

Adoption Advocate



The Future of Adoption from Foster Care: A Call for Collaboration

BY CHUCK JOHNSON, CHRISTIE MAC SEGARS,
SAARA MCEACHNIE, AND EILEEN WHARTON

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May is National Foster Care Month, and NCFA is proud to join private and public sector organizations from across the country in raising awareness about the need for permanent, loving families for more than 120,000 waiting children and youth in the foster care system. Each one deserves to thrive in the love, care of a prepared and supported family. And yet we have watched as year after year thousands exit foster care without a family, and thousands more continue to wait without permanency. It is an ongoing crisis of national importance with long-term individual and societal implications.

Solutions are not simple, and they will require collaboration, persistence, and a willingness to address systemic problems with meaningful reforms and effective programs. In this issue of the *Adoption Advocate*, we highlight the work of two member agencies whose foster care adoption programs can serve as models that we hope will inspire more agencies to become

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involved in collaborative solutions to this crisis. Their exemplary work demonstrates the potential to bring lasting change on behalf of thousands of children who are counting on us to meet their need for a permanent, loving family.

Why and How to Engage in Foster Care Services?

Encouragement and Lessons Learned as Shared by Lifeline Children's Services

As the landscape of adoption changes before our eyes, many private adoption service providers (ASPs) are faced with decisions about how to continue serving vulnerable children, both here in the States and around the world. ASPs may desire to use their expertise by engaging the U.S. foster care system, but aren't sure where to begin or how to best serve this community.

As ASPs, we have the opportunity to be servant leaders within this industry. Too often private organizations pre-determine their scope of engagement with the public sector before discovering the true needs of the system. True engagement takes conversation and, specifically, listening to those we desire to serve.

The first step is to engage in meaningful conversation with your local foster care providers. They will likely be eager to share their limitations and areas of greatest need. Despite being a crucial nationwide service, with governmental funding and structure, each state has acute needs. It's not surprising when you consider the vast scope of the work laid before each state and county.

Each year, over 3 million children undergo an abuse or neglect investigation and the U.S. averages approximately 400,000 children in an out-of-home placement on any given day.¹ More than 70,000 children are waiting for an adoptive family each year following termination of parental rights. Meanwhile approximately 20,000 foster youth age out of the foster care system annually.² These are staggering numbers and our state governments cannot support them on their own.

Lifeline's Foster Care Ministry has learned the importance of re-assessing and listening through our own missteps and re-directions through state partnership. While we have been engaged in foster care for over a decade, it was after introspection that we realized our program was duplicating the services of others. We took a step back and assessed the needs of our local foster care community, then sought ways to meet those needs. We saw very quickly that we needed to shift our energies and evaluate how our expertise could best be used.

Within our community, we felt best prepared to engage in the following ways: equipping foster families, providing quality continuing education for foster families, and supporting

birth families. This meant ending our role in foster care placements. It can be difficult to discontinue a ministry you have invested in for years, but rewarding to see stewarded resources used in areas where they are more needed. Because the state's ability to recruit, educate, and equip foster families was strained, the change in focus was ultimately more beneficial to these vulnerable children than continued work in direct placements.

We shifted to put more emphasis on recruitment, equipping, and partnership, and got to work on brainstorming the specific ways we could do this. As a Christian ministry, we knew we had a unique ability to engage local churches in ways the public system was not able to do. Therefore, **we formed a partnership with the state** to recruit, assess, and equip new foster families from within local churches, before sending them to the local child welfare offices for licensure. By shifting our staff resources from managing placements to this new focus, we were able to double the number of new foster families trained.

We also discovered that our international adoption education could provide new depth to our education program for foster families. We applied our team's knowledge of trauma—and how it impacts children—to foster families' education, expanding our continuing education services to those outside of our own recruitment. Previously, we had only been able to provide this to families we were serving through placements, but the shift allowed us to provide education to over 2,000 individuals each year.

¹ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport27.pdf>

² Ibid

How to Get Started

How is your organization able to serve? Begin by initiating conversations with your local foster care staff to talk about the recurrent issues they face, the greatest needs they see, and where they may feel limited. Listen first, but then begin assessing how your team may be skilled and equipped to meet any of these needs.

