

# Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities

Building on the Maine Framework for Action

January  
2023

## Context

The [Maine Child Welfare Action Network](#) (MCWAN) is 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. In January 2022, MCWAN released a [Framework for Child Welfare Reform](#) that established core issue areas and challenges, and made priority action recommendations that were supported by data and research. The 2023 Strategic Child Welfare System Priorities build upon that framework with updated data and context. MCWAN will continue to update these priorities annually, to serve as an ongoing framework for action and a tool for measuring improvement.

The tragic deaths of several Maine children associated with parental abuse or neglect in the summer of 2021 highlighted concerns about child safety that were already elevated following the deaths of two girls in 2017 and 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges families were already facing, presenting increased risk to child safety and family stability. This has resulted in a child protective system that is overstressed.

Improvements to the child welfare system will take time to implement and to yield measurable results. Sustained investments to support families experiencing challenges to safety and stability are essential to preventing child maltreatment and reducing the pressure on the state child protective agency. Ensuring the state agency has adequate capacity and caseworkers have support to conduct their work effectively is critical to child safety. Effective collaboration is needed between community providers and the state agency to build a system that supports family well-being. Coordinated oversight of the child welfare system is essential to the continuous quality improvement of the state Child Protective Services responsible for ensuring child safety and promoting family stability.

Collectively, these ongoing and sustained efforts should move us toward a more effective system of child and family well-being.

## Priority Actions

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

**Prevention:** The **State** should assume authority and responsibility for leading the development, implementation, and oversight of a statewide child maltreatment prevention plan.

**Collaboration:** The **State**, **Legislature**, and **Philanthropy** should invest in rebuilding infrastructure for cross system collaboration to support families.

**Capacity:** The **Legislature** and **State** should work together to build the optimal structure for state child welfare leadership and caseworker capacity.

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

**Oversight:** **Child Welfare Advisory Oversight** entities should continue to coordinate with the **Legislature** to provide recommendations for systems improvement.

## Data

Overall, the number of children in Maine experiencing substantiated child maltreatment increased 30% between 2017 and 2021, from 3,286 to 4,263 children.<sup>1</sup> Using the latest federal data for comparison, Maine's rate of child maltreatment in 2020 was 19.0 per 1,000 children, compared to the national rate of 8.4 per 1,000 children.<sup>2</sup> This rate of child maltreatment in Maine was the highest in the nation.

Children are also entering the foster care system in Maine at rates higher than the national average. In 2021, the state rate of children coming into foster care was 3.6 per 1,000 children, compared to the national rate of 2.8 per 1,000 children.<sup>3</sup> There were 2,220 children in state custody on December 31, 2021, nearly the same number as the previous year, but 675 more children than in 2017, and the highest number since 2006.<sup>4</sup>

Disparities by race remain, although looking at child maltreatment rates in Maine by race presents challenges, with race unreported for one out of four children. Available data shows that American Indian children and children of Two or More Races are 1.3 times more likely to have substantiated child maltreatment reports, compared to the rates of all children for whom race and ethnicity is reported.<sup>5</sup>

There are also disparities by geography, with wide variations by county. In 2021, Somerset and Waldo had the highest rates of substantiated child abuse at 29.8 and 28.0 per 1,000 children respectively. In 2021, Cumberland had the lowest rate of child abuse at 8.0 per 1,000 children, while Sagadahoc had the second lowest rate at 9.3 per 1,000 children.<sup>6</sup> The rates of substantiated maltreatment and youth in foster care are more than 5x as high in some counties compared to others. For children in foster care, Aroostook had the highest rate at 15.8 per 1,000 children, followed by Somerset at 15.1, compared to Sagadahoc at 2.7 and Washington at 3.3 per 1,000 children.<sup>7</sup>

Child welfare system involvement often crosses issues and systems. In 2020, the risk factors for maltreatment with the greatest prevalence were neglect, domestic violence, and drug/alcohol use.<sup>8</sup> The income status of families is a significant predictor of involvement.<sup>9</sup> A 2020 survey of incarcerated youth found 65% had a history of child welfare investigation.<sup>10</sup> In 2021, a total of 26,584 reports were made for potential child abuse/neglect; 9,808 were found appropriate, and 1,575 were opened for investigation.<sup>11</sup> In the 8,208 where a case was not opened, family members may still face significant challenges that require supportive services.

