



# **Child Welfare: An Update on System Improvement Efforts**

December 2, 2020

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

## Introduction

In July of 2019 the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) finalized a comprehensive evaluation of Maine’s child welfare system. Using the information in that report, as well as input from staff, stakeholders, and national experts, OCFS narrowed the recommendations in the report to a list of prioritized strategies:

### Safety

- Address Intake processes and improve staffing
- Re-assess the Alternative Response Program (ARP)
- Enhance Assessment processes

### Permanency

- Develop a Permanency Review Process
- Monitor the Family Visit Coaching pilot to develop best practices
- Improve Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool consistency

### Well-being

- Develop family engagement tools and training
- Improve resource parent outreach and support

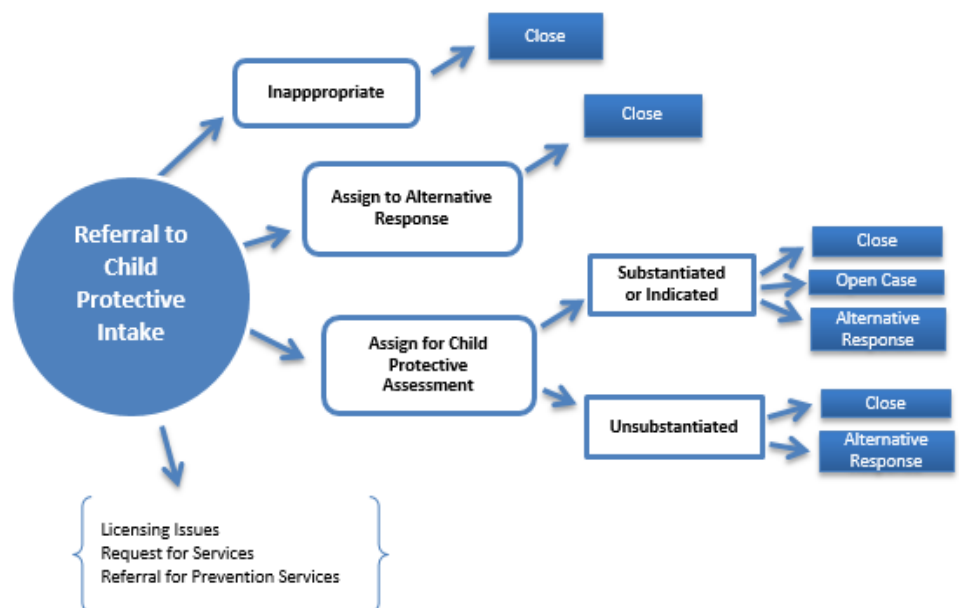
### Staff Training and Support

- Develop policy and training plan for new processes and tools
- Establish workforce wellness teams and education
- Update caseload size, standards, and ratios
- Procure a replacement for the Maine Automated Child Welfare Information System (MACWIS)

OCFS is pleased to provide this 2020 update that reflects implementation and system improvement efforts over the past 15 months, as well as data and information on the system as it stands today. The significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, evident throughout Maine’s child welfare system, are summarized later in this report.

## Intake: The Front Door of the Child Welfare System:

Intake serves as a critically important part of the child welfare system. All reports of alleged abuse and neglect are received by Intake where they are screened using a Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool to determine whether or not the allegations contained in the report are appropriate for child welfare assessment and possible intervention. OCFS’ involvement with every child in the Department’s custody



began with a report to Intake.

Recognizing the vitally important role the Intake Unit serves within the child welfare system, OCFS took swift action to align staffing patterns with workload and improve the technological support for staff, with changes [implemented in the summer of 2019](#).

Over the last year, significant effort has gone into conducting quality assurance reviews of the Intake process and working with the National Council on Crime & Delinquency (NCCD) to improve the SDM tool utilized by Intake staff. Staff received training on the updates in November with implementation of the revised version scheduled for December 2020.

## The Child Welfare Workforce

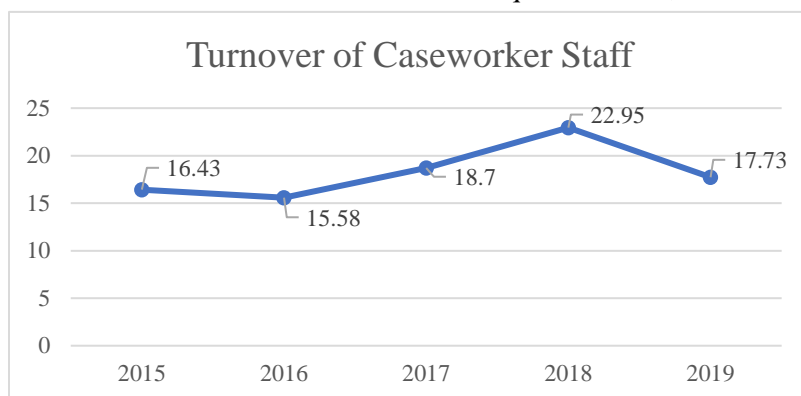
Throughout the work to evaluate the child welfare system and develop strategies for improvement one of the areas that rose to the surface again and again was the need for additional support within the child welfare workforce. The specific needs were varied and included:

- Caseload and workload standards that reflected the unique challenges faced by child welfare staff in Maine.
- Additional staff to ensure the safety, well-being, and timely permanency of children.
- A reduction in staff turnover.
- Improvements in training for child welfare staff.
- Additional tools and updated policies and procedures to support staff as they make difficult decisions related to cases, child safety, permanency, etc.
- The ability to cultivate prospective staff through internships and other types of engagement.

