

Using the Public Private Adoption Initiative and Child-Specific Recruitment to Achieve Successful Adoptive Placements for Children in Foster Care

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Identifying and securing permanent homes for foster children who are unable to safely return to their biological families has long been a central purpose of the child welfare system.¹ The cost to children not adopted from foster care is stunning – “with youth experiencing higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, unintended pregnancy and truncated educations. By every measure, children adopted from foster care have better outcomes than children who age out.”² Child-specific recruitment is one way to better ensure that children are receiving the specialized attention and services they need in order to find successful adoptive homes, and the Public Private Adoption Initiative (PPAI) is a Minnesota resource offering this invaluable tool. Utilizing PPAI’s child-specific recruitment programs, as well as their other services, is often an appropriate resource for Children’s Law Center’s (CLC) clients who are state wards looking for permanent homes that fit their unique needs.

What is the Public Private Adoption Initiative?

The PPAI is a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), county and tribal social services agencies and licensed, private adoption agencies, with a goal of placing those children who have been freed for adoption into adoptive homes.³ As of September 2011, there were 823 state wards in Minnesota and 406 of those children were without identified pre-adoptive homes.⁴ To enhance existing adoption resources, DHS has contracted with eight private adoption agencies.⁵ These agencies provide home studies, child-specific recruitment, placement services, and intensive, therapeutic post-adoption services.⁶

Services provided by these adoption agencies are available to all children under state guardianship and their prospective adoptive families, as well as certain target populations, at no cost to Minnesota’s counties or tribes.⁷ Populations with the greatest need for PPAI assistance are children of color, sibling groups, children with significant special needs, school-

¹ Ellis, R., *What Helps and Hinders Me from Being Adopted: Voices of Youth in Foster Care From the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids Evaluation*, Child Trends, Washington, D.C., 1 (October 2011).

² A national evaluation of *The Impact of Child-Focused Recruitment on Foster Care Adoption: A Five-Year Evaluation of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids Executive Summary*, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Child Trends, Washington, D.C., 1 (October 2011).

³ *Public Private Adoption Initiative: Working together to help families*, Minn. Dep’t of Human Services, (March 2012), www.dhs.state.mn.us.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ As of October 2011, the eight private agencies were *Ampersand Families, Bethany Christian Services, Children’s Home Society and Family Services, Downey Side, Family Focus, HOPE Adoption & Family Services International, Lutheran Social Services, and North Homes*. For a more detailed list of the private agencies under contract with the state please visit <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfsrver/Public/DHS-4923-ENG>.

⁶ *Public Private Adoption Initiative: Working together to help families*, Minn. Dep’t of Human Services, (March 2012), www.dhs.state.mn.us.

⁷ MN ADOPT. www.mnadopt.org. (A program contracted by the Minnesota Department of Human Services through the Minnesota Adoption Resource Network).

aged children, and older youth.⁸ Of those 406 children in the state without a pre-adoptive resource, a significant number were older youth or members of a sibling group.⁹ Agencies contracted through the PPAI work to reduce the time between termination of parental rights and adoption finalization. Because PPAI agencies operate with result-based funding, they are incentivized to find and place children in quality adoptive families.

Child-Specific Recruitment and Relevant Factors for Consideration

“The policy of the state of Minnesota is to ensure that the best interests of the child are met by requiring individualized determination of the needs of the child and how the adoptive placement will serve the needs of the child.”¹⁰ Considering the drastically high number of children aging out of foster care and in long-term foster care placement, “rigorous evaluation” of individualized adoption recruitment services should be customary practice.¹¹ A recent study conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids Signature Program, found that “the use of innovative strategies [child-specific recruitment] can lead to higher rates of adoption, especially for [youth] for whom it has traditionally been difficult to find permanent adoptive families.”¹² The following are some challenges that can hinder the adoption process.

Age

“Despite policy advancements for children in the child welfare system, the number of older youth aging out of foster care continues to rise.”¹³ The older a child is, the more difficult it is for him or her to find an adoptive home. It is harder to find parents who are willing to adopt older children,¹⁴ although this does not mean that they do not exist. Additionally, adoptive homes for older children are more likely to disrupt their adoptions than adoptive homes for younger children.¹⁵ These disruptions most often occur because of the emotional toll a new adoptive family endures as a result of the older child’s emotional and behavioral challenges.¹⁶ Child-specific recruiters can work with potential adoptive families to understand an older child’s needs and provide resources to both parties in order to foster a healthy and life-long adoptive family relationship.

Resistance to Adoption

Youth may express opposition to adoption.¹⁷ In Minnesota, “[w]hen the child to be adopted is over 14 years of age, the child’s written consent to adoption by a particular person is also necessary.”¹⁸ Resistance to adoption by children may occur due to previous negative experiences with adoption, a desire to be reunited with biological parents, a fear of

⁸ *Public Private Adoption Initiative: Working together to help families*, Minn. Dep’t of Human Services, (March 2012), www.dhs.state.mn.us.

