

2024 Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities

Building on the Maine Framework for Action

January
2024

Context

The [Maine Child Welfare Action Network](#) (“the Network”) is a group of organizations and individuals working together to improve the safety and well-being of all Maine children, youth, and families. In January 2022, the Network released a [Framework for Child Welfare Reform](#) that established core issue areas and challenges, and made priority recommendations supported by data and research that were updated again in [2023](#). The **2024 Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities** build upon these frameworks with new data and context. The Network will update these strategic priorities annually, to serve as an ongoing framework for action.

Improvements to the child welfare system will take time to implement and to yield measurable results. Robust and sustained investments in both child protective staff and in services to support families experiencing challenges are essential.

Failures in one system can lead to failures in another. Child protection can’t work as intended when community-based services are unavailable. Mental health and substance use services, domestic violence resources, childcare, housing and economic supports improve protective factors in families. Maine needs to bolster access to supports and services to ensure families can get the support they need, when they need it, to ensure their safety and stability.

Effective collaboration is also needed across state agencies and with community providers to develop and implement plans for system improvement. Coordinated oversight and shared outcomes measures are essential to the continuous quality improvement of the child welfare system.

Our efforts to build a strong system of child and family well-being must continue to be guided by the shared goals of reducing child maltreatment and family separation, and improving well-being for all children and youth, including those in state care.

Priority Actions

Equity: The **State** and **Legislature** should ensure equity is at the center of system improvement efforts to address any disparities by poverty, race, geography, immigration status, gender, sexual identity, and disability.

Prevention: The **State** should prioritize further development, implementation, and oversight of the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan.

Collaboration: The **State**, **Legislature**, and **Philanthropy** should invest in infrastructure for collaborative service models to better support families.

Capacity: The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure child welfare staff are fully supported to do their jobs effectively.

Supports: The **State** and **Legislature** should invest in concrete and economic supports and services for families as a means of preventing child maltreatment and family crisis.

Oversight: The **State**, **Legislature**, and **Advisory Oversight** entities should share information and measure outcomes of child welfare systems improvement efforts.

Data

In 2022, the total number of children who experienced maltreatment that was substantiated by a state investigation decreased, for the third year in a row, from 4,263 to 3,907 children.¹ However, in the same year, Maine's overall child maltreatment rate was 15.8 per 1,000 children. In 2021, the national rate of child maltreatment was 8.1, while Maine's rate was 16.8.¹

The number of children who removed from their families by the courts and in the custody of the state of Maine on December 31, 2023 was 2,401 - the highest number since 2004.² The rate of youth removed from their homes and placed in foster care is more than five times as high in some counties compared to others. There are roughly 7,000 Maine children being raised by grandparents.³

At the county level, in 2022, the rural counties of Somerset and Aroostook had the highest rates of child maltreatment at 31.7 and 26.3 per 1,000 children.⁴ By contrast, Sagadahoc had the lowest rate of child abuse and neglect at 7.4, while Cumberland had the second lowest rate at 7.9.⁴ This means that in Maine, children in the most rural counties experienced maltreatment at rates more than three times higher than in the urban counties.

Involvement with child protection often crosses issues and systems. A 2020 survey of incarcerated youth found 65% had a history with CPS,⁵ and multiple reports recommend aligning juvenile justice with a child-serving state agency to better address youth needs.⁶ The income status of families is a significant predictor of child protective involvement.⁷ Substance use continues to be an issue for many families; in 2022 it was a risk factor in 55% of child removals.⁸ In 2022, a total of 28,820 reports were made for potential child abuse or neglect; of those, less than half (11,808) were found appropriate for investigation.⁹ In the 8,852 instances where there were no findings of maltreatment, family members often still face significant challenges that require supportive services, which are too often unavailable. In 2022, the US Department of Justice found Maine's lack of access to community-based Children's Behavioral Health Services out of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.¹⁰

Progress

Since January 2022, when the Network released the first Framework for Child Welfare Reform, there has been meaningful progress on action steps. Policies and investments in 2023 that will improve the child welfare response across our state include:

- State leaders partnered with the Network to develop and begin implementing a new [Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan](#)
- Legislators made quarterly child welfare advisory oversight meetings with the Health and Human Services Committee permanent
- State leaders and legislators worked together to adopt statutory language for child placement in alignment with the federal Indian Child Welfare Act
- Legislators established a commission to study the provision of services through DHHS

The budget and change package also advanced important investments in services related to child welfare, including:

- Expanded access to substance use disorder treatment and recovery
- Rate reforms for behavioral health services for children, youth, and adults
- Building new, affordable housing
- Expansion of the Maine Dependent Tax Credit
- Assessment of the availability of community-based supports for families
- Education and peer support for parents involved with CPS

Collectively, these investments represent a significant response to support families, address child safety concerns, and reduce the strain on child protective services.