Beginning in 2019 and at the direction of the Legislature, OCFS began reporting yearly on both workload and caseload. An initial report was made in October of 2019 and the [2020 report](#) was released in January of this year. The 2021 report will be available by 1/31/21 and will include information on efforts over the last year to improve the workload analytic tool to ensure it reflects the realities of casework in the State of Maine.

In the late fall and early winter of 2019, OCFS was able to fill 33 caseworker lines allocated in the Biennial Budget. OCFS' work is complex, and although OCFS provides a comprehensive foundations training, a significant amount of learning occurs in the first year of employment as the policies, statutory requirements, and other concepts learned in training are put into action. OCFS is nearing the one-year mark for new caseworkers hired last year. As staff become more proficient, they become more independent and better able to handle a caseload analogous to that of a more seasoned caseworker.

The data today reflects OCFS' progress in retaining staff when compared to the turnover experienced in 2018. This reflects efforts to recruit new qualified staff, but also OCFS's work to improve training and support for both new and existing caseworkers.



OCFS has partnered with the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine to conduct a comprehensive review of child welfare policies and update policies where needed. The intent of this project is to ensure that policies are current and provide appropriate guidance to staff in order to ensure

high-quality casework practice and maximize the support staff are able to provide to children and families. Through this process some policies will be revised, and others created to align with current child

welfare practice. It is expected that the first set of these policies will be released in the coming weeks and will establish the framework for those that will be updated over the next year.

Once these policies are finalized, OCFS will need to train staff who are responsible for implementing the policies in their day-to-day work. Over the last year, Muskie has been conducting an evaluation of the training available to staff. They have examined baseline data, utilized research on effective training strategies, and developed plans along with OCFS' Training Team to expand the availability and accessibility of training for existing staff on a wide array of topics.

OCFS has also partnered with Muskie to modernize the Foundations training provided to all new caseworkers. Muskie developed a new framework for the training which was implemented in 2020 and includes virtual, online, and in-person training provided by Muskie staff, as well as additional coaching support provide through the OCFS Policy and Training Team and the supervisor as they begin to implement the skills and concepts learned in Foundations. The second cohort of new caseworkers to receive training through this framework has just completed Foundations. Feedback from new caseworkers and those providing support to the first cohort of new caseworkers has been positive.

OCFS also continues to partner with NCCD to implement Structured Decision Making tools throughout child welfare case continuum. The revised Intake tool is in the final testing stages and in the last year OCFS implemented tools to support staff in making decisions regarding safety and risk during the investigation process. Staff have received training regarding the safety and risk tool and OCFS' Quality Assurance Team has assisted in monitoring the use of these tools to ensure fidelity to the model. Their review has provided valuable feedback on areas where additional training is needed and OCFS has been able to partner with NCCD to target training appropriately. On 9/8/2020, OCFS implemented tools to guide staff as they make permanency decisions in child welfare cases. Permanency staff have been trained on the tools over the last few months and the Quality Assurance Team and supervisors have been trained to conduct quality reviews to ensure fidelity to the tools. They will be conducting regular reviews of the use of the SDM tools in order to provide child welfare leadership with insight into opportunities for additional training, support, and refinement of the tool.

Establishing workforce wellness teams was another strategy recommended in OCFS' system improvement plan. Over the last year OCFS was able to procure clinical support services for each OCFS District office. Currently, OCFS is working with the leaders of each District office to understand how best to begin building these workforce wellness teams within each office, recognizing that the culture within each District is unique. Child welfare leadership have benefitted significantly from the caseworker and supervisory advisory teams over the last year. The teams include one representative from each District, chosen by their management and peers. They are regularly consulted for their input on policy and procedural changes, training needs, the development of new or updated tools, etc. They also provide an invaluable communication loop with their co-workers in their respective District offices.

