



Public Comment, HHS Meeting on Child Welfare
September 19, 2022

Esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Melissa Hackett. I am a policy associate with the Maine Children's Alliance (MCA), a statewide nonprofit whose mission is to advocate for sound public policies and best practices that improve the lives of all Maine children, youth, and families. MCA serves as the backbone organization for the Maine Child Welfare Action Network (MCWAN), a group of organizations and individuals in Maine working together to align, strengthen, and sustain efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of all Maine children, youth, and families. I also serve as the coordinator for this Network.

Last session, we were glad to have the opportunity to present to this committee, providing information about the broad child welfare system, as well as issues related to its current ability to prevent child abuse and neglect, and to support and strengthen families. We appreciate the many opportunities we had to testify or provide information on relevant legislation being considered by the committee. Many of those considerations led to good legislation being enacted, with the support of this committee, to address some of the issues facing children and families touched by the child welfare system. Yet we know work remains.

The Maine rate for children experiencing maltreatment in 2021 was 17.2 per 1,000 children, or 1.7% of Maine children. In 2020, the national rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect was 8.4 per 1,000 children. Maine's rate of child maltreatment for that same period was 19.0, or more than double the national rate.¹ Maine has more children entering foster care than the national average: the rate for children ages 0-17 entering state custody in 2020 was 4.5 per 1,000 children, compared to the national rate of 3.0 per 1,000 children.²

It is notable that there are wide variations in rates of both maltreatment and foster care by counties across the state. Maine should continue to consider why these variations persist, and take action to develop a comprehensive statewide plan to reduce these disparities, reduce overall rates of child abuse and neglect, and provide safety and permanency for all children. This plan must consider what services are needed, where they are most needed, and how to provide them most effectively. It should also provide for the continuous assessment of program accessibility and outcomes for the children and families they are meant to serve.

As this committee considers challenges and opportunities to improve the child welfare system, we encourage you to continue to consider the broad child welfare system, and to engage with all the partners working across the child welfare system. This includes Child Protective Services, as well as various other state agencies and departments providing critical supportive services to families experiencing challenges with employment, mental health and substance use, domestic

violence, and basic needs like housing, health care, child care, and food security. In this work, there are many partners in communities across our state working directly with families to provide these critical services to their safety and stability, who also have important experience and perspectives that should be included in efforts to improve the child welfare system.

We have been encouraged by the establishment of these quarterly meetings that provide important opportunity to bring together various partners across the child welfare system to share information, raise important questions, and maintain a space for action steps to be raised to respond to concerns frequently.

The child welfare system is broad. No one person, nor one part of the system, will resolve all the issues the system experiences. We must not only focus our attention and efforts in the crisis intervention part of the system that is Child Protective Services. It will take ongoing attention to all parts of the system to ensure children are safe and families are supported. Study and investment must also be made upstream in supportive services for families experiencing challenges to safety, to prevent crisis and the risk of child removal, and to provide ongoing support to families after they have safely reunified.

Our Network offers to serve as an ongoing resource to you and your colleagues as you discuss ways to improve the way our child welfare system supports families and ensures child safety. Today, we are releasing an [information brief](#) on Family Reunification. We are producing these briefs on complex topic areas in child welfare and welcome your input in providing information on other topics of interest in the future. The Network is also currently developing policy priorities for the coming year. We look forward to sharing those with you next month, and welcome conversation about how we can take action on shared priorities.

We may not always agree on the challenges or solutions, but it is critical that legislators, administrators, community partners, and advocates continue to come together to consider how we can take action across the system to improve safety and well-being outcomes for children and families. Together, we can work toward the goal of every child in Maine having the opportunity to grow up in a safe and supportive environment.

Thank you for your service and for your engagement on these important issues.

REFERENCES

1. Child Trends. State-level data for understanding child welfare in the United States. Published February 28, 2022. Accessed September 18, 2022. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/state-level-data-for-understanding-child-welfare-in-the-united-states>
2. Children's Bureau. Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data. Accessed September 18, 2022. <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/maine.html>