS employed several different financial incentives to improve recruitment and retention, including stipends of up to \$3,000 per frontline staff person, reclassification of critically important Case Aide positions from pay grade 13 to paygrade 18 and starting them at Step 3 in the pay scale, and implementation of pay increases for caseworkers and supervisors. OCFS has also focused on other initiatives to alleviate some of the most common factors impacting retention and turnover, including expanding OCFS' Community Sitter program, implementing the redesign of the child welfare management structure to ensure comprehensive and consistent support for staff, hiring and onboarding new support staff (including an Onboarding and Training Supervisor in each district office, a second Assistant Program Administrator (APA) position in the Lewiston Office, and three new Legal Secretary Associate positions which allows each District to have a dedicated Legal Secretary Associate), and establishment of a centralized team to process vendor forms and direct deposits to remove this administrative burden from District staff.

CPS Caseworker Staffing Data

Point in Time	Nov 2018	Nov 2019	Nov 2020	Nov 2021	Nov 2022	Nov 2023	Nov 2024	Net Change 2018-2024
Total Positions	351	365	398	414	445	445	445	+94/ +27%
# Filled	327	348	382	384	388	365	398	+71/ +22%
# Vacancies	24	17	16	30	57	80	47	
% Vacancies	6.8%	4.7%	4.0%	7.5%	12.8%	18.0%	10.6%	

The data on caseworker staffing clearly shows that the diverse and comprehensive group of strategies OCFS employed to focus on recruitment and retention during 2024 are making a significant difference. The number of caseworker vacancies dropped by over 40% at the end of 2024.

Children in Care

As of 9/30/2024, there were 2,436 children in care in Maine. Of these children the average number of days in care was 682 and the median number of days in care was 416. Ensuring timely permanency remains a key goal driving OCFS work, and the child welfare division redesign was developed and implemented in a manner that

advances an emphasis on consistency of field operations and improvements to the policies, procedures, tools, and other waypoints for staff to ensure both safety and timely permanency.

Currently there are 488 children in Maine awaiting adoption, 117 of those children have identified special needs, while the remaining children do not. This number represents the total number of children for whom a termination of parental rights has occurred, but adoption has not yet been finalized. Many of these children are in pre-adoptive placements awaiting adoption and OCFS is grateful for the loving and committed resource parents who will provide these children with permanency. Nonetheless, there is a constant need for families willing to consider adoption of children from the Department's custody. OCFS continues to partner with A Family for ME on recruitment of both resource and adoptive homes. OCFS encourages those who may be interested in adoption to visit www.afamilyformemaine.org for more information.

Contingency Fund Update

OCFS continues to make contingency funding available to assist families involved in child protective investigations or trial home placements. These funds, allocated by the Legislature, provide the opportunity for OCFS to bridge a financial gap for families where that gap might impact child safety or wellbeing, ensuring that children are not separated from their parents due solely to economic-based concerns. This funding can be used for a variety of purposes ranging from housing to transportation to safe sleep accommodations. The funds are overseen by a fiscal agent who reviews requests made by caseworkers on behalf of families and ensures the costs fit within the funding criteria for use. Data on the utilization of these funds is outlined below.

2024 Reporting Period	Amount Expended	Number of Families Receiving Assistance	Average Expenditure Per Family
Quarter 1	\$23,616.88	20	\$1,180.84
Quarter 2	\$36,727.52	21	\$1,748.93
Quarter 3	\$25,440.14	30	\$848.00
Quarter 4	\$31,496.67	22	\$1,431.67

Some examples of the use of these funds in 2024 include: housing, heating fuel, pest control, utilities, trash removal, appliances, home safety equipment, medical devices, safe sleep accommodations, car repair, transportation, furniture and child care. OCFS' child welfare leadership team continues to work with the district offices to reinforce the availability of these funds and encourage staff to consider how these funds could be used to help mitigate concerns and prevent removal or hasten reunification.