Challenges

Prevention

Mandated reporters often make child protection reports in efforts to help families access services that are outside the statutory role of CPS and would be better provided by the community.¹¹ Nationally, just 14% of total child welfare spending is on prevention services, versus 45% for out of home placements.¹² Youth who "age out" of foster care without the support of positive, caring adults have an increased risk of unstable housing and justice system involvement, problems with mental health, and lack of adequate education and employment.¹³

Cross System Collaboration

Multiple reports have identified the need for the state child protection agency to improve collaboration with community providers and other state agencies that serve the same families.¹⁴ The Family Team Meeting (FTM) model, implemented in Maine in 2002, provides the infrastructure for families, service providers, and CPS to collaborate during the child protective case process. OCFS has recognized that due to implementation challenges and the increase in new staff, FTM practice has been inconsistent statewide.¹⁵

State Agency Capacity

On the front lines, the current number of caseworkers (~445) includes many newly added positions. However, hiring and retention are an ongoing challenge, and staffing continues to be a significant issue to child safety raised by the Ombudsman, OCFS, and OPEGA.¹⁶ As of November 2023, there were 80 staff vacancies, a rate of 18%, with significant variation by district office.¹⁷ A recent survey of child protective workers strongly indicated they do not feel respected by the Legislature or the public, and the public does not understand their work.¹⁸

Supportive Services

Every case review in the 2023 Ombudsman report described families being negatively affected by a lack of available services for both children and adults.¹⁹ There are an insufficient number of licensed clinical practitioners to fill open positions in mental health and SUD treatment services statewide. Many children with disabilities are unable to live at home due to a lack of community behavioral health services.²⁰ The first statutory goal of TANF is to "provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives," but there are many restrictions to families accessing this critical resource. Anticipated cuts to the largest funding source for victim services over the next two years (VOCA-Victims of Crimes Act) would result in a 60% reduction in services for victims of domestic violence and child sexual assault.²¹

Equity

In 2021, children of Two or More Races and American Indian children were overrepresented in substantiated maltreatment rates, compared to their rates in the general population.²² While an improvement over the prior year, there were still 17% of maltreatment cases where race/ethnicity were not identified in 2022.²³ Immigrant families need culturally competent information about Child Protective Services. LGBTQ+ youth and youth with disabilities are at higher risk of experiencing violence in their homes.²⁴

Oversight

Recent legislation made permanent a requirement that child welfare system citizen review panels share information and provide updates to the Health and Human Services Committee quarterly.²⁵ No formal process currently exists for this information to be shared with other legislative committees examining child welfare related issues. While effective oversight is important, research has shown that increased public and legislative scrutiny of CPS can have a negative impact on caseworker recruitment and retention.²⁶

Opportunities for Action

Preventing future tragedies means ensuring our state has a strong, broad child welfare system. This means reducing rates of child maltreatment, investing in supportive services for families, and ensuring an effective child protective agency to intervene when children are unsafe.

Prioritize Prevention

Maine must continue to prioritize the development of a system of child safety and family well-being that focuses on keeping children safe by keeping families strong.

- The **State** and **Community Organizations** should continue to work together to further develop and implement the state's [Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan](#). The **Legislature** should work with the **State** to ensure this plan is adequately funded.
- **Philanthropy** and **Community Organizations** should establish flexible funds that can be accessed by community providers to stabilize families, and invest in direct financial assistance for families, including Universal Basic Income pilots.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to reduce barriers to the effectiveness of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, including considerations related to the program's direct cash assistance, child support, education and employment, and supportive services.
- The **Legislature** should invest in family-serving organizations to provide universal parent support.
- The **Legislature** should change the statutory definition of neglect, to reflect willful parental withholding of resources, rather than the absence of those resources in the household due to poverty.

