



# **Office of Child and Family Services Report on October 2020 Child Welfare Forums**

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Maine Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of Child and Family Services

## OCFS Report on October 2020 Child Welfare Forums

During the second session of the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature, the Department received feedback from the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary about a lack of public awareness of the work of OCFS and the desire for an opportunity for public input on reforms. To address these concerns and expand on the Department's work to engage stakeholders, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) agreed to conduct a series of public forums. The goal of these forums was to receive input and have discussion for improving the child welfare system.

OCFS had originally planned to conduct these forums in-person, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic they were conducted remotely via Zoom. A total of four forums were hosted during the evening on Wednesdays in October of 2020. Each focused on two Districts in order to ensure information gathered was specific to various geographical areas across the state. The forums were held in the evening on the following dates:

- October 7, 2020 – Districts 1 and 2 (Cumberland, Sagadahoc, and York Counties)
- October 14, 2020 – Districts 3 and 5 (Androscoggin, Franklin, Kennebec, Oxford, and Somerset Counties)
- October 21, 2020 – Districts 4 and 7 (Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Waldo, and Washington Counties)
- October 28, 2020 – Districts 6 and 8 (Aroostook, Penobscot, and Piscataquis Counties)

Notice of the forums were provided in advance to providers, stakeholders, and Legislators, as well as being sent out to those on OCFS' listserv. Interested individuals registered online and were provided with login information to ensure adequate security. The format of each forum was the same. Each was facilitated by a neutral facilitator, Sheena Bunnell. Bunnell is a Professor of Business and Economics at the University of Maine at Farmington and the Director of the Maine Health Research Institute. Staff from OCFS (particularly child welfare leadership) were present to listen to the feedback and information provided.

Prior to the forums OCFS and Professor Bunnell collaborated to develop a list of topic areas and questions that were used to focus participants as they provided feedback. The topic areas were:

- Safely Keeping Families Together
- Reporting Suspected Abuse/Neglect
- Assessment/Investigation Process
- Supports for Child and Families Involved in the Formal Child Welfare System
- The Legal System and Their Role in Child Welfare
- General Comments and Open Forum

At the beginning of each forum OCFS Director Todd Landry shared data and information to give participants a snapshot of where OCFS stands today in terms of number of children in care, where those children are placed, the timeliness of permanency for children in care, outcomes for children exiting state custody, and the impact of the pandemic on child welfare. Dr. Landry also shared information regarding OCFS' implementation of the Federal Family First Prevention Services Act. Participants were provided with website links to additional data and other resources. Following the data and information portion of the forum, Professor Bunnell led the participants through each subject area, asking targeted questions. Participants provided feedback orally and by typing into the Zoom chat box.

Across the four forums there were approximately 200 attendees who gave of their time and shared their own experiences with the system, including recommendations for what is going well and where improvements are needed. On the calls there was representation of biological parents, current and former foster families, service providers, and more. OCFS wants to thank everyone who joined the forums for their dedication to improving the child welfare system. The feedback, as well as the opportunity for OCFS staff to ask follow-up questions or request additional information was invaluable. At the end of each forum OCFS provided a dedicated email address for participants to share input that they were not comfortable or able to share during the forum.

This report will outline the major themes and takeaways gathered by OCFS staff during these forums.

## Safely Keeping Families Together

Issues Identified	Specifics Identified
<i>There is a need for expanded access to and utilization of services for children, youth, and families</i>	
	Services mentioned include: Home and Community Based Treatment (HCT), Case Management, Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), mental health treatment, and child care.
	There is a particular need for these services in rural areas, as well as a need to destigmatize utilization of mental health services
	Also mentioned was a need to improve the crisis system available to youth and children, and substance use treatment options for parents, particularly those that allow the child to remain with the parent during treatment
<i>Home visiting programs were identified as a service that builds strength and parenting skills within families</i>	
	Expand options for coaching parents as they interact with their children in the home environment
	There is a need for peer support for parents as the child continues to grow and develop
<i>The importance of Family Team Meetings (FTMs) and Safety Planning as a tool for the Department to prevent removal</i>	
	Revisit a 2018 mandate that prohibited out-of-home safety plans
	Update guidance and training for staff on the use of FTMs as a family engagement tool and safety plans as a means of ensuring child safety while preventing the need for removal
<i>The impact of external services on children and families</i>	
	A need for additional affordable housing throughout the state
	A need for expanded transportation options for those living in rural areas
	A need for services to be available for all families in all communities (including rural areas) in Maine.
<i>Domestic violence (DV) providers, in particular DV Liaisons, in OCFS' District Offices were identified as a source of strength</i>	
	Continue to ensure access to DV Liaisons in District Offices
	Continue to support partnerships between child welfare district leadership and the DV and sexual assault providers in each Office's service area
<i>Alternative Response Program (ARP)</i>	
	There is a need to examine this program and its effectiveness, the providers don't seem to have the same tools available to them that they had in the past and most families don't want to engage with them
	There were questions as to whether ARP is having an impact when it comes to preventing the need for further child welfare involvement with a family