## Progress

Since January 2022, when MCWAN released the first Framework for Child Welfare Reform, there has been some progress on action steps. Several policies and investments were passed in the last legislative session that will improve child welfare responses across our state, including:

- Funding for prevention and intervention services to strengthen families
- Increased capacity and autonomy of the Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman,
- Support for older foster youth transitioning to adulthood
- A commission to study legal aid for families during assessment, and
- More frequent child welfare oversight by the Health and Human Services Committee.

The supplemental budget and change package also included important investments in the child welfare system:

- Additional caseworkers and supervisors dedicated to night and weekend shifts,
- A position in the DHHS Commissioner's office to develop a statewide prevention plan
- Discretionary funds to address family needs
- Expansion of Family Visit Coaching, Parents as Teachers, and the Homebuilders Program, and
- Bridge funding for behavioral health services for children, youth, and adults.

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

# Challenges

## Prevention

There is no statewide plan or coordinated system for preventing child maltreatment in Maine. A prevention position that was allocated by the 130th Maine Legislature to lead the development and implementation of a statewide plan for child abuse and neglect prevention was still under development at the time of this publication. Maine is just one of 8 states that does not appoint a state agency to lead and coordinate statewide child maltreatment prevention efforts under federal Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention funds.<sup>12</sup>

## Cross System Collaboration

Reports from the Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability in 2018 and Casey Family Programs in 2021 identified the need for the state child welfare agency to improve collaboration with community providers and other state agencies that serve the same families.<sup>13</sup> The state child welfare agency has been working on collaborative agreements with law enforcement and hospitals.<sup>14</sup> There are currently no targeted investments to improve collaboration between the state agency and other community providers.

## State Agency Capacity

In recent years, legislation has been introduced to restructure the state agency that is responsible for child welfare services. The Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) Director is responsible for administering Child Welfare, Children's Behavioral Health, Children's Licensing & Investigation, Early Care & Education, Youth Transition, Violence Prevention, and community-based contracts.<sup>15</sup> One Associate Director of Child Welfare position leads the administration of all programs and contracts in the child welfare division. On the front lines, the current number of caseworkers (~445) includes many newly added positions, but hiring and retention are an ongoing challenge, and staffing issues have continued to be raised as concerns by the Ombudsman.<sup>16</sup>

## Supportive Services

Almost half (47%) of Maine families assessed by child protective services in 2020 were single parent households experiencing economic stressors.<sup>17</sup> Parental substance use persists as a key challenge for families, with 50% of substantiated maltreatment cases citing this as a risk factor.<sup>18</sup> There are roughly 9,000 children being raised by kin with no parent present, and an estimated 5,224 grandparents responsible for raising their grandchildren.<sup>19</sup> Many children with disabilities, especially those in rural areas or with more intensive needs, are unable to live at home with their families due to a lack of community behavioral health services.<sup>20</sup> There are an insufficient number of licensed clinical practitioners to fill open positions in treatment services statewide.

## Equity

The state's highest per capita rates of maltreatment in 2020 were in rural counties that have less access to a full range of SUD treatment and recovery services.<sup>21</sup> Available data for Maine shows that American Indian children and children of Two or More Races are 1.3 times more likely to have substantiated child maltreatment reports, compared to the rates of all children for whom race and ethnicity is reported.<sup>22</sup> LGBTQ+ youth and youth with disabilities are at higher risk of experiencing violence in their homes.<sup>23</sup> The Justice for Children Task Force recently identified the need to assess systemic data collection with regard to race and other important markers of equity.<sup>24</sup> Immigrant families are facing significant challenges in acquiring housing,<sup>25</sup> and need culturally competent information about Child Protective Services. Native families are facing a challenge to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) at the Supreme Court, threatening their sovereignty and best practice child placement as defined by ICWA.<sup>26</sup>

## Oversight

There are several state advisory oversight entities that play key roles in providing recommendations for improving the child welfare system, including the Child Welfare Ombudsman, the Child Death and Serious Injury Review Panel, and the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel.<sup>27</sup> Recent legislation requires these entities to share information and to come before the Health and Human Services Committee quarterly to update on emerging concerns, but will expire in June 2024.<sup>28</sup>

## Opportunities for Action

Preventing future tragedies starts with reducing the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. This will require strategies and investments that stabilize families and decrease the need for child protective intervention.

