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**DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE TESTIMONY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES
INCREASING ADOPTIONS FROM FOSTER CARE
MARCH 13, 2013**

INTRODUCTION

[The Donaldson Adoption Institute](#) respectfully submits this testimony on increasing adoptions from foster care for the record to the Committee on Ways and Means' Subcommittee on Human Resources related to its Feb. 27, 2013 hearing. The Adoption Institute is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research, policy and education think tank that conducts research and analysis in order to improve adoption-related laws, policies and practices.

At the Feb. 27 hearing, Chairman Reichert (R-WA) noted that "the federal government should continue to support efforts to increase adoptions" and that "these kids deserve our best efforts to ensure that they are adopted." One of the Adoption Institute's primary objectives is to make certain that children and youth in temporary care who are legally free for adoption move from foster care into permanent, loving, successful families. Our nationwide ["Keeping the Promise"](#) initiative, for instance, aims to expand an essential tool for achieving this goal: adoption support and preservation services, including adoption assistance subsidies, which not only can encourage adoptions, but also help to sustain them.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), coupled with financial incentives to states, has led to a significant increase in adoptions. In the 10 years preceding ASFA (1988-1997), approximately 211,000 children were adopted from care;¹ in the most recent 10 years (FY2002-2011), 524,495 children were adopted – roughly two and a half times as many. Even so, more than 104,000 children -- who are on average 8 years old – are waiting in foster care, typically for *over three years*, to be adopted by loving parents.² In addition, over 26,000 youth "aged out" of care, without families, in 2011 alone, and the percentage has been increasing.³ There are profound personal and social costs to these teens and young adults. Multiple research studies demonstrate the high risks these youth face for poverty, early parenthood, victimization, mental health problems, homelessness and incarceration.⁴ It is critically important to continue the adoption incentives to states to facilitate adoptions of youth in care, particularly older youth.

As this Subcommittee and Congress have long recognized, adoption provides a lifetime of benefits for children who cannot return to their biological families, including the emotional security of caring adults and a committed family to ensure that their needs are met. Research consistently shows that children in adoptive homes fare better than those without permanent families on adjustment measures, developmental outcomes such as cognitive abilities and educational achievement, and self-support capability in young adulthood.⁵ Research also demonstrates that adoption yields substantial cost savings versus foster care. One economist found that every dollar invested in the adoption of a child from care returns about three dollars in public and private benefits.⁶ Another study concluded that the government cost savings for the

50,000 children adopted annually from foster care ranges from \$1 billion to \$6 billion.⁷ Research and evidence, discussed below, indicate there are policy and practice interventions to effectively increase adoptions of children and youth in foster care.

SUBSIDIES INCREASE ADOPTIONS FROM THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

According to economic analyses, subsidies “have a positive and statistically significant effect on adoption rates”⁸ and “subsidy policy is the most important determinant of adoptions from foster care that is under the direct control of policymakers.”⁹ A Department of Health and Human Services’ evaluation found that “adoption subsidies are perhaps the single most powerful tool by which the child welfare system can encourage adoption and support adoptive families.”¹⁰ Another federal program assessment determined that subsidies “increase permanent placement of foster care children, leading to both improved child well-being and reduced federal and State spending [and are] a critical component of the continuum of care provided through the State-administered child welfare system.”¹¹

Subsidies reduce financial barriers for families adopting from care and help them meet the basic needs of their children; they also may include amounts to help pay for critical services such as healthcare, therapy or tutoring to address their children’s physical, mental, cognitive and developmental challenges. Adoption assistance helps many families adopting children from the child welfare system – the vast majority of whom are foster parents (54%) or relatives (31%) – who have very low incomes.¹² Nationally, nearly half (46%) of families adopting from care are at or below 200 percent of the poverty level.¹³

Many parents report they could not have afforded to adopt without a subsidy.¹⁴ Among adoptive and prospective adoptive parents of foster children in a multi-state study, the vast majority (81%) said subsidies were important to their decision to adopt, and more than half (58%) said they could not have done so without them.¹⁵ In a study of success factors associated with families’ adoption of children from care, two-thirds (66%) of parents said they needed the subsidy in order to adopt.¹⁶ In another study, the vast majority of adoptive and prospective adoptive parents of children in foster care (88%) reported that receipt of Medicaid was critical to their decision to adopt.¹⁷ Financial supports are also among the factors significantly associated with higher satisfaction in parenting children with special needs,¹⁸ and evidence links subsidies with adoption stability.¹⁹

FAMILIES NEED POST-ADOPTION SERVICES, WHICH CAN SUSTAIN ADOPTIONS

Most adopted children – because they suffered early deprivation, abuse or neglect, multiple placements, and/or emotional conflicts related to loss and/or maltreatment – come to their new families with elevated risks for developmental, physical, psychological, emotional or behavioral challenges. Research indicates that adoptive families use clinical services at three to five times the rate reported by birth families, and those adopting from care have the highest rate of seeking a range of counseling and mental health services.²⁰ Studies of children in foster care consistently find that many (ranging from 40% to 80% across studies) have significant mental health needs.²¹ Adopted children also are more likely than their non-adopted peers to score in the clinical range on standardized behavior problem measures. Given the traumatic life experiences these children have endured, a substantial proportion of children placed for adoption continue to have ongoing emotional and behavioral problems that may intensify as they age, and at least half of their families will seek counseling services.²²

The availability of post-adoption servicesⁱ has been linked to parents' greater ability and willingness to adopt children from care, and the lack of these services is a barrier to adoptions from care.²³ Studies of adoptive families consistently document their desire and need for post-adoption services.²⁴ The overall body of adoption research generally has linked receiving post-adoption services with more positive outcomes; conversely, having unmet service needs is linked with lower perceived parent-child relationship quality and more negative impact of the adoption on the family and marital relationship.²⁵ Studies on child welfare adoptive families indicate that the amount and quality of support that adoptive families receive contribute to permanency and positive adjustment,²⁶ and providing supportive services early in the placement is linked to more positive outcomes.²⁷

