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TO: Members, Government Oversight Committee  
FROM: Lucia Nixon, Director  
DATE: March 19, 2021  
RE: Child Protective Services (CPS) Project Work – Update for March 26 meeting of the GOC

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Over the past several years, the GOC has directed OPEGA to conduct several projects related to child protective services (CPS) as administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS). The purpose of this memo is to provide information to assist the GOC in determining if and how it wishes proceed with work in this area at this time.

**Descriptive Timeline of Key Activities (March 2018 – October 2020)**

- **Case Study (March 2018-May 2018):** The GOC directed OPEGA to conduct a case study of how the child protective services system functioned in two cases of child death by abuse in the State. OPEGA completed this work in May 2018 and delivered an Information Brief to the GOC.
- **Perspectives of Frontline Workers (June 2018-February 2019):** After considering the Information Brief on the two cases, the GOC was interested in understanding the factors that impact the efficiency and effectiveness of workers on the frontlines of CPS. In June, the GOC directed OPEGA to conduct a special project to assess frontline workers perspectives on these factors. OPEGA gathered data for this project through a survey of all frontline workers and interviews with subset of workers. OPEGA presented its Final Report on the perspectives of frontline workers in the child protective services system to the GOC in February 2019.
- **Follow-up Work Assigned (March 2019):** After considering OPEGA's report on the perspectives of frontline workers in the child protective services system, the GOC identified two areas of interest for further work and assigned the following projects to OPEGA:
  - A future follow-up survey of the OCFS frontline workers; and
  - An evaluation of out of home (OOH) placements for children removed from their homes by the state, with a focus on the availability and types of placements; the extent to which hotels are used; and foster parent recruitment, retention, training, licensing, responsibilities and support.
- **Monitoring Developments at DHHS/OCFS (May-September 2019):** In May 2019, the GOC had a presentation from DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew and OCFS Director Todd Landry on the Department's plans for improvements to child protective services. DHHS was working on

this internally and had also contracted with the Public Consulting Group (PCG) in October 2018 for an independent evaluation of the child welfare system, as well as the children’s behavior health system. DHHS received its first major report from PCG in July 2019 and began developing a map of major initiatives and strategies, planned and ongoing, along with a strategic framework to guide priorities for improvement, largely based on the PCG recommendations. In September 2019, Director Landry returned to the GOC to present on the agency’s plan for prioritized initiatives and strategies to improve Maine’s child protective services system.

- **Follow-up Work Paused (October 2019):** In consideration of the significant number and extent of initiatives and strategies for improvement being undertaken by DHHS/OCFS, the GOC directed OPEGA to pause its work, which was in the stage of planning and preliminary research at the time, for a year to allow time for planned strategic changes to be implemented. The GOC also directed OPEGA to monitor monthly data available from DHHS related to out-of-home placements and overall system performance over that year.
- **OPEGA Work On-hold (November 2019-October 2020):** During the 12-month period beginning November 2019, OPEGA’s evaluation work on CPS issues was paused aside from retrieving monthly data from DHHS. In early March 2020, OCFS Director Landry returned to the GOC to present information on the agency’s plan for and status of prioritized initiatives and strategies to improve Maine’s child protective services system. In that same month, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Maine, with substantial implications for the system and service delivery.

### **Recent Work and Current Status**

In recent months, OPEGA has revisited its planning and preliminary research for the work assigned by the GOC in March 2019 for the: (1) follow-up survey of frontline workers and (2) evaluation of out-of-home placements for children. In revisiting these projects at this time, OPEGA has been mindful of the substantial changes and adaptations experienced from March 2020 to the present due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific activities OPEGA has conducted include:

- Meeting with OCFS Director Landry (February 2021) to get an update on the agency’s efforts to implement initiatives and strategies to improve Maine’s child protective services system;
- Reviewing the monthly data metrics provided by DHHS during the one-year pause, internally and with Director Landry; and
- Evaluating the timing of the follow-up survey of OCFS frontline workers.

Based on the information available, it appears that OCFS has made progress in some of the areas of interest and concern with regarding to out of home placements for children, even amidst the pandemic. However, it also appears that the agency’s efforts related to out-of-home placement issues specifically and child welfare improvement more generally have been disrupted the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, beginning in March 2020 and continuing to the present, the pandemic has had substantial implications for the rates of children coming into state custody, the availability of the courts for processing cases and the availability of out-of-home placements for children.

**Recommendation for Considering Future Work**

If the GOC would like to continue its oversight of child protective services at this time, OPEGA recommends the following avenues for consideration by the GOC:

- The GOC could direct OPEGA to proceed with the follow-up survey of OCFS frontline workers, perhaps supplemented with interviews as was done in the first survey project (completed February 2019). Conducting a follow-up survey now would provide the GOC with an understanding of the most current and relevant issues impacting child protective services from the frontline worker perspective after at least 18 months of DHHS improvement efforts and 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. After evaluating the results of the survey, OPEGA could assist the GOC in determining whether further evaluation work, whether that is focused on out-of-home placement issues or other areas within the CPS system, is necessary or appropriate; and
- The GOC could request OCFS Director Landry appear before the GOC to provide an update on the agency’s ongoing efforts to implement initiatives and strategies to improve the child protective services system. This could be requested as a one-time update or a periodic update at regular intervals.