### Prioritize Prevention

Maine's prevention services should be restructured so the State assumes authority and responsibility for leading the development, implementation, and oversight of a comprehensive statewide prevention plan.

- The position in the **DHHS Commissioner's Office** should facilitate work across state agencies to develop a plan that outlines Maine's theory of change for preventing child abuse and neglect. This plan should include a logic model and strategies, outcome measures, transparent investments, and a focus on equity. The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to ensure this plan is adequately funded.
- The **State** should reinstate DHHS as the lead agency for federal CBCAP funds, so DHHS can align these resources with the statewide prevention plan.
- **Philanthropy** and **Community Organizations** should work together to address family support gaps that exist between prevention and intervention services by establishing flexible funds and direct financial assistance that are available to community providers and can be accessed to stabilize families.

### Improve Cross-System Collaboration

Maine should renew 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 support **State** and **Community Organizations** to adopt a framework and build infrastructure for collaborative work that includes the development of a logic model, strategies, and measures of success that build on learning from past and current cross-sector initiatives.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should allocate funding to support the full implementation of Family Team Meetings to include neutral facilitation at critical case points and training and coaching for all staff.
- The **State** should expand Regional Care Teams as a community-based model for supporting youth and families who are involved with multiple service systems.
- 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 join other states in establishing statutory language for child placement that aligns with the federal Indian Child Welfare Act.

## Build State Agency Capacity

State leaders and policy makers should invest in optimal agency structure and support for caseworkers and social workers to ensure the demands of child welfare operations and systems improvements are met.

- The **Legislature** should establish a Commission to convene key partners to assess and make recommendations on the most effective and appropriate state agency structure for providing services to children, youth, and their families.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to provide adequate and sustained revenue to ensure child welfare workers receive sufficient training, supervision, and support for manageable caseloads.
- The **State** should train all staff to recognize and address disparities in child welfare based on poverty, race, geography, immigration status, gender or sexual identity, and disability.
- 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 child welfare.

## Invest in Supportive Services

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

- **Community Leaders, Philanthropy, Healthcare Organizations, and State Leaders** should work together to invest in community-based universal supports and enhanced primary care initiatives, e.g., Family Resource Centers and Healthy Steps.
- The **State** should expand access to recovery peer supports and set and maintain adequate reimbursement rates for mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) treatment services, including targeted case management for anyone with SUD.
- 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 together to address immediate, long-term, and structural challenges in the Children's Behavioral Health Services system.
- **State leaders** should work with Maine Housing and other housing partners to increase development of family-sized affordable housing and increase production of supportive housing for families.
- The **State** and **Legislature** should work together to increase the state Child Tax Credit and make it fully refundable.
- **Healthcare Organizations** should work with the State to expand buprenorphine availability in rural communities for caregivers who have Opioid Use Disorders.
- The **State** should follow all recommendations released in the report for the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) Act and provide consistent, ongoing funding for kinship support.
- The **Legislature** should establish a Commission to study and make recommendations for increasing Maine's clinically licensed workforce across child, youth, and family serving systems statewide.

## Ensure Effective Oversight

Entities that play key roles in providing recommendations for improving the child welfare system should continue to build capacity to do this effectively, and the Legislature should provide ongoing oversight of the outcomes of all formal recommendations.

- The **Legislature** should make permanent the regular reports from all child welfare advisory oversight bodies to the Health and Human Services Committee that are set to expire in 2024 to continue ongoing, coordinated oversight of child welfare system improvement efforts.
- The **Legislature** should require key, consistent indicators of safety, permanency, and well-being of children in the child welfare system are included in annual OCFS reports.

## Conclusion

The child welfare system includes all of us, and we must continue to work together now, and in the coming months and years, to improve the safety and well-being of Maine children and families.

As a state, we have a continued obligation and opportunity to engage in a transformation of our child welfare system. Our efforts cannot be solely focused on and limited to the state child welfare agency. It is critical that we also reduce the strain on Child Protective Services by doing everything we can to prevent abuse and neglect. We must act together to prevent future tragedies by building a child well-being and family strengthening system.

The system responsible for protecting and promoting the welfare of children includes many partners: families, community service providers, schools, healthcare, philanthropy, and local and state leaders. We must all work together across sectors and on all levels, to envision and invest in a continuum of care that focuses on child safety and well-being and strengthens families across every community in Maine.

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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