Impact of and Efforts to Address Caregiver Substance Use

Caregiver substance use continues to be one of the most predominant driving factors related to OCFS involvement in a family's life. From 10/1/2023-9/30/2024, nearly 50 percent of all removals included caregiver substance use as a risk factor and OCFS received over 600 notifications regarding the birth of substance exposed infants. This mirrors national trends for this risk factor and has driven OCFS to consider and implement new opportunities to strengthen training and support for child welfare staff related to these issues. OCFS now contracts to provide qualified Substance Use Disorder Consultant in each office to provide support to staff as they work with families impacted by substance use. OCFS has also implemented two new tools to assess concerns for substance use, the DAST 10 (which evaluates concerns regarding drug use) and the AUDIT (which evaluates concerns regarding alcohol misuse). OCFS is a part of the State's Opioid Clinical Advisory

Committee and has benefitted greatly from the Committee's input on how best to support families where caregiver substance use creates concerns for child safety.

In late 2023 and throughout 2024, OCFS implemented a number of new training opportunities for staff including:

- A webinar on ingestions, exposure, and reading and interpreting drug screen results;
- Supporting the development and distribution of a document entitled, *When Substance Use Disorder and CPS Impacts Families: Advice from Lived Experience* which was developed by OCFS' Family Engagement Specialist to help caseworkers engage with parents dealing with substance use disorder;
- Voluntary Naloxone training and distribution to staff; and
- Completion of an annual training entitled, *Drug Identification, Impairment Recognition and Caseworker Safety*.

Policy and practice updates have also been implemented including new and updated tools to screen for substance use disorder in investigations and improve the assessment of caregiver substance use as it may impact child safety and risk of harm. Included in this work was an update to OCFS' Investigation Policy to incorporate these changes. OCFS is also in the process of updating its policy specific to assessments in families where caregiver substance use is a concern. In 2025, OCFS also plans to propose a statutory change to allow for better guidance and support to medical and other providers working directly with pregnant and post-partum women with substance use disorder and substance exposed infants.

In addition, OCFS has collaborated with the Office of Behavioral health and the Maine Judicial Branch to deploy specialized Peer Recovery Support Professionals in each OCFS district with a Family Recovery Court. These individuals provide support for staff, parents/families, and the courts related to the complex dynamics and factors impacting caregivers with substance use disorder. OCFS, in recognition of the seriousness of accidental ingestions of both legal and illegal substances by children, has also worked to distribute lock boxes and lock bags for safe storage of medication and other substances that can be dangerous for children.

Improving Access to Services

In 2024, OCFS worked with numerous system partners to address the availability and accessibility of supportive services. While not every one of these services has a direct tie to child welfare, each of these services is intended to help families address issues and concerns, create stability, and ensure safety for children. While all or nearly all of the service providers that work with families are experiencing some level of workforce challenges, OCFS continues to partner with providers to seek new and innovative solutions and services to best meet the needs of families within currently available resources. Some examples include:

- Ongoing work related to substance exposed infants (SEI). OCFS employs a dedicated Plan of Safe Care (POSC) nurse who works with providers to ensure that to the greatest extent possible each family with a substance exposed infant has the support and services they need to meet their child's needs and address their substance use concerns. Due to the dedicated work of the POSC nurse, nearly 90 percent of all families with a substance exposed infant had a POSC created following the child's birth. These plans help connect families to services and supports focused on child development and substance use recovery.
- OCFS continues to partner with Public Health Nursing (PHN) and the Maine Families Home Visiting Program to improve statewide service delivery to children born substance exposed. This process, known as CradleME, creates a centralized referral point for both PHN and home visiting services for these

families and allows for timely service delivery and improved outcomes for families most in need of these services.

- Help Me Grow Maine is a free information and referral service available to all pregnant individuals and families with children through age eight. The program provides parents, physicians, and community partners across the state with connections to resources intended to ensure healthy development and positive outcomes for young children.
- The Violence Prevention Program, housed within OCFS provides support for a number of services and programs including:
 - The Sexual Assault Forensic Nurse Examiner (SAFE) program that provides training and educational offerings for specialized SAFE providers (there are currently 60 credentialed adult forensic nurse examiners and 21 credentialed pediatric forensic nurse examiners statewide).
 - The Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) of Maine provides a multidisciplinary team approach to forensic interviewing of children who have experienced sexual abuse and support for their families. Over 1,000 children and their families are served by these programs each year and the work of the CACs helps to support the prosecution of sexually-based crimes against children and efforts to ensure safety of children through the protective custody court process.
- Family Time Coaching and expanded monitored visitation - OCFS expanded a program to provide monitored visitation to the Lewiston area in order to assist with the unmet visitation needs in the area. Additionally, Family Time Coaching allows parents to receive in the moment parent coaching, ideally in their homes.