## Reporting Suspected Abuse/Neglect

Issues Identified	Specifics Identified
<i>A need for additional public awareness of the reporting process</i>	

	Consideration of a public service announcement or social media campaign to spread awareness about reporting
	Work to transform the public's thoughts around reporting, from viewing it as a punitive action to a positive one that allows families to connect with the services and supports needed to ensure their children are safe
	A need to make available additional information about what happens with a report after it is made, including the process to screen reports and next steps if a report results in an investigation
<i>OCFS' Intake staff were identified as a source of strength</i>	
	Intake staff are knowledgeable about abuse and neglect and make the reporting process very smooth
<i>A need to improve collaboration with law enforcement</i>	
	Work to improve the timeliness of reports from law enforcement to ensure that OCFS and law enforcement coordinate their response instead of OCFS following up hours, days, or even weeks after information originally comes to the attention of law enforcement

### **Assessment/Investigation Process**

<b>Issues Identified</b>	<b>Specifics Identified</b>
<i>The need to improve communication and collaboration during investigations</i>	
	Caseworkers should engage with parents to assess safety, but also work with family members to involve natural supports that aid the family in ensuring child safety
	A need to renew focus on FTMs and safety plans as a way of ensuring child safety without the need for removal and allowing the family and the Department caseworker to communicate about safety concerns and develop plans and strategies to address those concerns

### **Supports for Children and Families Involved with the Formal Child Welfare System (Including Resource and Adoptive Families)**

<b>Issues Identified</b>	<b>Specifics Identified</b>
<i>The impact of external services on children and families</i>	
	A need for additional affordable housing throughout the state; a lack of safe and stable housing is sometimes the only barrier to reunification
	A need for expanded transportation options for those living in rural areas
	A need for services to be available for all families in all communities (including rural areas) in Maine
<i>The importance of the caseworker to the reunification process</i>	
	Many caseworkers are well-trained and competent and care deeply about the work and the safety and well-being of children and families
	At times caseworkers appear stretched thin and unable to give proper attention to cases. There was a perception that this may lead to inconsistent practice among caseworkers
	The need for a consistent schedule of FTMs during the life of a case to ensure all case participants have a clear understanding of goals and expectations, and team members establish a consistent understanding of the plan and the family's progress toward reunification

	Parents need to have a voice throughout their case, they should not feel left out of the process of planning for reunification or measuring their progress towards it
	Caseworkers must ensure they are engaging in concurrent planning for child permanency regardless of the outcome of reunification
	Resource parents need better support from caseworkers, including information about services and support available to them
	Specific training for staff in trauma-informed response and techniques for working with those who have experienced significant trauma
<i>Visitation</i>	
	The need to increase the frequency of visits by better utilizing family and natural supports to supervise
	Training and support for resource parents on how to develop and navigate a healthy relationship with parents, which in turn might make more resource parents willing to supervise visits
<i>The need for expanded services for children and parents</i>	
	Services mentioned include: Home and Community Based Treatment (HCT), Case Management, Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), and mental health treatment
	There is a particular need for these services in rural areas
	Resource parents are not able to sustain certain children in their placement because of waitlists for services and/or long distances that are required to access services
	Also mentioned was a need to improve the crisis system available to youth and children and substance use treatment options for parents, particularly those that allow the child to remain with the parent during treatment
	Ensure that parents have access to the services that they are expected to complete as part of reunification and providing them the opportunity to engage in services for their child
	Consider post-adoption support for children and families to provide ongoing information on accessing services
	Resource parents need access to child care and respite care for children placed with them
<i>Information on the legal process</i>	
	Both parents and resource parents need more information about the legal process involved with a child welfare case
<i>Resource and adoptive parent recruitment and training</i>	
	The resource parent training developed and delivered remotely during the pandemic has been very helpful
	Resource parents need more information about the services, supports, and resources available, both at the beginning of the licensing process and throughout their time as resource parents
	The Department's resource parent recruitment efforts should focus not just on recruiting full-time resource parents, but also respite providers (many people start with respite and grow into the role of a resource parent)
	Adoptive parents need access to information about services and supports that might benefit their adopted child on an ongoing basis
<i>Placement</i>	
	There is a need to reconsider the limits on the number of children placed in a home, particularly if a waiver would allow siblings to be placed together
	The Department must also ensure that when a child comes into care the resource home of his/her sibling is considered before placement in an unrelated resource home