Improve Cross-System Collaboration

Maine should consider investments in strategies that enable child welfare caseworkers and community service providers to work together to ensure children are safe and families are supported.

- **Philanthropy** should continue to work with **State** and **Community Organizations** to support the development of a statewide network of Community Collaboratives.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should allocate funding to evaluate and develop a process for Continuous Quality Improvement of the Family Team Meeting model.
- The **State** should expand Regional Care Teams as a community-based model for supporting youth and families to prevent juvenile justice system involvement and keep youth in homes and communities.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to reinvest in comprehensive, statewide Wraparound services as an immediate response to reduce out-of-home placements for children.
- The **State**, **Municipalities**, and **Philanthropy** should work together to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee families and provide culturally competent education about Child Protective Services.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to invest in the expansion of Community Schools as a model for community providers and school partnerships to support children and families.

Build State Agency Capacity

State leaders and policymakers should invest in support for leadership, supervisors, caseworkers, and support staff to ensure the demands of child welfare operations and system improvement efforts are met.

- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure the new OCFS Director has the resources they need to fully support child welfare staff and system improvement efforts, including (but not limited to) embedded strategic consultation to provide comprehensive support for reforms.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure child protective staff are supported and receive sufficient training, coaching, supervision, and manageable caseloads. This should include consideration of additional support staff lines in each district office.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to adequately fund and fully implement a model of peer support provided by parents who have lived experience of the child welfare system.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to develop and adequately fund transitional housing, residential treatment, and therapeutic foster care to prevent children from staying in ERs, hotels, and district offices.

Invest in Supportive Services

Maine should invest in economic and concrete supports and services for families as an important means of reducing child maltreatment and preventing families from experiencing crisis.

- **Community Leaders, Philanthropy, Healthcare Organizations, and State Leaders** should work together to invest in community-based universal supports, e.g., Family Resource Centers and Healthy Steps enhanced primary care.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to expand access to low-barrier recovery supports, including Family Recovery Courts, Recovery Community Centers, and pathways for peer providers.
- The **State** should ensure all caregivers (including birth parents, kinship, grandparents, and resource families) receive equitable and sustained financial support and access to services.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work with housing partners to increase development of family-sized affordable housing and increase production of supportive housing for families.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work to increase Maine's clinically licensed workforce by eliminating unnecessary barriers to licensure.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should invest in aftercare services for children and caregivers following CPS involvement, to address child trauma and reduce the recurrence of child maltreatment.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure youth in foster care are provided educational and economic opportunities, including access to their Social Security benefits.

Ensure Effective Oversight

Entities that make recommendations for improving the child welfare system, including the Legislature, should have data and critical information on child and family well-being that can be used to measure outcomes of system improvement efforts.

- The **State** should develop and provide regular updates on a comprehensive child welfare division improvement plan, with short, medium, and long term strategies, and measurable outcomes.
- The **Legislature** should require key, consistent indicators of safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families are included in annual reports.
- The **Legislature** should ensure information is shared among committees examining child welfare issues.
- The **Legislature** and **Media** should ensure child protective workers feel supported and respected.

Conclusion

It has been five years since the Network released the first white paper with strategic priorities to improve Maine's child welfare system. Our state clearly has a continued obligation and opportunity to engage in transformation of this system. Change will only be possible with many partners working together: families, community service providers, caseworkers, schools, healthcare, philanthropy, and local and state leaders.

Child safety issues cannot be fully addressed until caseworkers have the capacity to do their jobs effectively. The people who do the frontline work must be empowered to shape the policies and programs they implement every day. We can also prevent child maltreatment and family separation by ensuring families have access to a full range of community-based resources and services. Research shows these supports work to reduce maltreatment and the need for child protective involvement, and are less costly than the foster care system.

System improvement efforts that will have the most meaningful impact on improving outcomes will be directed by what data and evidence indicate are most effective. We must all work together to develop and implement changes to better serve all children, youth and families in communities across our state.

The recommendations in this policy brief were developed by the Maine Child Welfare Action Network, a group of organizations and individuals who are deeply committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all children, youth, and families in Maine.



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