As adoption service professionals, we all have varying expertise that we can contribute. The system, foster families, vulnerable children, and birth families all benefit from our working together to serve this community.

- Do you have staff trained in trauma? Could those staff help train local child welfare teams or other private agencies?
- Do you have qualified counselors serving international adoptive families that could also serve children in foster care? Or birth families in the foster care system?
- Can you use your knowledge of trauma to serve birth families, many of whom were themselves children from hard places?
- Could you use your knowledge about recruiting families for international adoption to help find adoptive families for children in foster care?
- Could some of your experienced international adoptive parents be good mentors for youth aging out of the foster care system?

As adoption service professionals, we have a lot to offer the foster care system. We must continue serving within our current contexts, but also use our knowledge to expand this service to children in foster care. Here are a few steps to begin:

1. Approach the child welfare authorities and other private providers with humility and openness. Do not come in with the answers, but rather a desire to serve.
2. Identify with local staff where gaps exist and needs for services remain.
3. Assess where your agency is equipped to meet the state's needs.
4. Assess where there are duplicated services in your community.
5. Consider shifting staff and other resources to fill in where there are gaps and needs.
6. Get started and know there is almost always a place to serve and meet needs.

Breaking Jurisdictional Barriers in Older Child Adoptions from Foster Care

A Profile in Innovative Collaboration from Barker Adoptions

She scanned the room of the various individuals who came to learn more about adoption from foster care, and after sitting quietly for a short but weighted and deafening period, she pierced the silence with her question.

“Why adoption? Why older child adoption?”

Eva was adopted by her single mother at the age of 15 and has become a vocal spokesperson for Project Wait No Longer at the Barker Adoption Foundation. She is passionate about children in foster care and is not timid about sharing the bleak outcomes of older children who never join a family.

“Children like me are passed over all the time for the cute, cuddly toddlers. We don’t get picked first, and we don’t get picked second. But we’ve become resilient although a lot of times we feel dispensable.”

This, sadly, is the reality of many waiting children in the foster care system. The likelihood of a child being adopted goes down by 50% over the age of 10, regardless of how long they have been in care. As they continue to grow older, this percentage only decreases and their journey to finding their forever family becomes narrower and lengthier.

Project Wait No Longer (PWNL) was established in 2007 with the primary mission of responding to this need for the nation’s most vulnerable children to be placed with forever families. PWNL seeks to recruit, educate, and prepare prospective adoptive families to welcome into their homes children who are legally free for adoption in the foster care system—because every child deserves a family. Doing this effectively and successfully required us to expand our reach and our search outside our borders. For some children, placement into a local family is not a viable or available option. The barrier to a child being adopted should never be due to our own geographic limitations. Working across jurisdictions increases opportunities for waiting children as well as for waiting families.

Through the establishment of meaningful relationships and dedicated searches, PWNL has been able to find homes for children residing in 26 different states, seven of which were cultivated in the last four years. For older children like Eva, it is imperative that agencies increase competencies to accommodate interstate adoptions in order to find homes for children. Eva came to us from Ohio, and

joined her family in the District of Columbia. The most vulnerable groups continue to be older children and children in large sibling groups. PWNL is committed to recruiting families who believe that they can meet the needs of these children who often present with trauma from abandonment, grief, loss, multiple placements and displacements, academic setbacks, and strained relationships with their families of origin.

It was October 2013 when four bright-eyed children from Minnesota first interacted with the foster care system. Samuel (11), Cindy (7), Esther (6), and Tommy (2) had suffered emotional and physical abuse, and also witnessed varying levels of domestic violence within their home. Their birth mother had an extensive history with Child and Family Services, dating back to when Samuel was an infant, and she continued to struggle with substance abuse, ultimately limiting her capacity to safely parent. Their birth father was incarcerated, thus not a viable resource for the children. After unsuccessful attempts at reunification and six placements with different care providers, the children were listed on national adoption databases and the search for their forever family began.

Children entering care as large sibling groups often face immense challenges as caseworkers make efforts to keep them together. Samuel, Cindy, Esther, and Tommy were not always afforded the opportunity to stay together, and were split many times between different foster homes. In 2018, they were successfully placed in their forever home, and their journey together as a finalized family commenced in 2019. PWNL has been able to place 27 sibling groups together, and 12 of these groups contained three or four children! To date, PWNL has found homes for over 161 children.

