

2025 Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities

Building on the Maine Framework for Action

January
2025

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. Since 2018, the Network has issued annual publications that identify core issues and challenges, and outlined recommendations for action supported by evidence. **The 2025 Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities** build upon these recommendations with current data and context. The Network will continue to update these strategic priorities annually to provide an ongoing framework for action.

Our efforts to build a strong system of child and family well-being continue to be guided by the shared goals of reducing child abuse and neglect and family separation, shared accountability, and improving well-being for all children and youth, including those in state care. While the number of Maine children experiencing substantiated child abuse or neglect has decreased four years in a row, the number of children in the custody of the state on December 31, 2023 was 2,401 - the highest number since 2004.

Failures in one system lead to failures in another. Child protection can’t work as intended when community-based services are unavailable. Substance use, mental health, and domestic violence resources, child care, housing, and economic supports improve family well-being and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect occurring. Maine must continue to work to improve access to these critical supports and services to ensure families can get the support they need, when they need it, for safety and stability.

Prevention, supportive services, and coordination between state and community partners are essential to meeting our goal of keeping children safe by keeping families strong. The forthcoming long-term statewide Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan will provide a roadmap to achieve this goal through coordinated activities and actions at state and local levels.

Priority Actions

Prevention: The **State** and **Legislature** should fully resource and implement the activities outlined in the long-term version of the Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan.

Collaboration: The **State**, **Legislature**, and **Philanthropy** should invest in the infrastructure for collaboration to better support families in their communities.

Capacity: The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure the child welfare agency has sufficiently resourced and supported child protective leadership and frontline staff.

Supports: The **State** and **Legislature** should invest in concrete and economic supports and services for families as an essential means of preventing the need for state child protective agency intervention.

Oversight: The **State**, **Legislature**, and **Advisory Oversight** entities should support accountability and track progress on child welfare system improvements.

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

Progress

Since 2019, when the Network released the first white paper, there has been meaningful progress on many action steps. Policies and investments in 2024 to improve child safety and well-being across our state included:

- State leaders partnered with the Network, in collaboration with community partners and families, to implement actions in the short-term Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan, including the development of a forthcoming long-term version
- Legislators supported a 20% increase in benefit levels for families enrolled in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program

State and Legislative leaders also:

- Increased compensation, support staff, and coaching for child protective workers
- Reformed rates for behavioral health services and investments in mobile crisis and crisis receiving centers
- Established an Office of Violence Prevention at the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
- Funded child care provider stability grants, Head Start costs, and technology changes
- Increased basic needs supports through General Assistance and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Collectively, these investments represent a meaningful response to support families, address child safety concerns, and reduce the strain on the child protection agency in our state.

Challenges

Prevention

Studies have found that mandated reporters often make child protection reports for services that are outside the statutory role of CPS and would be better provided by the community. In 2023, a total of 29,428 reports were made for potential child abuse or neglect in Maine; of those, only 38% (11,122) were found appropriate for investigation.¹ Nationally, just 14% of total child welfare spending is on prevention services, versus 45% for out-of-home placements.² Youth who "age out" of foster care without the permanent 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.

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. A mechanism for coordination and communication among community providers is also essential. Maine has implemented several models over the years, including Wraparound Maine, Regional Care Teams and Local Case Resolution Committees through the Governor's Children's Cabinet. Coordination is also necessary across all child serving agencies. This requires investing in a process and positions that work within and across state agencies that serve the same families, are responsive to child and community needs, and are responsible for identifying what could work better.

State Agency Capacity

On the front lines, the current number of caseworkers 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 OCFs, OPEGA, and the Ombudsman. In December 2022, 57 of 445 caseworker positions across the state were

unfilled. At the end of 2023, that was up to 83, and in July 2024, down to 44 positions.³ Variation in vacancies and worker tenure also differ by district office. 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.⁴

Supportive Services

Every case review in the 2023 Ombudsman report described families being negatively affected by a lack of available services.⁵ In 2023, the primary risk factors present at a child's removal from the home were neglect (73%), substance use (58%), and domestic violence (25%).⁶ There are an insufficient number of licensed clinical practitioners to fill open positions in mental health and SUD treatment services. Many children with disabilities are unable to live at home due to a lack of community services. As noted in the Department of Justice lawsuit and subsequent settlement with Maine, this has led to children and youth being inappropriately placed at Long Creek, and stuck waiting for care in emergency rooms and hotels.⁷ From October 2023 to October 2024, at least 400 children were waiting to receive home- or community-based treatment, and wait times varied greatly by service type and region.⁸

