

Child Welfare Briefing  
Christine Alberi, Child Welfare Ombudsman  
Health and Human Services Committee

September 19, 2022

Good morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this session. My name is Christine Alberi, and I am the Child Welfare Ombudsman for Maine. I have a brief update for you today.

Our fiscal year ends on September 30, 2022. We are still counting, but so far this year we have opened 84 cases for review, made 439 information and referral calls and emails, and had 224 unassigned contacts, for a total of 747 inquiries with our office. For context, last year we had total of 708 inquiries. We have completed 83 case specific reports. I do not have any specific information today on our findings and recommendations for this year, but preliminarily it is likely that we will have similar findings and make similar recommendations to last year. Our annual report will be distributed to the Governor, Legislature, the Department, and the public on January 1, 2023.

Regardless of our findings and recommendations that will be published in our annual report this year, it is important to keep in mind that the report will cover a backward-looking period: we are reviewing cases from 2021 and 2022.

The Ombudsman's office continues to participate in the Department's new Safety Science review program. I am part of a group that selects cases for review where a child has died or been seriously injured and the family had previous Department involvement. The cases selected are then referred to one of three larger safety science review teams throughout the state. The Department is collecting data from these reviews and tracking trends and issues. Hopefully, this will continue to help the Department's efforts to understand systemic changes that needs to take place to improve child welfare practice.

I am happy to report that the Ombudsman's office is also now part of the Serious Injury and Death Review panel. We just participated in our first meeting.

Unfortunately, the strain on all of the systems affecting child welfare remains considerable. Many of Maine's children are struggling. There are two areas that are particularly worrying to me: 1) vulnerable infants and young children exposed to legal and illegal substances and 2) the mental health of older youth and lack of services available for them. In general, mental health and behavioral services for children in Maine are not keeping up with the needs of the children and families.

I am also concerned about the continuing strain on child welfare caseworkers. Child welfare caseworkers every day are going out into the field and trying to protect children in what are always difficult and sometimes dangerous situations. I cannot emphasize enough how challenging and complicated the job of a child welfare caseworker is, whether it is a child

protective worker going out to a home for the first time, not knowing what he or she will find, or a permanency worker attempting to reunify children with parents who are struggling with enormous problems. Caseworkers continue to need all of the supports we can give them, including ongoing training and education. I am hopeful that the newly formed after hours and weekends unit can ease some of the strain on caseworkers. The Department can speak to this in more detail, but it is my understanding that the majority of the after-hours unit has been staffed.

Thank you very much, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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