⁹ *Id.* (In October 2011, 36 percent of children waiting to be adopted were between the ages of 12-18, and 26 percent were members of a sibling group to be adopted together).

¹⁰ Minn. Stat. § 259.29, subd.1 (2011).

¹¹ Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption: *A National Evaluation of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids*, Fact Sheet, Child Trends, Washington, D.C., 2 (2011). See also, *Love and Belonging for a Lifetime: Youth Permanency In Child Welfare*, American Humane Association, Volume 26, Number 1 (2011).

¹² Child Trends, *supra* note 2 at 2.

¹³ Child Trends, *supra* note 11 at 1.

¹⁴ Ellis, R., *supra* note 1 at 1-2.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 1 citing, Barth, R.P., *Institutions vs. foster homes: The empirical base for a century of action*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Social Work, Jordan Institute for Families (2002); Rosenthal, J., Schmidt, D., & Conner, J., *Predictors of special needs adoption disruption: An exploratory study*, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 10, 101-117 (1988); Smith, S.L., Howard, J.A., Garner, P.C. & Ryan, S.D. *Where are we now? A post-ASFA examination of adoption disruption*. *Adoption Quarterly*, 9(4), 19-44 (2006); Writing, L. & Flynn, C.C. *Adolescent adoption: Success despite challenges*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28, 487-510 (2006).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Ellis, R., *supra* note 1 at 2.

¹⁸ Minn. Stat. § 259.24, subd.3 (2011).

losing their relationship with their biological parents, a belief that no one would want to adopt them, or a need to feel independent.¹⁹ Child-specific recruiters and the PPAI can work with foster youth to dissolve misconceptions about adoption and educate them on the process in general. By emphasizing the benefits of adoption a child may develop a more open attitude towards the possibility of adoption.

Child-Specific Needs

The positive impact of child-specific recruiters and specialized adoption services is the strongest in older children and those with mental health disorders.²⁰ According to the study by *Wendy's Wonderful Kids*, children with mental health disorders who were served by child-specific recruiters were “three times more likely to be adopted than” those not served by specialized services.²¹ Parents may feel unprepared to address and fulfill the needs of the child/sibling group they wish to adopt; however, recruiters can help put potential adoptive parents at ease simply by “being personable, emotionally supportive, dedicated, and available.”²²

By pinpointing adoption concerns and working with children on a one-on-one basis, child-specific recruitment aims to overcome these barriers and achieve successful adoptive placements. Many CLC clients face these similar challenges, and it is imperative that their attorneys recognize their clients’ challenges in order to talk with them about their adoption fears. After client discussions, child attorneys can then advocate and request that the court order the county agency to use a PPAI agency for their clients to ensure that their clients’ adoption processes receive additional support and attention.

TIPS FOR REQUESTING CHILD-SPECIFIC RECRUITMENT AND INVOLVEMENT OF A PUBLIC PRIVATE ADOPTION INITIATIVE AGENCY:

- 1. Encourage your clients to talk with you about their thoughts, fears, and concerns about adoption.**
- 2. Be open and honest with your clients about the entire adoption process; educate them about what will happen at each stage.**
- 3. Emphasize the potential benefits of having a permanent home to your clients.**
- 4. Identify each client’s specific and individual needs; based on the client’s needs, a more detailed—and ultimately more successful—child-specific recruitment effort may be warranted.**
- 5. Empower your clients by explaining how important their involvement is to the adoption process.**
- 6. Request the court order child-specific recruitment and the involvement of a PPAI agency to ensure the county agency utilizes all the adoptive resources available to help find potential adoptive placements for your clients.**

If a written motion is required, please contact Children’s Law Center. Also feel free to contact CLC with any questions on child-specific recruitment, the PPAI or any other issues regarding your state ward clients.

¹⁹ Ellis, R. *supra* note 1 at 2 citing, Bush, M. & Goldman, H. *The psychological parenting and permanency principles in child welfare: A reappraisal and critique*, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 52(2), 223-235 (1982) and Chambers, K., Zielewski, E.H., & Malm, K., *Older foster youths’ views on adoption and permanency*. Urban Institute Research Brief (2007).

²⁰ Child Trends, *supra* note 2 at 2. (Hennepin and Ramsey Counties each have designated Wendy’s Wonderful Kids child specific recruiters available to assist with permanency efforts, but utilizing a PPAI agency in addition to WWK will provide extra support).

²¹ *Id.*

²² Ellis, R., *Achieving Successful Adoptions: Voices of Prospective and Current Adoptive Parents from the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids Evaluation*, Child Trends, Washington D.C., 4 (2011).