## **Initiatives to Support Family Engagement and Reunification**

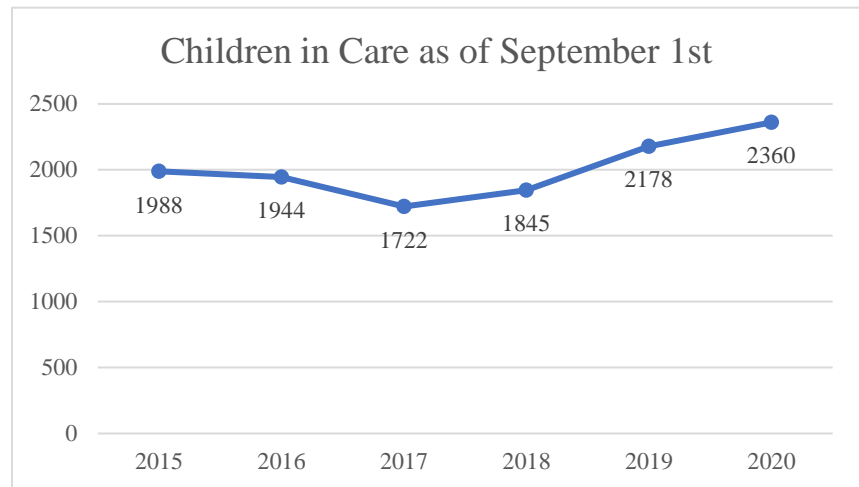
In the last 15 months, OCFS has undertaken a number of initiatives targeted at specific strategies, as well as the larger goals of ensuring the safety of children by appropriately assessing and addressing safety and risk, improving the timeliness of permanency for children, and improving the well-being of children by focusing on their individual needs.

OCFS has worked collaboratively with the Office of the Attorney General, staff, and stakeholders to develop updated versions of the Reunification Plan (for cases where children are in state custody) and the Family Plan (for cases where children remain in the custody of their parent(s), but the family is in need of services to ensure the safety of the children). These plans were piloted in District 2 (Cumberland, Sagadahoc, and Lincoln counties) over the last several months. Child welfare leadership built on the lessons learned from the pilot and incorporated feedback from staff and stakeholders into the plans that were rolled-out statewide in November. OCFS has solicited the feedback of parents, the Maine Justice for Children Task Force, and attorneys who represent parents in child protective court proceedings in

order to ensure the plans meet the needs of all those involved in child welfare cases. The goal in updating these plans is to ensure that they are not just forms that staff are required to complete in the life of a case, but instead that they are a high-quality, effective, and useful family engagement tool that allow parents the opportunity to become more engaged in their case, and planning for the future, with the goal of improving the number of children who successfully reunify with their parents.

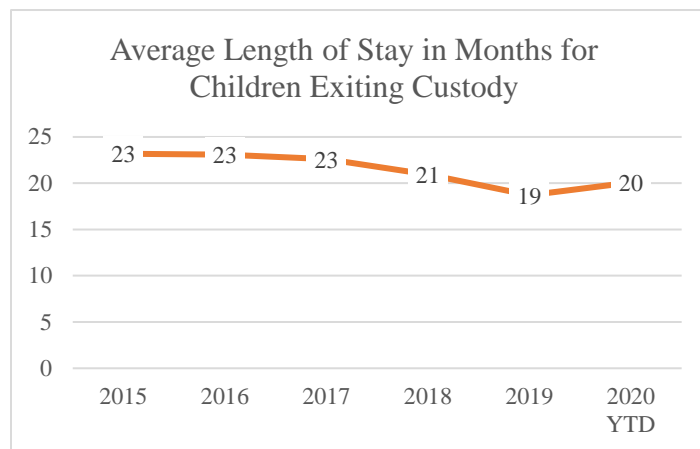
Child welfare leaders have also been examining the policies and procedures regarding Family Team Meetings (FTMs) and the way in which they are used within child welfare practice. In 2018, a directive was given to staff that ended the process of out-of-home safety plans, whereby a child was placed outside of his or her home with a relative or close family friend pursuant to a plan agreed to by the child's parents. Since that directive, OCFS has seen a steady increase in the number of children in the Department's care.

Through engagement with staff and stakeholders it has been determined that FTMs prior to the removal of a child served as an effective tool for preventing the removal of a child while also ensuring that child's safety and well-being. OCFS is currently in the process of developing new and updated guidance on FTMs, as well as training for staff, to ensure that whenever possible they are utilizing FTMs and



safety plans within the child's home to prevent the trauma associated with the removal of a child from his or her home and parents.

The number of children in the Department's care at any given time is a function not just of the number of children entering custody, but also of the number exiting to permanency. In a given week if 12 children enter the Department's custody, but 15 exit to reunification with their parents, adoption, or another form of permanency, it results in 3 fewer children in care at the end of that week.

