



Keeping the Promise **Joint Policy Recommendations**

As a coalition of partners, we believe that creating effective post adoption services and making them available to all who need them are primary challenges in the field of adoption and child welfare. If we hope to keep our promise to children and their families, an emphasis must be placed on making post adoption services available as an essential part of the adoption process and not only an emergency resource. We strongly encourage federal policymakers to help in shifting the paradigm away from simply placing children in families for adoption to providing the supports that families need to raise children to healthy adulthood. To that end, we recommend that efforts be made to:

- **Create a national task force to provide strategic planning and legislative leadership for the development of post-adoption services.** Composed of representatives from the U.S. Children's Bureau and the U.S. Department of State, as well as post-adoption experts, practitioners, and researchers, such a task force could assist in collecting information, discussing key issues, and drafting proposals/legislation to promote additional funding, policy changes, and practice improvements.
- **Develop and support research in and evaluation of post-adoption services.** As governments, foundations, service providers, and advocates consider how best to support adoptive families and fund post-adoption services, they need to be guided by outcome-based research and evaluation of post-adoption service models. The federal government should restructure existing evaluation requirements for its post-adoption services grants so that they emphasize outcome-based information. In addition, funding for research on post-adoption interventions should be increased so as to allow for the development of evidence-based best practices. Once such research is completed, HHS should assist in efforts to ensure it is systematically disseminated to adoption practitioners.
- **Establish government and private partnerships that will make services available and easily accessible to families and highlight communities of faith as a source for identifying and growing local hubs of post-adoption support.** An effort to make post-adoption services accessible to all families in need is a challenge that cannot be met by the government alone. The diversity of services needed requires the collaboration of a wide variety of private partners, including universities, hospitals, mental health professionals, and adoption agencies. It is also important to bear in mind that the most natural and abundant source of potential post-adoption support in most American communities is found in their churches and other houses of worship. These possess not only free facilities, but also are rich in relationship and human infrastructure. In addition, many adoptive families—motivated to adopt by their faith in the first place—are now eager to establish support groups and programs within their communities of faith.



- Eliminate all state policies that force parents to give up custody in order to receive services.** The Bazelon Center of Mental Health Law reports that 21 states have some type of relinquishment statute, requiring parents to relinquish custody to the state to access state-funded mental health services. Faced with the hard choice of receiving no services or relinquishing parental rights, thousands of families each year lose their children to state Child Protective Services. For adopted children who have already been through at least one relinquishment and placement into their adoptive home, this practice is especially damaging, exacerbating their early trauma and attachment challenges. Further, in some of these states, the relinquishment is legally considered abandonment and the parents are criminally prosecuted, resulting in fines, jail time, child support payments and loss of professional licensures.
- Provide access to post-adoption services regardless of the type of adoptive family.** At this point, only a handful of states allow children adopted internationally or through private domestic adoptions to access the support groups, respite programs, or counseling and therapies funded through state child welfare agencies. Most reserve these services only for children adopted from foster care. Although there were provisions within the Hague Convention for “promoting the development of adoption counseling and post adoption services in their states” families adopting internationally are still less likely to have access to post adoptive services than those adopting through foster care. While the number of adoption agencies and non-profit private child welfare organizations providing post adoptive services has increased, the demand for trauma-sensitive, attachment-focused services continues to outpace the supply. It is worth noting that children in need of interventions who do not receive appropriate and timely services will often end up in government-funded systems such as foster care, mental health or juvenile justice, costing society so much more than early interventions ever would.
- Ensure that services offered to adoptive families embrace best practice and are provided by adoption-competent professionals.** Adoptive families are outspoken about the unintentional harm caused by some professionals – mental health providers and others – when professionals do not understand the dynamics and impact of adoption and previous trauma on children’s overall development. Best practices must be articulated and developed into standards for working with adopted children and their families in post adoption, mental health, or other service provision settings. Once such standards are available, efforts must be made to ensure that they are practiced by a “workforce” of providers who are specially trained and have the knowledge and skills to ethically treat the needs of the adoption community. Finally, university, graduate and continuing education curricula on adoption issues need to be created for and provided to help inform the work of all professionals who work with adopted children and their families. Teachers, school counselors and psychologists, medical professionals, social workers and other mental health professionals would all benefit from training in this area.



