

In Key Victory for Youth Disability Rights, Federal Court Denies Effort to Roll Back Settlement

A judge rejected a motion by the U.S. Department of Justice and State of Maine to weaken an agreement to uphold the rights of youth with disabilities.

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MAINE — The U.S. District Court for the District of Maine [rejected a joint effort](#) by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and the State of Maine to weaken a settlement protecting the state's youth behavioral-health system and the rights of children with disabilities. The settlement was the [result of DOJ findings](#) that Maine has failed to uphold the rights of children with disabilities as required by federal law.

The ruling is a significant victory for children with disabilities and for government accountability. It preserves essential protections that ensure children with behavioral-health needs will receive integrated, community-based services rather than face unnecessary institutionalization.

The ACLU of Maine, along with Disability Rights Maine, GLAD Law, and the Center for Public Representation, [had urged the court to reject the proposed modifications](#) and will continue monitoring the state's compliance to ensure Maine's children receive the services they are entitled to under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

“Disability Rights Maine is pleased for Maine children and families, and relieved that the court ruled against weakening the settlement agreement,” **said Atlee Reilly, DRM's managing attorney.** “We are hopeful that Maine and the United States will now turn their focus and resources toward implementing the original settlement they negotiated and addressing the longstanding failure to deliver appropriate services to children in their homes and communities.”

Background

In September 2024, the DOJ sued the State of Maine for violating youth disability rights under ADA, concluding that Maine discriminated against youth with disabilities by failing to maintain an adequate behavioral-health system that prevented institutionalization.

Just two months later, in November 2024, the state reached a settlement with DOJ that included provisions to support children with disabilities and bring the state into compliance with federal law. The agreement required a robust, community-based behavioral-health network that would allow children to live at home and in their communities, rather than in institutions like hospitals or Long Creek. It also created an independent reviewer position that would monitor the state's progress.

Less than a year later, in September 2025, the DOJ and Maine jointly asked the court to modify the settlement. Their proposed changes included eliminating the independent reviewer and removing key protections and resources for children and families involved in the juvenile-justice system.

The ACLU of Maine, as part of a coalition with Disability Rights Maine, GLAD Law, and the Center for Public Representation, [filed an amicus brief](#) urging the court to deny the motion, arguing that the proposed modifications would harm Maine children and families.

After a hearing in October 2025 and additional briefing, the court denied the joint motion on November 24, 2025. In its ruling, the court concluded that “absent a showing of changed circumstances ... and given the strong public interest in finality, the Court must deny the Parties’ present joint motion to amend.”

“The court recognized that the proposed changes would have cascading, negative consequences for children and families in Maine,” **said Kathryn Rucker, the legal director at the Center for Public Representation.** “Our coalition remains committed to monitoring the implementation of the agreement and to ensuring that families receive expanded service options, children receive timely assessments, and appropriate care and treatment is made available in their homes and communities.”

“In denying this motion, the court affirmed that independent, external oversight is essential,” **said Carol Garvan, legal director at the ACLU of Maine.** “The role of an independent reviewer is critical in ensuring that Maine keeps its promises to children with disabilities and follows through on long-overdue reforms. A child’s right to live and thrive in their community is a fundamental right that must be continuously defended.”

“The settlement the parties reached in November 2024 recognized that both law and common sense require young people to have access to medically necessary behavioral health care in their homes and communities,” **said Mary Bonauto, the senior director of civil rights and legal strategies at GLAD Law.** “For far too long, the lack of legally required services has led children to deteriorate and families to struggle or fracture, leaving an in-state or out-of-state institution as the last resort. To be sure, Maine is taking important steps to put the required services in place state-wide, but the need remains urgent. The judge’s decision rightly held the parties to their agreement about an independent reviewer. It’s a win-win: Maine has the benefit of an external expert as it rebuilds its care network, and all children, families, and communities benefit from the reviewer driving progress, innovating solutions, and keeping the public involved and informed.”