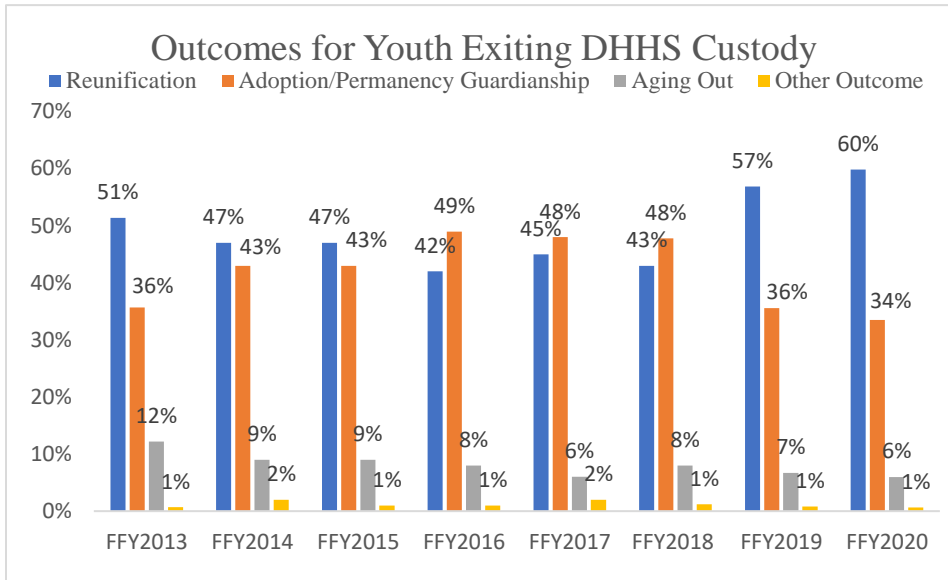


The Federal goal for permanency is that 40.5% of children will exit care within 12 months. Throughout most of 2019, OCFS exited approximately 30% of children to permanency in 12 months, but in 2020 that number has declined, with the most recent data indicating 26% of children in the Department's custody exit to permanency in 12 months. Maine is not an outlier, as many states do not currently meet the Federal goal for timely permanency. Nonetheless, OCFS has been tracking this trend closely and is developing a permanency review process

built off a previous initiative piloted in 2016 and 2017. OCFS working to develop the framework for this process to ensure that children exit care in a timely manner, but only when it is possible to do so while also ensuring their safety and well-being.

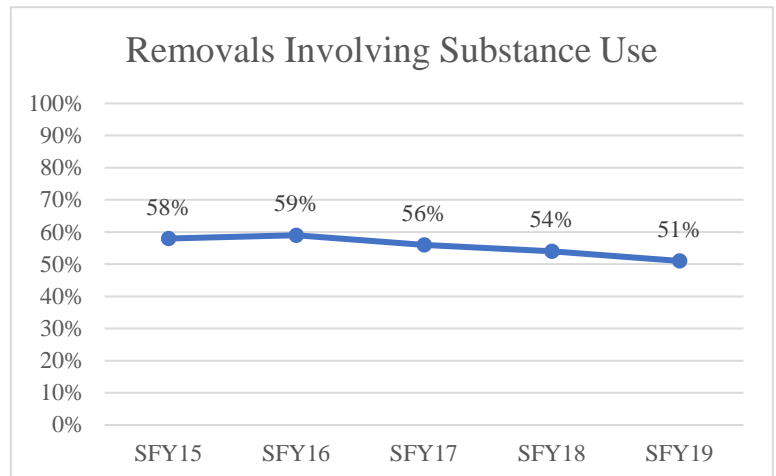
OCFS has also noted that in the last two federal fiscal years the data on outcomes for youth exiting custody reflects a significant increase in the number of children exiting to reunification versus adoption or

permanency guardianship. One of the core tenets of OCFS' Practice Model is that parents have the right and responsibility to raise their own children whenever they can do so safely.



The data in FFY 2019 and 2020 reflects outcomes related to that tenet. At the same time there is recognition that real and lasting change in the lives of children and families takes time and effort. Reunification is the goal for nearly every child that enters the Department's custody, but in order to minimize trauma it must be done in a manner that considers the long-term safety of the child.

During the same time period, substance use has been a factor in over 50% of all removals. Ensuring parents are able to effectively engage in substance use treatment and make meaningful and sustainable changes to ensure the safety of their children is a process that takes time. The data indicate that parents in need of or receiving substance use treatment take, on average, an additional three months to reunify with their children when compared to those whose cases do not involve substance use. The data from State Fiscal Years 2017, 2018, and 2019 indicates that reunification is occurring regularly in cases involving substance use. Among children who exited care whose case involved substance use at the time of removal, an average of 55% exited to reunification in SFYS17-19. Timely reunification requires solid casework by OCFS staff, as well as well-informed child safety decisions, demonstrating one of the many areas where OCFS' system improvement initiatives tie together.