## The Legal System and Their Role in Child Welfare

Issues Identified	Specifics Identified
<i>Training for judges, attorneys, and Guardians ad Litem</i>	Several participants identified the need for additional training regarding the dynamics of domestic violence and its impact on children, as well as on trauma-informed practices in the judicial process
<i>Consistency and timeliness</i>	<p>Recommendation that the Courts adopt a policy of ensuring one Judge presides over the entire child protective case to ensure the Judge has a broad understanding of the case, including child safety issues, parent progress, the child’s needs, etc. before issuing a ruling</p> <p>In some parts of the state children, parents, and resource parents are being impacted by long wait times for jeopardy and termination hearings that delay cases and timely permanency</p> <p>Ensure that resource parents (as those currently caring for the child) always have the opportunity to provide input at critical junctures in the Court proceeding</p>
<i>Attorneys and Guardians ad Litem</i>	<p>Parents’ attorneys need to focus not just on “winning” the case for their client, but on the totality of the case, including the safety of the child(ren) involved</p> <p>Among some parents’ attorneys and GALs there is a need for additional engagement with their client, they need to be responsive and to care about the issues that are impacting the person they represent</p> <p>GALs don’t have enough time to really connect with kids, identify their needs, and advocate for their needs; without this time the process of engaging with a GAL can just feel like something done to “check a box”</p> <p>Case participants do not always understand the role of the GAL</p>
<i>Training for parents, resource parents, and older youth</i>	Those involved with the case must have a sound understanding of each stage of the process if they are expected to navigate through it in a meaningful way

The depth of the information brought forth in these forums was significant. Participants provided thought-provoking insight into the child welfare system, as well as confirmation that many of the initiatives underway within OCFS are appropriately targeted to issues already identified. One of the themes throughout many of the topic areas was the need for additional services and supports for children, youth, parents, resource parents, and adoptive parents. OCFS also oversees Children’s Behavioral Health Services (CBHS) for the state and is currently in the process of a multi-year system improvement effort. Many of the strategies that are planned for implementation (or are already in the process of implementation) target the specific services that participants listed during the forums, including HCT, FFT, and MST. Additional information about CBHS’ work is available in the program’s [Annual Report](#). At the same time, OCFS also recognizes that some services and supports are outside of OCFS’ purview, including housing and general transportation (OCFS oversees only child welfare-specific transportation). Participants clearly and consistently brought forward concerns that lack of affordable adequate housing and difficulty accessing services and supports due to a lack of transportation were negatively effecting children and their parents.

Like CBHS, Child Welfare is also in the process of implementing a multi-year system improvement effort based on strategies identified in a comprehensive evaluation of the child welfare system conducted in 2018 and 2019. Many of the reoccurring themes and issues identified during the forums aligned closely with initiatives currently underway. For example, OCFS is in the process of evaluating the use of FTMs and safety planning and developing strategies to provide

updated guidance and training to staff on both tools. The [Annual Report on Child Welfare](#) reviews this work in greater depth. OCFS is also focusing considerable resources on the implementation of the Federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) which is designed to provide children at imminent risk of entering state custody (and their family) with evidence-based services to prevent the need for removal. The work to implement FFPSA is expected to have an impact on the availability of evidence-based supportive services families can access when there are issues regarding the possible imminent removal of a child from a home. FFPSA has also provided OCFS with the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of ARP and plan for the future of alternative response in Maine.

While OCFS has already undertaken initiatives to address some of the issues identified during the forums, other items will require additional efforts to address. OCFS will continue to partner with the Maine Judicial Branch and the Attorney General's Office on concerns regarding the legal system. OCFS will also continue to examine the current services and supports available to resource and adoptive parents in order to identify areas in need of improvement, as well as considering additional outreach regarding existing services. Another area that was identified under several topic areas was the importance of well-trained caseworkers who have a balanced workload that allows for appropriate focus on each case they are assigned. OCFS continues to examine both workload and caseload among child welfare staff. The Department reports to the Legislature on this topic annually, and the 2021 report will be available by the end of January. At present, OCFS is working on development and implementation of a new information system for child welfare that, once implemented, is meant to minimize some duplicative data entry and record keeping work required of caseworkers by the current system, allowing them more time to meaningfully engage with families.

Many participants during the forums praised the Department for efforts towards transparency and public engagement over the last two years. As one participant put it, just the fact that the Department was conducting these forums and accepting all forms of feedback represents OCFS' dedication to ensuring those with first-hand experience in, and knowledge of, the child welfare system have the opportunity to make a positive difference for children and families. OCFS thanks all those who participated in the forums for the gift of their time and the invaluable insight they provided on the child welfare system.