Increasing awareness and partnering with public agencies for interstate adoptions remains one of the central obligations of PWNL. A dedicated search-and-match specialist works with families and liaises with caseworkers to find families for waiting children. After a family has been officially matched with a child, the two agencies work together to establish a contract which outlines the responsibilities of each agency. The receiving agency will provide post-placement visitation and support to the family, and will supply monthly reports to the state agency as well as the monitoring entity, Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC).

There is often a financial commitment from the sending agency or state to aid the receiving agency with the expenses of overseeing the placement. This is negotiated and agreed upon in the initial stages of the process, and often prior to the completion of the 100A form for ICPC. The procedures in each state may vary, but **ultimately the partnering agencies work together to support the best interest of the child.**

Transitions can be difficult, and acclimating to a new home, sometimes in an entirely different state, presents a unique set of rewards and challenges. Building resilience in families and strengthening their capacity to create a loving environment where healthy relationships can thrive is important. At The Barker Adoption Foundation, we believe that **a child is never**

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too old to need a family. Breaking down the barriers to interstate adoptions increases the opportunities for children to have the gift of family, and we strive to continue to make this a reality for many more families.

Continuing to Improve

National Council For Adoption Envisions a Brighter Future for Foster Care

NCFA has long called for improvements in the foster care system that would result in stronger recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents, increased adoptions from foster care, and a stronger focus on achieving permanency for children in foster care. These outcomes require legislative, legal, policy, and practice changes at the local, state, and even national level.

NCFA has offered specific recommendations and worked alongside professionals and policymakers to advocate for change. We are pleased to see that many of those recommendations are now considered mainstream best practice, with public and private agencies and organizations offering programs and services that more effectively benefit children and serve families. But if the numbers tell us anything, it's that we still have a long way to go.

Over the past decade, the number of children defined as waiting to be adopted has remained relatively flat each year, and the number of youth aging out of the system has not decreased.³ In fact, in the last fiscal year report, nearly 20,000 youth emancipated from care. We applaud progress in specific

³ https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/trends_foster_care_adoption_10thru19.pdf

localities,⁴ but on a national scale, the foster care system is still broken and in desperate need of dramatic reform to achieve better outcomes for children and youth in need of permanent families.

NCFA recommended that federal and state agencies, who are primarily responsible for funding and oversight of the public foster care system, work collaboratively with the private adoption service providers to recruit and train prospective foster and adoptive families. In years following, public-private partnerships have brought thousands of new foster and adoptive parent recruits. The addition of many private agencies, such as Lifeline, Barker, and Evolve,⁵ has been a very positive development. NCFA encourages all private adoption agencies to consider their contribution to improving the foster care system in their communities and across the states in which they are licensed.

At the same time, although targeted recruitment efforts have resulted in thousands of families stepping up to become licensed as a foster family, long-term retention of these families has been problematic, with the majority of families quitting within the first two years, citing their frustration working with the public agencies. Since most adoptions from foster care are by the foster family and the child is better served by fewer placement disruptions, the field should prioritize improved retention. Not only will the foster experience be less disruptive for children, but more children will achieve permanency

through adoption when foster families keep fostering.

In cooperation with both public and private foster care programs in multiple states, NCFA launched the Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention Project to research ways to increase retention of foster families. The research project has tracked foster and adoptive parents from the very beginning of the certification process, through the training process and after placement—and also includes families who dropped out.

We are pleased to report that 26 states have extended the services to youth in foster care past the age of 18, including many to the age of 21.⁶ Extending time in foster care to older youth gives them more time to mature and provides greater opportunity for many to be adopted. We call upon remaining states to extend services to their young adults without a permanent family.

Programs such as Wendy’s Wonderful Kids develop effective strategies for child-specific recruitment of adoptive families for older children and sibling groups.⁷ With a working premise that every child is adoptable, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids’ recruitment model has been three times more effective finding adoptive homes for children for whom the system had considered unadoptable.