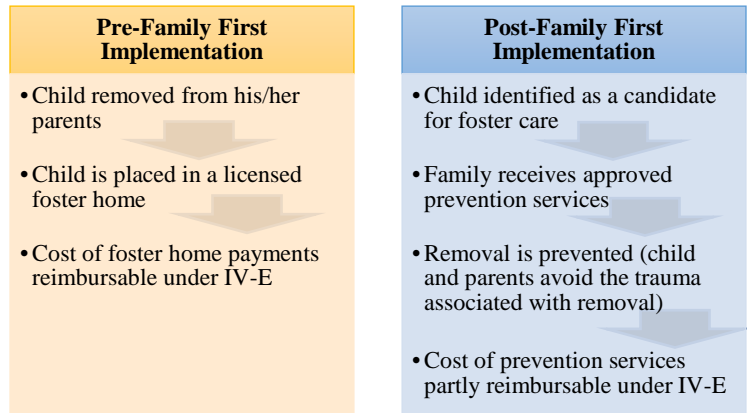
OCFS is dedicating time and resources to understand both entries into care and exits from care to identify trends in each area. For entry data, staff are reviewing the risk factors and reasons for removal. Increased understanding of the issues which most commonly result in removal will help to target future initiatives and services to address these needs before they necessitate removal. In exits, staff are examining cases carefully to determine what barriers exist to exiting children to safe permanency in a timely manner. These reviews explore all aspects of the child welfare process, including OCFS staff efforts, service availability, the role of the Courts, and that of parents and their attorneys.

Exits from care will be a primary focus in the coming year as OCFS collaborates with staff and stakeholders to develop a permanency review process. OCFS' goal is to examine the entire child welfare system when developing this process, including the courts, the service array available to parents and children, as well as the Department's own policies, procedures, and actions. By taking a holistic approach to the issue of timely permanency, OCFS will be prepared to work collaboratively in order to address barriers.

OCFS is also focusing resources and attention on preventing the need for children to enter care. The Federal Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) has presented Maine with an opportunity to prevent the need for removals. The efforts to implement Family First, in conjunction with OCFS' renewed commitment to FTMs, policy improvements, and enhanced training will provide OCFS staff with additional tools and techniques to safely prevent removal.

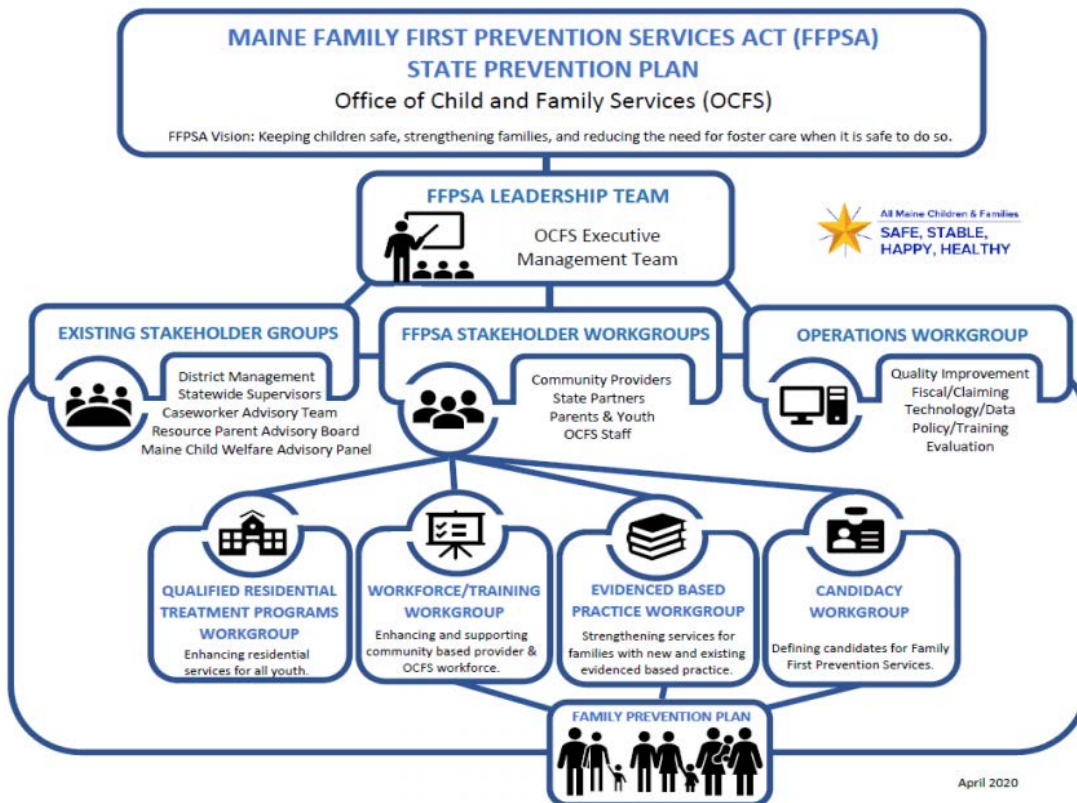
## Family First

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) is a Federal law passed in 2018 which redirects Federal funds to focus services on evidence-based prevention and early intervention services. The goal is to prevent the need for a child to be removed from his or her parents by utilizing services that have been demonstrated to be effective in addressing some of the most common factors which result in removal. FFPSA allows OCFS to draw down Federal Title IV-E funding to pay for these prevention services for a child who is at imminent risk of entering state custody.



