In 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available, there were 510,000 children in foster care, of whom 129,000 were waiting to be adopted. In 2006, 289,000 children exited foster care, with the following outcomes: 53% were reunified with a parent or caregiver; 17% were adopted; 11% were living with other relatives; 9% were emancipated; 5% were in a guardianship setting; 2% were transferred to another agency; and 2% ran away. It is important to note that the number of children “aging out” of the system each year (i.e. being emancipated) – meaning they reach the age of majority without ever having been placed with a permanent family – has increased steadily, reaching a record of 26,517 in 2006.¹

Children’s advocates, foster care alumni, policy makers, and other stakeholders are all calling for reform of the current foster care system. The research is clear that remaining in foster care is not good for kids. As Bass and colleagues state in their introduction to The Future of Children, “Foster care is intended to serve as a temporary haven for abused or neglected children who cannot safely remain with their families...even in the best situations, foster care is inherently fraught with uncertainty, instability, and impermanence” (p. 6). Bass’ review of the research finds that children in foster care are at high risk of poor educational outcomes, demonstrate low levels of school engagement, and are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities. Children in foster care are also more likely to have physical and mental health problems than children growing up not in foster care.²

“Aging out” of foster care before one is ready for adulthood and independence also has detrimental effects on children. As Courtney and colleagues explain, “Too old for the child welfare system, but often not yet ready to live as independent young adults, the … foster youth who “age out” of care each year are expected to make it on their own long before the vast majority of their peers” (p. 5).³ As part of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, Courtney used data from Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin to determine how foster youth were functioning as they transitioned into adulthood. In the most recent report from the


study, looking at the youth at age 21, the researchers found negative outcomes in multiple domains. Compared to a nationally representative sample of 21-year-olds who were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (“Add Health”), the foster care youth: were more than twice as likely to not have a high school diploma or GED; were less likely to be employed; reported a median income of $5,450 from employment over the previous year (compared to $9,120 for their Add Health peers); were more likely to describe their health as being fair or poor; were less likely to have health insurance; were more likely to have been pregnant; were more likely to have belonged to a gang (males only); were more likely to have pulled a gun or knife on someone; were more likely to report ever being arrested, convicted, and ever being arrested as an adult; were more likely to report being cut or stabbed by someone (males only); were less likely to report performing any unpaid volunteer or community service work in the past twelve months; and were less likely to report maintaining a positive relationship with an adult since age 14 (60% v. 77%).

This issue of the Adoption Advocate will present suggestions for improving the foster care system and insuring that more children currently residing in the foster care system find a safe permanency option. These suggestions should be implemented immediately and will result in favorable outcomes for children languishing in the foster care system. The recommendations fall into the following areas:

• Foster and adoptive parent recruitment and retention
• Increasing adoptions out of foster care
• Getting more families involved in the lives of foster children
• Support/training for frontline, child welfare workers
• Encourage states to provide care until age 21
• Focus on permanency
• Court-related changes
• Policy/legislative changes

Parent Recruitment and Retention---Issues

Foster and adoptive parent recruitment.
The most direct way to fix the foster care problem is to move more children sooner into permanency, whether that permanency is achieved by returning the child safely to his or her biological family or by the child being adopted out of the foster care system into a loving new family. For the latter---those children that will not be returning to their biological families---the most direct way to accomplish that is to recruit more foster and adoptive parents. (We suggest foster parent recruitment, as the majority (60%) of children adopted out of foster care are adopted by their foster parents4.) Fortunately for children waiting to be adopted, American culture is strongly pro-adoption, and surveys show that Americans’ pro-adoption sentiments apply to foster care adoption specifically. For example, a nationally representative survey released by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption in 2007 found that 72 percent of Americans viewed adoption favorably and 69 percent thought the government should do more to encourage adoptions out of foster care. Additionally, 30 percent had considered adoption, and 71 percent of those who had considered adoption had considered foster care adoption specifically. In other words, over 20 percent of Americans have considered adopting a child out of foster care.5 Furthermore, a team of researchers at the Urban Institute, using data from the National Survey of Family Growth, found that women’s interest in adopting increased by 38% between 1995 and 2002. This includes an increase of 35% among Black women, 29%


among Hispanic women, and 50% by lower-income women.6 

Unfortunately, Americans’ enthusiasm for foster care adoption often doesn’t translate into actual adoptions from foster care, largely because prospective adoptive parents either do not know where to begin the process or they do not receive the outreach and support they need from the public or private agency once they apply. In one nationally representative survey conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of NCFA, only 29 percent of respondents who had considered adopting or foster-parenting a child actually inquired with their state agency about doing so.7 In the Urban study cited above, while the percentage of women who expressed interest in adoption and actually took steps toward that end was 16% in 1995, it had declined to only 10% by 2002.