For years, NCFA has recommended making the [Adoption Tax Credit](#) refundable, as it was in 2010 and 2011. Knowing that 46% of

⁴ <https://adoptioncouncil.org/press-release/a-review-of-fy-2018s-foster-care-and-adoption-statistics-2/>

⁵ <https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-95/>

⁶ [https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-411#:~:text=The%2026%20states%20that%20have,other%20settings%20\(see%20figure\)](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-411#:~:text=The%2026%20states%20that%20have,other%20settings%20(see%20figure))

⁷ <https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/our-programs/wendys-wonderful-kids/>

children adopted from foster care are in low income households,⁸ a refundable credit will allow families with a low tax liability to also benefit from the credit, and can serve as a financial support to adoptive families to help meet the needs of the children placed in their home. It may also serve as an incentive to foster families to finalize an adoption of a children that is already in their family.

We applaud the intent of legislation like [H.R. 1713](#),⁹ which would amend the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act of 1978 to require a study and report on adoption outcomes and the factors affecting those outcomes. This legislation came about in direct response to the converging pressures of the opioid epidemic and the Covid-19 pandemic on the foster care system. The intended goal is to better understand how to reduce barriers to adoption and strengthen adoption outcomes to positively impact a child's life.

NCFA is pleased to work collaboratively with a diverse community of foster care alumni, foster and adoptive parents, adoption and foster care professionals, policymakers,

legislators, and others who want to see positive reforms in foster care. We are committed to offering research-based solutions and proven strategies to help more children waiting in the foster care system thrive in nurturing, permanent families. NCFA hopes for the day when there are more families waiting to adopt from foster care than children waiting for a family.

Additional Resources

For Parents

- [Learn More About Adoption From Foster Care](#)
- [State Specific Information from AdoptUSKids](#)
- [A Guide to Adoption Subsidies and Assistance for Adoptive Parents](#)

For Professionals

- [Adoption Agencies Serving Kids in Foster Care: Adoption Advocate No. 95](#)
- [America's Kids Belong](#)
- [KidSave](#)
- [TN Fosters Hope](#)

⁸ https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/children-adopted-foster-care-child-and-family-characteristics-adoption-motivation-and-well-being#_Toc300125445

⁹ <https://smucker.house.gov/media/press-releases/icymi-smucker-legislation-improve-adoption-outcomes-children-impacted-opioid>

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Join us at the National Adoption Conference presented virtually September 21 – 23, 2021

Featured Session:

Collaborating with Communities to Design a Statewide Kinship & Adoption Navigator Program

In this session, attendees will learn how [OhioKAN](#), a new statewide kinship and adoption navigator program, collaborated with communities throughout the intervention design and implementation process; hear about key decision-making milestones and design considerations for building a navigator program from scratch; and walk away with best practices and pitfalls to avoid when collaborating with communities. The presenters will lead a rich discussion on how to engage individuals with lived experience and other community stakeholders in program design and implementation, even on a tight timeline.

[Learn More](#)

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About the Authors

Chuck Johnson serves as President and CEO of the National Council For Adoption. He is responsible for all aspects of NCFA, including management as well as implementing the organization's mission. He is an advocate for children, birth parents, and adoptive families, and is a frequent writer, speaker, and commentator on adoption policy and practice. Prior to joining NCFA, Chuck served 17 years with a licensed child-placing agency in Alabama, including eight years as its executive director. Chuck is a graduate of Auburn University with a degree in Social Work and holds a Masters degree from Birmingham Theological Seminary. He and his wife are parents by adoption and live in Maryland.

Christie Mac Segars, LICSW holds a bachelor's from Samford University and a Master's in Social Work from The University of Alabama. She has almost 20 years of child welfare experience and has been the Vice President of Domestic Services at Lifeline Children's Services since March of 2013. She is passionate about taking the gospel to hurting families and seeing the church engage in the ministry of reconciliation through foster care, adoption, and birth family engagement. She and her husband Croft have three daughters, Ila, Elizabeth, and Harris.

Saara McEachnie is the Director of Domestic Adoption Programs at the Barker Adoption Foundation. Ms. McEachnie oversees Project Wait No Longer, and has conducted trainings on increasing competencies between agencies who are seeking to embark on interstate adoptions.

Eileen Wharton is the Child Matching and Family Support Specialist at the Barker Adoption Foundation. Ms. Wharton works with prospective individuals seeking to adopt from foster care. She supports these families through searching and matching until they are ultimately placed with their child.



This issue of the *Adoption Advocate* was edited by Kristen Hamilton and Ryan Hanlon.