

Child Welfare Briefing
Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman
Health and Human Services Committee

June 8, 2022

Good morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. Thank you for having me here today. My name is Christine Alberi, and I am the Child Welfare Ombudsman for Maine. I have a brief update for you today.

During the current fiscal year, since October 1, the Ombudsman's office has opened 66 cases for review, completed 306 Information and Referral contacts, and had 144 unassigned cases. We continue to work with the Department during our case specific reviews and work together to make changes big and small to individual cases as they are proceeding.

As you know, during the last legislative session, the executive branch increased our current contract funding, and then the legislature and governor strengthened our office with additional funds and authority to receive information. There has been some delay in receiving the funding, so we have not been able to hire any additional staff at this point, but I am hoping that this will be resolved soon.

The question on everyone's mind today is whether there has been improvement to the child welfare system between this year and years past. The Child Welfare Ombudsman has narrow statutory authority to investigate complaints made against the Office of Child and Family Services, Child Welfare Services. In other words, we can investigate the government's response in cases where something has gone wrong enough in a family's life that the child abuse hotline has received a call. There are many other factors that affect the safety of children that are outside of our purview. Both the system of Child Welfare Services and "the system" as a whole are complex. At this stage, it is fair to say that we just do not know whether some of the systemic efforts have had an effect. For example, the legislature and governor passed a number of budget initiatives, including funding to hire standby workers to cover weekends, nights, and holidays, and to hire new paralegal case aides. These new positions are not up and running yet, and implementation takes time.

The Department also started working with Collaborative Safety LLC to implement safety science reviews in order to better understand the underlying issues when child welfare interventions do not proceed in ways that most effectively protect children. I am part of a safety science review committee that selects cases for a more in-depth review to map systemic issues. The in-depth reviews use the same process the Casey Family Services and Collaborative Safety LLC reviews completed last summer used. The selection group has met four times so far. Each month Department employees present all of the cases that involved a serious injury or death of a child that has occurred in the month prior to the meeting, when the children had child welfare involvement in the past three years. Out of the cases presented, the team selects two for the larger review. All of the other cases are also surveyed. The process is new, and several full reviews have been completed so far. The Department will update us with a trend report in the

next month or so, and more importantly, hopefully use that information to make internal changes to practice, policy, training, and culture.

Thank you very much, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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