- Minimize damage to children in the child welfare system and elsewhere.** The sad reality is that some of the issues that are sustained by children post adoption are ones that arose from their experience while in foster care. In order to reduce the need for services post adoption, efforts should be made provide sensitive nurturance after separation from birth families, minimize moves in care, find a permanent home as early as possible, and give support through transitions. In addition, the system should work to provide high quality mental health services to children in need while in care.
- Make pre-adoption training an integral part of the adoption process.** No one disagrees that an adoption is most likely to be successful when the adoptive family has been properly educated and prepared for the challenges of parenting and any unique challenges associated with parenting a post-institutionalized or post-traumatized child. Preparation services benefit all forms of permanency from adoption to kinship placement by strengthening the caregivers understanding of the unique needs of the child and the need to nurture the relational permanency needed, not just the legal permanence gained by way of the court. Adoption preparation services for both caregiver and child would ultimately translate to improved post adoption outcome measures. While federal law does require pre-adoptive training for foster and Hague adoptions, little is known about the quality and effectiveness of these trainings.
- Performance and outcome measures for child and states must be amended to include measures of post adoption placement and stability.** Federal Child and Family Service Reviews and financial incentive programs put a great deal of emphasis on the provision of permanency for children but do not put an equal emphasis on the maintenance of this permanency and stability. For instance, the adoption incentive program provides states an incentive to place a child from foster care for adoption but takes no action to remove the incentive if such an adoption disrupts. To address this disparity, federal and state governments should undertake a review of policies, evaluations, outcome measures and performance reviews to ensure that they appropriately address the need for stability and support post adoption.
- Federal funding for post-adoption services should be enhanced and improved.** Almost every one of the above recommendations has at its center the question of funding. A major reason for the current gap in post-adoption services is the lack of a dedicated and reliable source of federal funding. Policymakers should consider providing funding for post-adoption services that is both flexible and sustainable, allowing states to rely on the funding in the future to enable longer-term investments in their post adoption services infrastructure and to provide a range of adoption-competent post adoption service options to families to meet their diverse needs and to help coordinate existing services to better serve adoptive families. Public policy and child welfare officials at every level – federal, state, county and local – should re-examine their current budgets, staffing and other resources to determine whether sufficient priority is being given to helping families succeed as well as forming them. Going forward,

EVAN B. DONALDSON

adoptioninstitute



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post-adoption services should become a clearly defined, integral operational and programmatic component of adoption-related planning and financing at all levels. As a first step, states need to better coordinate funding and services that may be available but have not been made accessible to adoptive families. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) can assist states by providing technical assistance and provide strategies to address this need.

These policy recommendations were created in collaboration with and are endorsed by the following organizations; please note this list is not exhaustive:

The Child Welfare League of America, the North American Council on Adoptable Children, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Voice for Adoption¹, the Attachment & Trauma Network, the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, the National Council for Adoption, the Joint Council on International Children's Services, the Adoption Exchange Association, the Kinship Center, Lutheran Social Services of New England, Spence-Chapin Services to Families, The Cradle, Bethany Christian Services, the Center for Family Connections, the Center for Adoption Support and Education, the New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children, Wide Horizons for Children, Adoptions Together, Children's Home Society of North Carolina, Christian Alliance for Orphans, Harmony Adoptions, and Adoption Resources of Wisconsin.

¹ The Voice for Adoption is a coalition whose Board is composed of Adopt America Network, Adoption Exchange Association, Adoption Exchange Inc., Casey Family Services, Child Welfare League of America, Children Awaiting Parents, EMQ FamiliesFirst, Family Builders Network, Kinship Center, Latino Family Institute, New York Council on Adoptable Children, North American Council on Adoptable Children, Spaulding for Children-Michigan, and Three Rivers Adoption Council.