Policy and Training Update

In 2024, OCFS devoted significant resources to updating and improving training opportunities for staff. This included a number of new and updated trainings designed to address opportunities identified by staff, child welfare leadership, and outside reviews of various aspects of policy and practice. Some of the trainings were tailored specifically for certain districts to address their specific needs, while others were available statewide.

New/Substantially Updated Trainings in 2024

- The Interdependency of Health: 5 Domains of Development in the Very Young Child
- Assessing Substance Use & Mental Health Services & Supports with Maine Families
- Drug Testing: Myths & Realities
- Staff Safety and High Risk Situations
- Planning for Safety when Parental Substance Use Disorder is Present
- Advance Practical Training for Frontline Staff
- Collaborative Safety Orientation
- Youth Substance Use Disorder Services & Supports
- Pathways to Determining Risk of Harm from SUD
- Overdose Prevention and Naloxone Administration Training
- Hotel/Emergency Department Coverage
- Safety Planning
- Engagement Development
- Public Health Nursing 101
- Discovery
- Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)
- New Worker Training: MainePays
- New Worker Training: Time Management
- Car Seat Training
- Katahdin Foundations Training
- Katahdin Payment Issues Training for District Management
- Katahdin Placement Training
- Katahdin Person Record Training
- Medical Measures
- Katahdin and Documentation Training

Substantive updates to seven policies were completed in 2024 with more planned for 2025. Those completed in 2024 included, Audio Recording, the Investigations Policy, Domestic Abuse and Violence, Caseworker Contact, LGBTQI+, Supervisory, and Resource Home policies. OCFS continues to work with subject matter experts on drafting and updating policies. The process of drafting and finalizing policies also includes opportunities for staff throughout the child welfare structure, from frontline caseworkers to program administrators, as well as other key partners, to review and provide input to draft policies.

In late 2023, OCFS finalized a new Supervisory Policy, recognizing the essential role that supervisors play in the day-to-day operation of child welfare services. The policy provides guidelines related to supervision, including specialized information on supervising new staff and working within the human resources expectations of the State government system. In 2024, OCFS also introduced a Supervisory Framework to accompany this policy. The framework provides one consistent and comprehensive resource for policies, forms, human resources information, and training information.

Katahdin Update

Since August of 2023, OCFS' Information Services Team has completed a number of system updates and enhancements to OCFS' comprehensive child welfare information system, known as Katahdin. These efforts equated to a significant update per month over the last year, implementing changes such as updates to the Resource Home Policy, adding new prompts and reminders about tasks throughout the process of investigations and cases, implementing changes based on new and updated federal laws, streamlining processes for staff and the information services team, implementing new features to prompt/require that all critical and required actions are completed, updating the Legal Clearance for Adoption process in Katahdin, and ensuring system outputs meet the needs of those who use the information (including Guardians ad Litem, attorneys, and others).

These updates and enhancements were developed by the Information Services team through significant collaboration both with our technical partners who develop the updates to the system code and frontline child

welfare staff. Information Services meets bi-weekly with the Katahdin Superuser Group which includes staff from all levels of child welfare, holds in-person meetings with each district office twice per year as well as conducting an all staff survey two times per year, meeting annually with staff from the Office of the Attorney General for their feedback, engaging with the Caseworker and Supervisory Advisory Teams which include a representative from each district, attending monthly District Management Team (DMT) meetings, and meeting annually with the Resource Parent Advisory Group for their input. This intensive stakeholder engagement has helped to ensure that upgrades and enhancements address current concerns and keeping pace with the ever-evolving nature of child welfare's work with children and families.

Resource Parents

OCFS' ability to ensure the safety and well-being of Maine children would not be possible without the dedicated individuals who serve as resource parents statewide. Over the last year OCFS has worked to finalize an updated Resource Parent Bill of Rights (RPBR) which will be enacted in early 2025. The updates to the RPBR were made with the input of a stakeholder group that included resource parents, providers, and representatives from OCFS that worked to ensure the document properly supported foster, adoptive, and kinship families as active participants in the State's efforts to care for children in need of out-of-home placement. During these meetings resource parents and those who regularly work with resource parents provided OCFS with additional feedback regarding specific concerns related to payment issues. In response, OCFS worked in conjunction with the Commissioner's Office to engage in a statewide workgroup of Executive Branch agencies to map out the payment process with the goal of streamlining and updating the process. OCFS also created a single point of contact (OCFSPaymentInquiry@maine.gov) for all resource parents to use when they have concerns regarding payment issues. OCFS has dedicated staff to receive, review, and expeditiously resolve payment issues received via this single point of contact.

