

Letter signed by 145 Maine DHHS caseworkers, community care workers and case aides declaring no confidence in Maine DHHS Office of Child and Family Services Director Bobbi Johnson and asking Governor Janet Mills and Maine DHHS Commissioner Sarah Gagne-Homes to replace her immediately:

Members of MSEA-SEIU employed by the State of Maine, Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child and Family Services, are deeply committed to serving the most vulnerable citizens of the State of Maine: children.

A common theme throughout the descriptions of the poor functioning of OCFS was this: a top-down decision-making process operating without input from the front-line workforce. Even when feedback was sent to leadership, it was often not even acknowledged, let alone evaluated or discussed. This resulted in the commonplace practice of Central Office issuing unilateral changes to policies and procedures that lacked any expressed rationale, were communicated slowly and unevenly statewide, and often overrode specific local practices that had been collaboratively created in field offices by those doing the daily work. What was also made clear was that none of these practices began with the Landry directorship. Indeed, these concerns had long been embedded in the OCFS culture. Embedded in the Landry directorship are staff who are now in the roles of Commissioner and Directors within the Department of Health and Human Services.

Director Bobbi Johnson has actively demonstrated that she is unable to ensure the well-being and safety of children and OCFS staff by refusing to address the housing of children in hotels. First and foremost, holding children in hotels or emergency rooms only increases the trauma for children. The Director's inaction in finding an alternate to the warehousing of children in hotels or emergency rooms lends to the perception by many frontline workers that those in Central Office are reinforcing the misconception that hotels and emergency rooms are the only options for housing children. The focus on scheduling and costs associated with warehousing children in hotel and emergency rooms belies the actual needs of the children.

Director Johnson was confirmed by the Maine Legislature after a confirmation hearing in which she pledged to have open and honest communication with all stakeholders, including frontline employees. Yet even prior to the confirmation hearing, Director Johnson under the letterhead of then acting Commissioner Gagne-Holmes sent out unilateral changes affecting long-standing scheduling policies (Intake/CES/Hotel/ER).

OCFS frontline staff fully understand overtime is a necessity in a child protective position. Every OCFS frontline employee knows they will sometimes miss planned personal activities or be required to work on holidays, since the OCFS never closes under any circumstances. The objection we raise to these unilateral statewide changes is the inevitable decrease in our ability to reliably plan social time or make commitments to anyone outside of our employer. This should not be expected of any worker, particularly ones who have chosen to work in this difficult field. We should all have significant periods of non-scheduled work time that are free of the looming possibility of being mandated to work overtime.

When the new policy on scheduling was first announced in June 2024, members reached out via the OCFS' Town Hall aka all staff meetings process to express concerns over seniority, the lack of predictability, the loss of credit for previous coverage of shifts, increase mandating, loss of vacation

rights, etc. Multiple members can attest to Director Johnson's refusal to answer questions and dismissal of expressed concerns at these staff meetings. Concerns about after-hours coverage were identified back in 2021 as a significant factor for retention within OCFS; the [2021 Child Welfare Annual Report 0.pdf](#) report (pages 4 & 5) indicated a workgroup of District staff was convened to examine the after-hours practice. However, when asked who developed the new June 2024 procedure/policy, Director Bobbi Johnson refused to name who was in the working group or even reference that the 2021 Casey Family Programs' recommendations on Collaborative Science were followed in developing this new policy for scheduling.

Under the MSEA-SEIU contract, impact bargaining can be requested when the employer institutes policy which conflict with the MSEA-SEIU contract. Impact Bargaining was conducted with the assistance of MSEA-SEIU through the summer of 2024. During the impact meetings, members submitted multiple impact statements explaining how the new schedule would impact their work/life balance due to the unpredictability of the new procedure. Surveys were developed and circulated by members; the surveys demonstrated significant dissatisfaction with the proposed schedule. Members wrote and gathered signatures asking Commissioner Gagne-Holmes and Director Bobbi Johnson to rescind the new scheduling policy. Presentation of said survey and petitions at impact bargaining proved fruitless despite the best efforts of members. Over the objection of MSEA SEIU members, the new policy was implemented on November 1, 2024.

Additionally; throughout the years, OCFS workers who are required to provide services to children placed in hotels or emergency rooms have voiced concerns about the mental health and safety of children lodged in hotel rooms. Concerns ranged from poor nutrition, inadequate behavioral health services, aggressive behaviors, frequent staff changes, etc. The need to address all these concerns are documented in multiple reports and opinion pieces by Maine Children's Alliance, Maine's Government Oversight Committee, and even within the Department of Health and Human Services. To name just a few:

<https://legislature.maine.gov/backend/app/services/getDocument.aspx?documentId=107569>

<https://www.centralmaine.com/2024/10/12/sen-craig-hickman-we-must-protect-all-our-children/>

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[2023 Annual Report for Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman](#)

Safety issues time after time and in meeting after meeting have been raised by OCFS staff:

1. Aggressive children have assaulted staff in hotel rooms.
2. Safety concerns have been addressed by the directive to call local law enforcement.
3. Staff do not want to nor do they have the training to safely restrain dysregulated minors.
4. Staff mandated to cover a hotel shift, then having to attend court, are concerned about making errors in their presentation of the case to the court system.
5. Staff mandated to cover multiple shifts within 24-36 hours are concerned about the safety of driving (to the public and themselves).
6. Staff are not certified in the administration of medications. Additionally, questions have arisen over medication not in locked boxes.
7. Staff are concerned with the resultant mandated long hours; vital information will not be documented in their cases and critical deadlines will be missed.

All of the above concerns have been raised in meetings with Director Johnson and the significance of these concerns have been dismissed as a failure on the frontline staff to adapt to the demands of the work.

Director Johnson consistently demonstrate a blatant failure to listen to the concerns of the frontline OCFS staff prior to or even post-implementation of policies and procedures, jeopardizing Maine's vulnerable citizens and the OCFS staff who serve them.

For these reasons, we have no confidence in Director Johnson's ability to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child and Family Services. We call on Commissioner Gagne-Holmes and Governor Janet Mills to replace Director Johnson immediately. Furthermore, we call on Commissioner Gagne-Holmes and Governor Janet Mills to move beyond platitudes by working with the Legislature and frontline OCFS workers in developing alternatives to warehousing children in emergency rooms and hotels.