Oversight

While effective oversight is important, research shows that increased public and legislative scrutiny of the child protection agency can have a negative impact on caseworker recruitment and retention, and the public's understanding of the child welfare system.⁹ Beyond a focus on the child protection agency, Maine's children and youth would be well served by the establishment of a mechanism for ensuring the state is meeting obligations to provide children's developmental and behavioral health services. Other states have successfully established independent entities with the authority and responsibility to receive complaints and make findings that improve the way the state serves children and youth.

Equity

In Maine, children of Two or More Races were overrepresented in child abuse and neglect substantiations.¹⁰ Further, 15.9% of children who experienced substantiated abuse or neglect did not have their race identified, making it challenging to fully understand where racial disparities might exist. LGBTQ+ youth and youth with disabilities are at higher risk of experiencing violence in their homes.¹¹ Children in rural counties in Maine experienced abuse and neglect at rates more than three times higher than in urban counties, and the rate of youth removed from their homes and placed in foster care was more than five times higher in some counties than in others.¹²

Opportunities for Action

Children, youth, and families in Maine deserve a robust, broad child and family well-being system. This means ensuring children and families have their basic needs met, investing in supportive services for families that prevent crises, and ensuring an effective child protective agency to intervene when children are unsafe. In all these efforts, centering equity and the perspectives of children and parents will be critical to ensuring all children in Maine are able to grow up in homes where they experience safety and stability.

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 fully implement the activities in the state's [Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan](#). The **Legislature** and **Philanthropy** should work with the State to ensure all the activities in this plan are adequately funded.
- The **Legislature** should provide additional investment in the statewide network of Prevention Councils to provide universal parent support and prevent the need for more costly state agency interventions.
- 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.
- The **Legislature** should consider child abuse and neglect mandated reporting requirements and invest in training and education to mandated reporters to provide support to families.

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 a statewide network of Community Collaboratives that address community conditions for families.
- The **State** should expand Regional Care Teams as a community-based model for supporting youth and families to prevent juvenile justice involvement and keep youth in homes and communities.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should accelerate implementation of 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.

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 OCFS Director has the resources to fully support child welfare staff and system improvement efforts.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure child protective staff are supported and receive sufficient training, supervision, and manageable caseloads.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to innovate and adequately fund the development of 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 a critical means of reducing child abuse and neglect and preventing the need for state child protective agency intervention.

- **Community Leaders, Philanthropy, Healthcare Organizations, and State Leaders** should work together to invest in community-based supports as outlined in Maine’s Child Safety and Family Well Being Plan.
- **Philanthropy** should adequately fund and fully implement a model of peer support provided by parents who have lived experience of the child welfare system, that could be expanded statewide through investment by the **State** and **Legislature**.
- 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 accelerate development of family-sized affordable housing and ensure access to supportive and transitional housing options.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work to increase Maine’s clinically licensed workforce by eliminating unnecessary barriers to licensure and developing cross-sector recruitment and training efforts.
- 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 progress of system improvement efforts.

- The **State** should provide regular updates on a comprehensive child protection state agency 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 be included in annual reports.
- The **Legislature** and **Media** should ensure that discussions around child welfare system challenges are [informed by accurate data and evidence-informed policies](#).

Conclusion

It has been six years since the Network released the first white paper with strategic priorities to improve Maine’s child welfare system. Our state has a continued obligation and opportunity to engage in the 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.

We all care about the safety and well-being of Maine children. The challenges facing families are complex, and require the thoughtful, intentional and determined work of us all. Children and caregivers are safer when they can get the help they need, when they need it. Child safety issues will not be fully addressed until all families have equitable access to a full range of community-based resources and services. Research shows these supports work to reduce child abuse and neglect, and are less costly than the foster care system.

We have the policy solutions needed to improve child safety and family stability. Now we need the public and political will to take action. We urge our legislators and state leaders to invest in the resources needed to improve child and family well-being now – and for generations to come.

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 the safety and well-being of all children, youth, and families in Maine.

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