Parent retention. Parent recruitment is only half of the equation. Once recruited, foster parents need to be supported so that they remain in the system, and there is considerable evidence that this is not happening. Research has consistently found high yearly turnover rates among foster parents. According to adoption advocate Jayne Schooler, fifty percent of foster parents drop out within a year of their first placement, citing three main reasons: lack of respect; lack of effective support; and lack of relevant training.8 Similarly, an analysis of data from the 1991 National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents found that 40.5 percent of former foster parents listed lack of support from their agency as a reason for exiting the system.9

Equally worrisome is the fact that many potential foster parents are being lost before they even make it through the front door. Julie Wilson, from Harvard’s Kennedy School, analyzed data from four sources: the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS); a survey of state adoption directors from 43 states; case studies of adoption practices in Boston, Miami, and San Jose; and an analysis of adoption applicant case records in those three cities. They found that only one in 28 people who contact a child welfare agency actually adopts a child from foster care.10 Some of the problem may be with the initial phone call. Many of the individuals in the three cities complained that there was no answer, they left voicemail messages but got no return call, it was hard to find

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the right phone number, and they got bounced around from person to person before finding the correct staff member.

**Parent Recruitment and Retention--- Solutions**

There are multiple documented strategies for increasing parent recruitment and retention. For an excellent overview, see the study by the Urban Institute previously cited. Below are specific examples of recruitment and retention strategies that NCFA believes can make important differences in the lives of foster children waiting to be adopted.

**Public service announcements (PSAs).**

PSAs represent one area where a difference can be made quickly. In the Wilson study, many of the individuals who participated in their study in Boston, Miami and San Jose reported hearing about foster care adoptions through electronic and print media, such as *Wednesday’s Child* segments on television, billboards (in Miami they stated, “Adoption has been made easier”), PSAs, and booths at community festivals. NCFA has attempted to meet the responsibility to increase foster care awareness and adoption by developing radio and television public service announcements featuring country music recording artist and NCFA National Adoption Spokesperson Rodney Atkins. The PSAs are designed to educate listeners and viewers on the nation’s need for more adoptive and foster parents. To date, the radio public service announcement has been released to 1,250 country music radio stations and 125 Christian radio stations and been broadcast over 20,000 times. The television public service announcement was distributed to more than 200 television stations nationwide, has aired on the ABC-TV network, CNN and the USA Network and its cable subsidiaries, and was the first PSA shown by Wal-Mart’s in-house television network during National Foster Care Month in May, 2009.

**Child-specific campaigns.**

Research also suggests that campaigns may be most effective when they are “child-specific,” that is featuring specific children. *Wednesday’s Child* campaigns are examples of child-specific efforts. The efforts made by Children Unlimited, a private adoption agency in South Carolina, are highlighted in a paper on recruitment from the National Center for Resource Family Support. Children Unlimited reported that 22% of their inquiries and 10% of completed adoptions over a nine-month period came from child-specific print media campaigns. Another example of a child-specific focus is the adoptuskids.org website, sponsored by the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children & Families, and the Department of Health & Human Services. With the mission of recruiting and connective foster and adoptive families with waiting children across the country, AdoptUsKids provides a national photolisting of children waiting in foster care.

**First contact.**

Public service campaigns are only useful if, when people respond to them, that subsequent interaction is successful. Wilson and colleagues recommend that agencies have specialized adoption hotlines to ensure that individuals who call will be responded to in a timely, professional fashion. Agencies should also have a very clear road map of the adoption process ready and available for potential adopters. Finally, they recommend that the first contact emphasis be placed on recruitment and not on screening out prospective parents who may not be appropriate.