A 2011 HHS study found the vast majority (86%-100%) of parents with children who received a particular adoption-specific service felt it was "somewhat helpful" or "very helpful."²⁸ In earlier HHS research, families reported using an average of 13 different post-adoption services, saying that three-quarters of them were either very or extremely helpful, and 90 percent of families receiving these services found them very or extremely helpful.²⁹ In a New York study, over 80 percent of families responded that they were better off after receiving post-adoption services, and of the nearly 30 percent who had a child at risk of out-of-home placement, nearly three-quarters (73%) indicated the child was able to remain at home as a result of the services they received.³⁰ Massachusetts and Illinois child welfare agencies reported that the availability of post-adoption services was essential to ensure that placements remained stable.³¹

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCED POST-ADOPTION SUPPORTS

While the need for and benefit of adoption subsidies and post-adoption services are well established, challenges and opportunities remain to improve their quality and access to them.

- **Challenge:** Even with subsidies, one- to two-thirds of parents report they did not meet their children's needs, and some had to forego necessary services.³² The annual median adoption payment of \$5,820 is significantly lower than the federal government's lowest estimate (\$8,480) for how much it costs yearly to raise a child.³³
- **Recommendation:** Incentivize states to increase adoption assistance subsidy amounts. Modest payment increases of 10 percent could result in nearly 100 additional adoptions from foster care in a state in one year.³⁴
- **Challenge:** Monthly adoption subsidies, on average, are \$100-\$150 lower than foster care payments.³⁵ Among children adopted from care whose parents had previously fostered them, nearly one-third (30%) receive an adoption subsidy lower than their previous foster care payment.³⁶ Such discrepancies provide a financial disincentive to adoption from the very pool of parents who are most likely to adopt.
- **Recommendation:** Federal law should encourage parity between adoption assistance and foster care maintenance payments.
- **Challenge:** There are inadequate funding resources to meet the needs of all families who adopt children from foster care, through their childhood and youth. Parents report that they need, on average, six services that they do not receive.³⁷ Adoptive parents in several studies have rated counseling at the top of the list of services they had trouble getting.³⁸ Being forced to relinquish custody to child welfare agencies in order to obtain necessary mental health services is reported as a problem in at least half the states.³⁹ Several studies

ⁱ Such services include financial and medical supports, parent education, child and parent support services, case management, therapeutic counseling/interventions, advocacy, respite care, crisis intervention, residential treatment, and information and referral.

indicate that service needs may emerge and resurface at different points in the family life cycle and services must be available as needed.⁴⁰ While many exemplary services have been developed, primarily through federally funded demonstration projects and initiatives supported by state child welfare systems, funding constraints have led some to be terminated, others to be scaled back, and others to be offered on very limited bases.

- **Recommendation:** Establish a dedicated federal funding stream for post-adoption services, including long-term, continuum-of-care support. Evaluations of post-adoption programs conclude that being able to receive services for as long as they are needed, rather than for a time-limited period, is linked with more positive outcomes⁴¹ and a more family-focused approach appears more suitable.⁴² The Adoption Institute also supports Voice for Adoption's recommendation to require states to report Title IV-E adoption assistance program savings resulting from the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and programs for which the savings are used; and to mandate that states allocate a significant percentage of the savings to post-adoption services.
- **Challenge:** Lack of information about available services is a major barrier to families receiving needed help.⁴³ Parents report the most common reason for being unable to obtain a needed service was that provision was not stipulated in the subsidy agreement.⁴⁴ Neither the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 nor its implementing regulations (45 CFR § 1356.40(f)) require states to inform prospective parents about adoption assistance subsidies or other support services. HHS ACF Child Welfare Policy Manual (§8.2E) policy guidance provides that states are "responsible" for notifying parents of subsidies.
- **Recommendation:** Amend federal law to require state/county child welfare administrators to inform prospective adoptive parents about federally funded adoption subsidies and post-adoption services, much as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires states to inform prospective parents of the federal adoption tax credit.
- **Challenge:** Research on the efficacy of post-adoption services is in an early stage and few, if any, studies rise to the level of rigor needed to substantiate empirically based effectiveness.⁴⁵
- **Recommendation:** Require that some Adoption Opportunity grants fund evaluation of post-adoption services in order to identify the most effective interventions, producing the best outcomes, and create practitioner curricula and trainings to disseminate best practices for service provision to adoptive families.
- **Challenge:** Adoptive parents often report that counselors in mental health and family services agencies do not adequately understand adoption, trauma and other challenges affecting their children, and that it is hard to find specialized services.⁴⁶ Moreover, there is evidence that foster youth receiving mental health services from community providers generally do not show significant gains, and experts recommend the use of "adoption or permanency-competent" providers who can address their specialized needs.⁴⁷
- **Recommendation:** Design demonstration grants that would allow expert researchers, academics and organizations to develop adoption-competency mental health curricula and therapeutic training programs. In order to effectively serve the families with children adopted from foster care, it is critically important for service providers to understand the unique aspects of adoption and the developmental impact of inadequate early care and trauma.
- **Challenge:** For children who have ever used Medicaid for mental health services, approximately one-fifth have parents who found it difficult to use for mental health care.⁴⁸
- **Recommendation:** Increase Medicaid funding rates for mental health services so that more specialized providers will accept Medicaid.

I hope you will agree that enhancing adoption support and preservation services is in the best interests of children, families and the nation. Thank you for your attention to this vulnerable, underserved group of children and adolescents who are all too often overlooked.

Respectfully submitted,

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