

2026 Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities

Building on the Maine Framework for Action

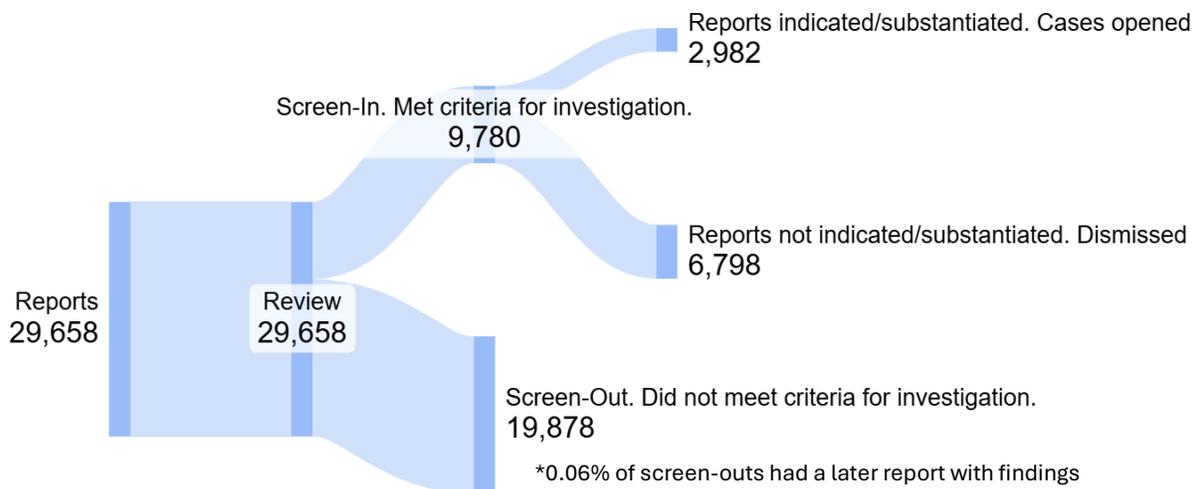
Introduction

The Maine Child Welfare Action 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 recommendations for action with updated data and context. All our efforts are guided by listening to families, and focused on ensuring every child in Maine has the same opportunity to grow up in a safe and stable home. Our goals are reducing child abuse and neglect and family separation, sharing accountability, and improving the well-being of all children and youth, including those in state care.

Data

This diagram from [Maine’s Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan](#) illustrates various places across the system where data can inform improvements to policy, practice, and outcomes for children and families. Notably, in 2024, 90% of reports of suspected abuse or neglect did not result in a finding of abuse or neglect; fewer than 1 in 1,000 families who were screened out had a later report with findings. This indicates there are a significant number of families who are being misdirected to child welfare, when community-based supports would be more appropriate. Research shows these types of supports work to reduce child abuse and neglect, and are less costly than child welfare interventions. This data demonstrates the need for policies and practices in Maine that ensure every family has access to community-based services, resources, and supports when they need them.

Reports of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect: Process and Outcomes (2024)



Opportunities for Action in 2026

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 operating an effective child protective agency to intervene when children are unsafe. The Network has identified the following activities as most actionable in 2026.

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, Community Organizations, and Philanthropy should continue to work together to fully implement the activities in [Maine's Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan](#).
- The Legislature should provide additional investment in the statewide network of Prevention Councils to increase access to universal parent support and prevent the need for more costly state agency interventions.
- The Legislature should clarify child abuse and neglect mandated reporting requirements and invest in training and education for mandated reporters to increase support to families.

Improve Cross-System Collaboration

Maine should promote strategies that support child welfare staff and community service providers to work together to ensure children are safe and families are supported.

- Philanthropic and Community Organizations should continue to support a statewide network of Community Collaboratives that address community conditions for families.
- The State and Community Organizations should work together to provide culturally competent education about child protective intervention.

Build State Agency Capacity

State leaders and policymakers should invest in efforts to ensure the demands of child welfare operations and system improvement efforts are met.

- The State and Legislature should continue to work together to ensure child protective leadership and staff are supported and receive sufficient training, supervision, and manageable caseloads.
- The State should leverage existing groups of parents with lived experience in child welfare to support other families currently navigating the child welfare system.

- The State and Legislature should work together to innovate and 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 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 the community-based supports outlined in Maine's Child Safety and Family Well Being Plan.
- 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.

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 the OCFS strategic plan, including short- medium- and long-term strategies, and measurable outcomes.
- The Legislature and Media should ensure that discussions around child welfare system challenges are informed by accurate data and evidence-informed policies.

Conclusion

We all care about the safety and well-being of Maine children and youth. The challenges facing families are complex, and require thoughtful, coordinated efforts. We have the policy solutions needed to improve child safety and family stability. Now we need the public and political will to act.

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 the same access to a full range of community-based resources and services. We urge our legislators and state leaders to invest in all the resources needed to improve child and family well-being now – and for generations to come.

MAINE CHILD WELFARE ACTION NETWORK: 2026 PRIORITIES

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.

For more information, contact: Maine Children's Alliance - (207) 623-1868, or Melissa Hackett - mhackett@mekids.org