In March of 2020, OCFS hired a dedicated Family First Program Manager. Family First planning has included outreach and engagement to ensure providers, community members, legislators, and staff understand FFPSA and the impact it will have on Maine's child welfare system. OCFS is currently working together with staff and four stakeholder engagement groups to draft Maine's federally required

Family First Prevention Services State Plan. Through this work, OCFS is actively seeking stakeholder and community engagement in the planning and implementation of the prevention service array available to Maine families. Over 200 stakeholders (including service providers, parents, youth, state agency partners, and community members) have been engaged in the planning



process through the various stakeholder workgroup meetings. Over 20 meetings have been held since March of 2020. OCFS has also maintained a focus on data-driven decision making to ensure that the

Family First Plan implemented by Maine reflects the specific needs of children and families throughout the state, as well as the child welfare system as a whole. OCFS has also partnered with national experts and other states through Casey Family Programs to gather resources and lessons learned from those that are further along in the implementation process.

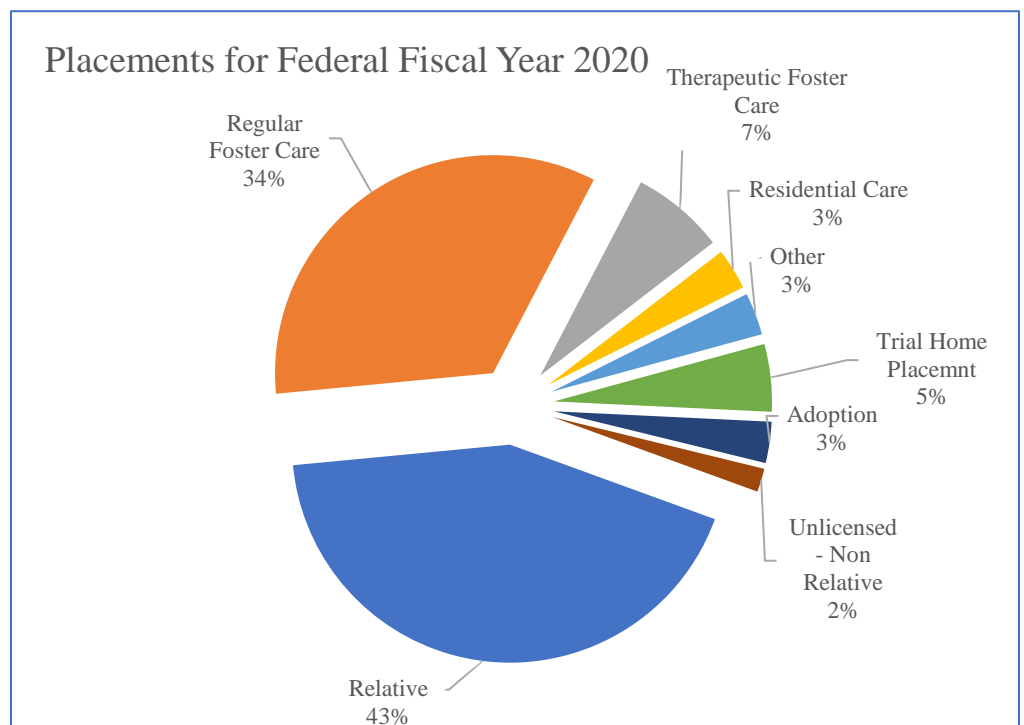
In April of 2020, Maine was awarded over \$1.8 million in FFPSA Transition Grant funds. These funds will be used throughout the system of care to build capacity and readiness to implement Family First. FFPSA Transition Grant funds will be spent to build to expand access to and availability of evidence-based services in Maine, conduct training for OCFS staff in FFPSA and its implementation, complete an evaluation of the service array implemented in Maine under FFPSA, and provide children’s residential treatment providers with financial capacity to meet the standards of a Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTS) under FFPSA. These provider costs include staff fingerprinting and national accreditation costs. Currently, OCFS is working towards full implementation of FFPSA in October of 2021. The next several months will require continued work with our Federal partners to obtain approval of Maine’s candidacy definition and Plan, as well as ongoing work to bolster the availability of federally approved evidence-based services intended to prevent removal.

Efforts will also include an examination of the Alternative Response Program (ARP) to determine the future of these services. ARP was originally conceptualized as a program to prevent full-scale child welfare involvement in a family’s life, much like Family First. As Maine’s Family First Plan begins to develop, it is expected to include next steps regarding ARP within the child welfare system.

## Resource Parents

Although it is OCFS’ goal to ensure children remain safely with their parents whenever possible, the need for caring and committed resource parents remains high. OCFS continues to partner with its contracted Resource Parent Recruitment agency, Spurwink, and has also focused attention on retaining experienced foster parents. OCFS has supported the establishment of the Resource Parent Advisory Team by partnering with Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine to co-lead the group and build membership. This team now includes a diverse group of experienced resource parents whose insight has been invaluable to the Department, particularly as OCFS has partnered with Muskie to update the training provided to new resource parents.