In late 2023, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) finalized updated rules regarding Title IV-E funding which allows child welfare agencies to enact separate licensing requirements for kinship home licensing and payments. This change was centered around the goal of improving the utilization of kinship care for out-of-home placements. Currently, approximately 39 percent of all children in care in Maine are placed in kinship care and historically Maine has exceeded the national average for kinship care (which is currently around 35 percent of all children in care with some State's utilization of kinship care as low as 10 percent of children in their care). Recognizing the importance of placement with kin whenever possible, the depth of the support that kinship caregivers can offer to children who cannot remain safely with their parents, and the unique role of kinship caregivers who are often asked to step into these roles unexpectedly - OCFS has taken the opportunity presented by ACF's new rules to update its standards for kinship resource homes. This work is currently underway, and it is anticipated that these updated standards will be finalized and promulgated in 2025.

Over the last year, OCFS has also sought to leverage technology to better support resource parents throughout the licensing process. Individuals and families interested in becoming resource parents can now utilize the Resource Parent Portal (RPP) in the Katahdin system to submit their required documentation. Similarly, resource families under renewal can submit their application and supporting documents via the portal. The RPP also allows individuals to track the status of their application or renewal.

A subsequent Katahdin update provides the option for resource parents to utilize the RPP to review information regarding the children placed in their care including medical information like allergies, appointments, and providers; upcoming court dates; the visitation plan; educational information, etc. The portal can also be utilized by resource parents to provide information to the Department by uploading into the portal. The RPP also allows

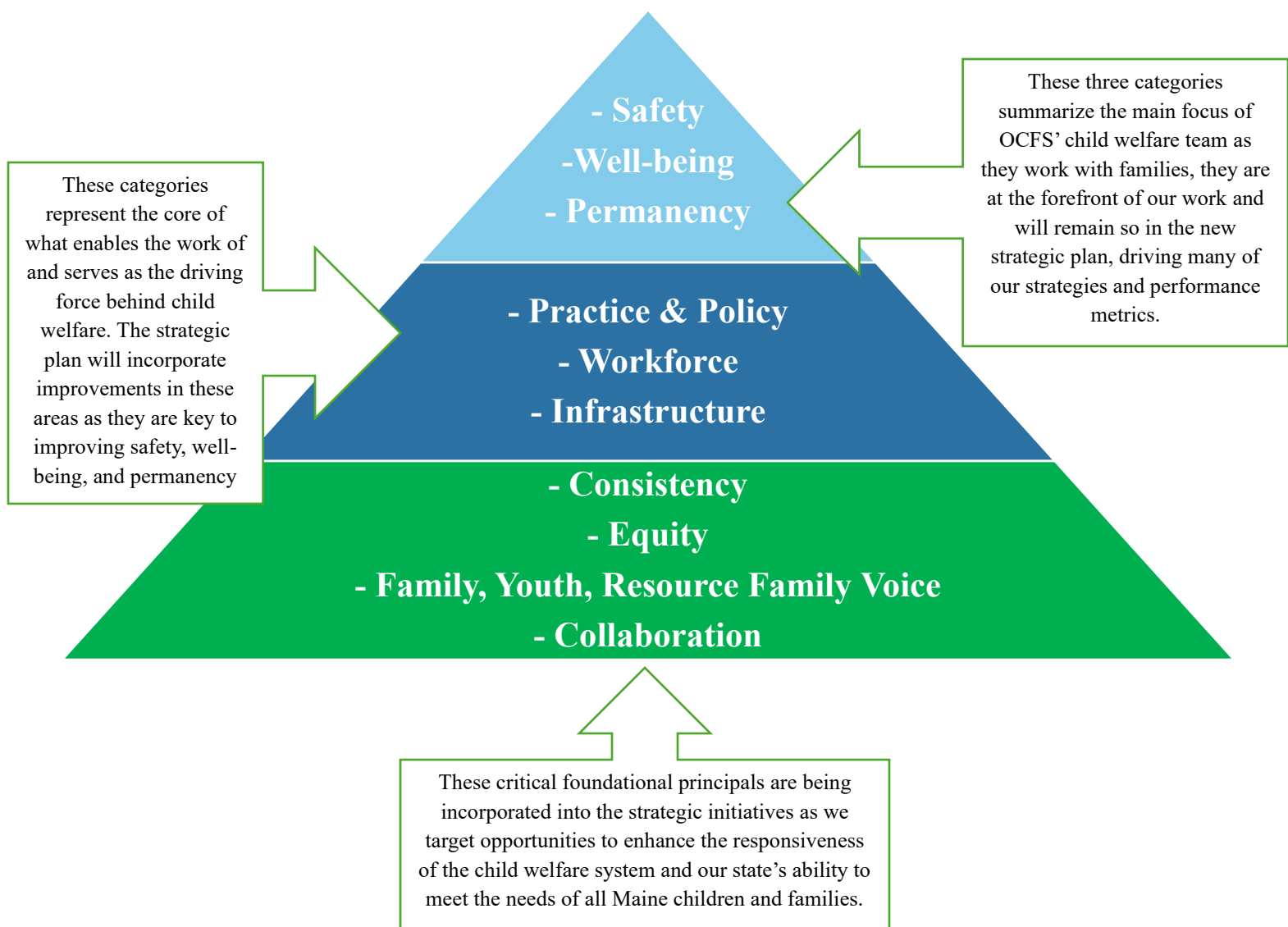
resource parents to view their payment transaction history for the previous 90 day and to filter transactions by child that the payments were made for/on behalf of.

