

THE DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

Donaldson Adoption Institute July 23, 2014 Comments to
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions,
Subcommittee on Children and Families
Regarding July 8, 2014 Hearing on “Re-homing”

[The Donaldson Adoption Institute](#) (DAI) wishes to thank the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Subcommittee on Children and Families for its attention to the issue of “re-homing” by holding its July 8, 2014 hearing, “Falling Through the Cracks: The Challenges of Prevention and Identification in Child Trafficking and Private Re-homing.” DAI is pleased that the Subcommittee is addressing the need to educate professionals, such as teachers and doctors, about how to identify children in unstable families and interventions to help them, and that the Congressional Research Service, Government Accountability Office and several federal agencies are also studying the issue. As the Subcommittee knows, private custody transfers raise concerns about the quality of and access to pre- and post-adoption services for adoptive parents and their children, as well as the role of the Internet and social media in adoption.

The terms and language we use help shape our understanding and response to challenges facing these vulnerable children and youth. We therefore respectfully urge the Subcommittee, other Congressional Committees, federal agencies and the media to use a more accurate term, such as “extralegal custody transfer,” rather than “re-homing,” which traditionally has referred to pets and suggests a benign practice, when discussing cases of parents placing their children with unrelated adults without state approval or oversight.

Identifying Families At-Risk of Adoption Instability

While the Reuters investigative report found that most children (70%) who were “advertised” for placement online were adopted internationally, 8 percent had been born in the U.S. and it was unclear where the remaining 22 percent had been born. Additional research into child and parent demographics in such cases could help identify causes and interventions for unstable adoptions depending on where children are from, the circumstances under which they spent their early years, and parents’ characteristics.

Currently, there is very limited research following children who were adopted from U.S. foster care to age 18. Two recent studies, however, offer some insight into children’s adoption outcomes and post-adoption instability, though additional research is needed. One site of the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) study followed 330 children entering foster care from before age 4 to 18 and found that by age 16, 28 percent of those who were adopted (126 youth) had lived away from their families at some point after adoption and most of these placements were not through the foster care system.

New findings from an Illinois longitudinal study of children who exited foster care to adoption or guardianship and experienced “post-permanency discontinuity” (change in caregiver for child/youth after adoption/guardianship or premature ending of subsidy) showed that for 38 percent, subsidy payments to the family stopped prematurely and there is no record of reentry

into custody. For one-third of these children/youth, at least one of their caregivers died, but reasons are unclear for why the subsidies stopped for the remainder.

Improving Quality of and Access to Pre- and Post-Adoption Services

It is widely accepted among adoption professionals that parent preparation, education and support is vital for the stability of the adoption placement and for the long-term emotional well-being of all family members. Best-practice standards also require that it not only be a routine part of the application and placement process, but also must be integrated into a well-developed and accessible post-adoption service program.

There is ample support to justify funding pre- and post-adoption services and resources:

- One of the best predictors of placement stability and healthy parent-child relationships in adoptive families is the development of realistic expectations on the part of parents.
- A longitudinal study on the contribution of supportive resources to the well-being of “special needs” adoptive families found that those who received more services prior to finalization were more stable and experienced less conflict three years later.
- According to the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption 2013 [National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey](#), “those who have considered foster care adoption, and those who have not, see financial-support-related steps as making the biggest difference in the decision to adopt.” Of those who have considered it, from two-thirds (66%) to nearly 85 percent (83%) said that various post-adoption services and supports were “difference-makers” in decisions regarding foster care adoption.
- Research indicates that the amount and quality of support child welfare adoptive families receive contributes to family permanency and positive adjustment.

Yet, lack of information about available services is a major barrier to adoptive families receiving help. Parents report the most common reason for being unable to obtain a needed service was that provision was not stipulated in the subsidy agreement. Additionally, adoptive parents often say 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.

Federal efforts such as the recently announced HHS grant opportunities for a National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption/Guardianship Support and Preservation and National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative represent opportunities to enhance pre- and post-adoption supports, as well as develop interventions specifically to address the challenges uncovered by the Reuters report. Identification of and education around risk factors for disruption, dissolution and private custody transfer, as well as outreach to adoptive parents about the availability of resources, may also facilitate early intervention.

Additionally, pending legislation (HR4980) requiring states to spend 20 percent of adoption assistance/ADFC de-link savings on post-adoption/guardianship services should increase access to and quality of supports. Current Title IV-B funding levels, however, likely are insufficient to meet the demand of all eligible adoptive families - those who have adopted domestically and internationally - who need and could benefit from services. Indeed, recent DAI research shows that more than one-third of states have cut post-adoption services or subsidies in the last 10 years and only 21 states allow all types of adoptive families to access post-adoption services.

DAI therefore recommends that the federal government:

- Tailor funding for access to, quality of, and education around pre- and post-adoption services to the numbers and needs of families who have adopted children domestically and internationally,
- Require state/county child welfare administrators to inform prospective adoptive parents of children from foster care about adoption subsidies and post-adoption services, as the 2008 Fostering Connections law requires them to tell prospective parents about the federal adoption tax credit,
- Conduct research to understand the frequency and circumstances under which adoptive parents or guardians place their children in foster care through “voluntary placement agreements,” in addition to the implications and outcomes for children and parents, and
- Provide guidance to states to enact stronger laws - as Colorado, Florida, Louisiana and Wisconsin have done - to regulate “advertising” children for adoption, including through electronic media; monitoring such online activities and enforcing penalties against them; and requiring state approval and oversight of parental power delegation to non-relatives for more than a certain period of time.

Thank you again for your attention to the troubling issue of private custody transfer of children. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like additional information.

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