OCFS, in collaboration with Muskie, has identified the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) for Foster and Adoptive Parents as the model for resource parent training. NTDC was produced by national experts including, the Child Trauma Academy (CTA), the Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE), the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), and the National Council for Adoption, as a state-of-the-art training program to prepare resource parents to effectively care for children exposed to trauma, including providing them the ongoing skill development





they need to understand and promote healthy child development.

This training will replace the current training available to prospective resource parents, including kinship families who are seeking to become licensed as they care for relative children. This is particularly important given the significant number of children in the Department's custody who are placed with relatives. In FFY 2020, 43% of all children in state custody were placed with relatives. To compare nationally, in FFY 2018 (the most recent year for which federal data is available), 32% of all children in state custody were placed with relatives.

## **Technology**

In April of 2020, OCFS was able to finalize the procurement process for a new information technology system to support child welfare operations. This system is referred to as the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) and it will replace OCFS' current system, MACWIS, which is over 20 years old. OCFS' operations staff and child welfare staff have been collaborating as they work together with the contracted provider, Deloitte, to develop a system that reflects the unique facets of Maine's child welfare system. Leadership recognized early on in this process that CCWIS would not be successful without significant input and oversight from child welfare. As a result, child welfare staff with varying levels of experience are devoting a significant amount of time to working with operations staff and Deloitte's developers to create and refine the system. This has resulted in a need to reduce the workload for these child welfare staff, but their input has been invaluable to the development process.

Child welfare leadership has approached the development of CCWIS as an opportunity to look at current policy and practice and ensure the tools and information on which CCWIS is built represent the existing needs of the system. OCFS has also been able to align the policy work underway in collaboration with Muskie to ensure CCWIS is reflective of up-to-date tools, policies, procedures, and best practice guidelines when it goes live in late 2021.

The goal of the CCWIS project is to modernize and improve the technological support staff have available as they work with families. There has been particular focus on minimizing the need for duplicative work within the system, allowing staff to be more engaged with the people they are working with, instead of the technology. This report outlines a number of new initiatives that are in-progress and each of these is being examined through the lens of incorporating the initiative into CCWIS for long-term sustainability. These current initiatives, including Family First implementation, permanency reviews to ensure timely and safe exits, and resource parent support are some of the foundational building blocks of a strong child welfare system; by incorporating them into the CCWIS system, OCFS can ensure long-term sustainability of these initiatives and sustained outcome improvements in these areas.

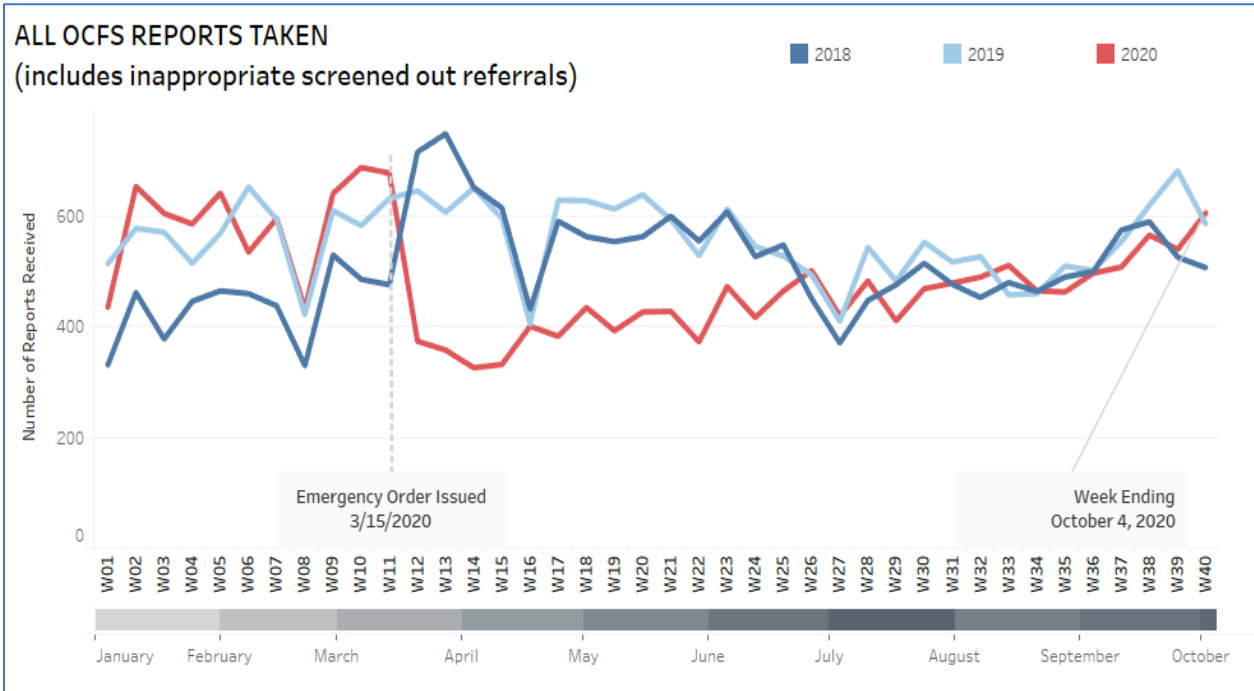
## **COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all aspects of life in Maine, including child welfare. Over the last seven months, OCFS has taken steps to ensure the safety of staff, contractors, children, parents, resource families, and others. These include screening questions before staff meet with a family, the procurement of personal protective equipment, a dispatch from home model for most child welfare staff, and changes to practice to safeguard public health. The most significant change was a temporary suspension of in-person visits between children and their parents. In-person visits were suspended from late-March until June 8, 2020. Video and telephone visits were emphasized during this time and in-person visitation was only restarted after considerable consultation with public health experts, OCFS' Medical Director, and child welfare staff. There are strict protocols and guidelines for these visits and all participants are expected to follow them to ensure their own health.

