

Caring for children in custody

Over the past year, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) has seen an increase in the number of children in care, with multiple factors likely contributing. There were 2,091 children in the Department's custody as of May 23, 2019, representing a 21.5% increase in the last year.

OCFS has seen a related increase in the number of reports of abuse and/or neglect received by our central intake unit each month. In 2017, the intake unit received an average of 1,630 reports of abuse and/or neglect per month. In 2018, intake received an average of 2,059 reports per month, and in the first four months of 2019, intake received an average of 2,322 reports per month. There has been a corresponding increase in the number of assessments each month.

To address this, since last October, we have added more than 100 new workers to OCFS, largely in child welfare. This has stabilized but not reduced the average caseload. As such, last week, Governor Mills [proposed adding 62 new child welfare staff positions in OCFS](#) starting in September. And she [signed into law LD 821](#) that calls for development and publication of a plan to implement standard caseload recommendations.

The recent high-profile deaths of two Maine children has raised the collective awareness of Maine's child welfare system, as well as our shared obligation to ensure children are safe. Across the country, other states have experienced a similar increase in the number of children in care when public awareness of child welfare increased, meaning Maine's increased reports and children in care is not atypical.

Several other factors may be contributing to the increase in the number of children in care:

- In December of 2018, OCFS ended the practice of out-of-home safety planning. Previously, under these safety plans OCFS would partner with the child's support system to place the child outside of his or her family home without court intervention. With the end of out-of-home safety plans, OCFS staff now bring children into custody when they cannot stay safely in their home. This change has resulted in an increase in the number of children in care and helped ensure that children who cannot live safely in their home have the benefit of careful case monitoring, court involvement, and statutory timeframes associated with an open child protective case.
- In March of 2018, OCFS issued guidance to Alternative Response Program (ARP) providers regarding the process for re-referring reports of abuse and/or neglect to the Department. ARP providers are now required to report back to the Department when a family does not complete ARP services. This has resulted in additional assessments, some of which resulted in removal of a child from the family home.
- The opioid crisis in Maine has also been a contributing factor. In 2018, 55% of cases where children were taken into custody involved substance use as a risk factor.

Of the roughly 2,000 children currently in the Department's custody, 399 are awaiting adoption. OCFS continues to focus on seeking adoptive families and on providing support to current and prospective adoptive families. OCFS [recognizes](#) Maine's foster families during May, National Foster Care Month, and encourages anyone who may be interested to visit [A Family for ME](#)'s website for more information.

Foster parents are a critical link in reducing the trauma associated with the removal of a child from his or her parents' custody. Over the last few months, the staff of OCFS have undertaken a number of initiatives to improve the experience of becoming and being a foster parent in Maine. These include:

- Supporting [LD 1526](#), which would remove the requirement of a Fire Marshal's inspection to issue a foster home license (either a new license or a renewal). Instead, Department staff would conduct health and safety inspections.
- Renewing our commitment to increasing the percentage of homes licensed within 120 days. This includes adding additional staff within licensing to accelerate the process and increase the support provided to families.
- Piloting the use of an online informational meeting format to make initial foster parent meetings more accessible.
- Continuing to work with our Resource Parent Care Team contractor to support foster families with children currently placed in the home. The contractor is working with over 100 foster families statewide to provide in-home clinical support to foster parents.
- Continuing our partnership with [A Family for ME](#) to recruit foster and adoptive homes throughout the state, as well as support prospective foster homes as they complete the licensing process.
- We have continued to contract with [Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine \(AFFM\)](#) to support their work and ensure they can continue to provide support groups throughout the state for foster and adoptive families.

Each child in custody represents a family in need of services and support to ensure safety and wellbeing. OCFS' goal, which is statutorily mandated, is to ensure the availability of services and support to eliminate safety concerns, allowing families to remain intact. When we prevent the circumstances that require removal, in a manner that ensures long-term safety and wellbeing, we minimize the trauma experienced by the child and his or her family. Reducing or eliminating childhood trauma is a primary goal of OCFS as we work to ensure the best interests of all Maine children.