OCFS is grateful for the partnership of Maine's resource parents and remains committed to ensuring that resource parents have the information, tools, and support they need to best care for children placed in their homes. OCFS will continue to cultivate new and existing opportunities to work directly with resource parents to learn about their challenges and successes and how OCFS can continue to make improvements in our work that promote their success.

Strategic Planning

Over the course of the last several years, child welfare has received numerous system improvement recommendations from multiple sources including the citizen review panels, advocacy groups, the Child Welfare Ombudsman, the Government Oversight Committee and Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability, OCFS staff, and reports commissioned by the Department. As OCFS looked towards establishing a new child welfare strategic plan in 2025, the logical starting point was with these recommendations. OCFS' Executive Management Team spent a significant amount of time reviewing each recommendation, outlining work already done towards many of the recommendations and considering additional work or focus that will contribute towards system improvement. The team also utilized the findings of the federal government in the recently completed Program Improvement Plan and the OIG audit related to the Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA), both of which provided valuable information on areas in need of specific focus in system improvement efforts. OCFS is grateful for the partnership of all of these entities in supporting OCFS' goal of continuous quality improvement that adapts to the ever-changing and evolving circumstances that influence the work of child welfare.

OCFS expects to introduce its new child welfare strategic plan in the coming year. The plan will include benchmarks and metrics for measuring progress, as recommended by multiple key stakeholders. While OCFS takes the time to carefully develop a balanced, attainable, and impactful plan, the Department can share some of the foundational principals that will underly the plan.



Looking forward to 2025

OCFS' strategic priorities will guide much of the work over the next few years. Most of these priorities are rooted in addressing the same larger systemic issues identified at the outset of this report – statewide workforce challenges, complex social issues impacting families, and service availability.

Over the last few months, OCFS leadership has devoted significant time to meeting with staff from each district to hear directly from them about what is working and what issues continue to create challenges that directly impact workload and the ability to work with families towards long-term, sustainable safety and stability. These visits will continue through 2025, and the information gathered will continue to inform both small-scale and larger initiatives directed towards strengthening not just the child welfare workforce itself but their ability to focus on the core functions of child welfare to ensure the safety and wellbeing of Maine's children and families.

OCFS is grateful for the partnership of countless stakeholders who provide advocacy and support on behalf of Maine's children and who work diligently to collaborate with OCFS to build solutions (both internal and external to OCFS) that benefit children and their families. In 2025, OCFS is committed to continuing to grow and strengthen these relationships which are key to shifting the public narrative related to child welfare from

solely negative to a more balanced message that articulates the complexities of the work of the agency, while also making systemic improvements to the overall system of support for children and families.