COVID-19 has served as an important reminder of the interconnectedness of all aspects of the child welfare system. OCFS has worked collaboratively with service providers to ensure children in care have appropriate medical, mental health, and behavioral care. Another example is the Courts, which have taken various steps to ensure the health and safety of their staff and those participating in court proceedings.

This has, at times, resulted in delays in Court proceedings, including jeopardy hearings, judicial reviews, termination hearings, and adoption proceedings. OCFS staff have worked closely with the Office of the Attorney General and the Maine Judicial Branch to ensure that cases are moving through the Court system as expeditiously as possible under the circumstances.

OCFS saw a significant decline in the number of reports to Intake after the Governor issued the Emergency Order regarding COVID-19 in mid-March. This is attributed primarily to the end of in-person instruction in Maine schools that occurred around this same time period. On 4/15/2020, OCFS issued guidance to educators, health care providers, and community members on responding to concerns of abuse and/or neglect. The following week OCFS saw a rise in the number of reports.



During the summer months the number of reports remained relatively in-line with the number in the previous two years, which reflects the decline in the number of reports typically received during a period of school vacation.

SOURCE	CALENDAR YEAR		September	
	2019	YTD 2020	2019	2020
SCHOOL PERSONNEL	22%	14%	25%	19%
LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL	19%	23%	19%	21%
MEDICAL PERSONNEL	12%	14%	9%	13%
MENTAL HEALTH PERSONNEL	8%	8%	8%	7%
SOCIAL SERVICE PERSONNEL	13%	14%	13%	13%
PARENT	8%	9%	7%	8%
ANONYMOUS	7%	8%	10%	7%
RELATIVE	5%	6%	4%	5%
NEIGHBOR/FRIEND	4%	5%	4%	6%
CHILD CARE PERSONNEL	1%	1%	1%	1%

When school began again in September, OCFS saw an increase in the percentage of reports coming from school personnel, which is typical of most years. In August of 2020, school personnel made 2% of all reports to OCFS, that was the same percentage of all reports made by school personnel in August of 2019, as well. But in September of 2020 school personnel made 19% of all reports, while this is a significant increase from 2% it still represents a slight decline from September of 2019 when school personnel made 25% of all reports.

## **The Road Ahead**

COVID-19 continues to impact all aspects of OCFS' operations and this is likely to continue into the future, particularly as the State begins to feel the impact of revenue losses resulting from the pandemic. As OCFS has sought to confront these changes and challenges there has been a continued focus on the system improvement strategies and those initiatives tied most closely to OCFS' desired outcomes. In the coming year, OCFS will seek to align resources by focusing on these strategic goals in order to reduce the number of children in care by preventing removals through prevention services and moving children to permanency in a careful, but expeditious manner.

As OCFS plans for the road ahead it is vital that the agency also retains the ability to look back over the last few years and learn from both successes and failures. In late 2017 and early 2018, the State experienced the tragic deaths of two children who had been involved with child welfare. Since that time OCFS has undertaken a comprehensive evaluation of the child welfare system that has included national experts, stakeholders, staff, and others. OCFS has sought to rebuild trust through transparent communication and frequent stakeholder engagement that continues today with virtual public forums on the child welfare system which were hosted in the month of October. The efforts to simultaneously improve and evaluate resulted in a defined list of strategies and OCFS has spent the last year working towards implementation of many of these strategies. At times COVID-19 has presented a challenge in momentum, whether it was difficulty engaging stakeholders remotely, or the time required to attend to child welfare operations as a result of the pandemic (which took away from time that could be spent on implementing change). Despite this challenge, OCFS has laid a strong foundation for the work that still lies ahead, ensuring that the changes in the child welfare system that are underway will have a solid foundation that results in long-term, sustained improvements.