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Use of more federal dollars for recruitment. States should also use more federal dollars for parent recruitment. According to an analysis conducted by NCFA of states’ Child and Family Services (CFS) 101 forms, while 22% of children in foster care are waiting to be adopted, on average, states are only spending 1.2 to 1.3% of available federal funds on parent recruitment and training ($102 million out of an available $7.9-8.5 billion). As the report argues, “States’ decision to allocate relatively paltry amounts of federal funding toward parent recruitment and training services results in children aging out of the system unnecessarily. Increased emphasis among the states on parent recruitment and training is necessary to build on the success of ASFA and improve outcomes for children in care.” Spending more money is only useful if the money is being spent on activities that work. More research is required to know what types of parent recruitment efforts are most effective. On a more long-term basis, researchers need to examine the factors that motivate relatives to adopt or serve as guardians for their kin.

Public-private partnerships. Public-private partnerships have shown promising results in both reaching prospective adoptive parents and keeping them in the system. With public-private partnerships, state and private agencies work together to recruit, train and retain foster and adoptive parents. For example, the One Church, One Child program works to increase the number of African American children adopted out of foster care by actively recruiting permanent adoptive homes (see http://home.earthlink.net/~nationalococ/). As one state example, in Maryland, One Church, One Child works directly with local social service departments. This strategy may be especially important for minority families. In the study cited above by Wilson, the authors review research which finds that it is especially difficult to recruit and retain minority families and that public agencies are increasingly contracting with “minority-controlled agencies” to reach these families.

Private agencies are also well-respected for their ability to provide a “seamless system” of support services, including post-placement services, for adoptive and foster parents from the first inquiring phone call on. They are also well-regarded for their record of making adoptive and foster parents feel valued throughout the process. For example, Bethany Christian Services, one of the nation’s largest private adoption agencies, involves foster and adoptive parents in its recruitment efforts and provides financial rewards to families who successfully recruit other foster families. By involving foster and adoptive parents in the agency’s important work, Bethany Christian Services sends parents the message that they are equal partners in the important work of finding families for children. Expanding the role of public-private partnerships in recruiting, training and retaining adoptive and foster parents will help alleviate the high caseloads with which public agencies typically struggle, allow more targeted recruitment efforts, and ultimately lead to more children being adopted out of foster care.

Making sure agency staff knows what works for retaining families. The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning identifies multiple factors that increase the likelihood of foster parent retention. If agencies that work with families are aware of and embrace these principles, increased retention will be more likely. They are:

- Foster parents have a positive relationship with agency, characterized by sharing information, support, and mutual respect
- Foster parents understand their rights and responsibilities and what is expected of them
- Foster parents have access to training
- Foster parents have access to support from caseworkers and more experienced foster parents


Training. It is clear that agencies, programs, and governments need to make sure that appropriate training is available for foster adoptive parents. Children often enter care as a result of abuse and neglect that truly leaves them emotionally fragile. One example of the type of training that can make a huge difference in the success of a foster care/ adoption placement is Trauma Informed Assessment and Preparation (TIAP). Jayne Schooler describes TIAP as a “purposeful, therapeutic approach to the assessment and preparation process for foster and adoptive parents” to help close the gap between expectations and reality.\textsuperscript{14} Trauma-competent adoptive and foster parents:

- Understand the impact that childhood trauma can have
- Understand the unique needs and strengths of the child who has survived the trauma
- Understand the impact on the family of parenting/being a sibling to these children
- Understand the demands of the relationship
- Understand what services are needed

Increasing Adoptions Out of Foster Care---Issues

Moving beyond parent recruitment and retention, to further promote and increase adoptions out of foster care, it is vital to know what factors successfully predict adoption. Hansen and Hansen, economists at the University of Mary Washington and American University, used foster care data from across the states to determine the most important determinants of adoptions out of foster care. They found that: “the size of the adoption assistance payment is the only policy variable that is clearly and positively correlated with success in achieving adoption for waiting children” (p. 3).\textsuperscript{15} In fact, using a linear model to predict number of adoptions out of foster care, they found that an increase of $36 in the adoption assistance subsidy correlated with 10 additional adoptions.

Increasing Adoptions Out of Foster Care---Solutions

Adoption subsidies. There are several strategies for increasing the number of adoptions out of foster care. The first, as suggested by the above research, is to make adoption subsidies for families adopting out of foster care uniform and standardized across states. A survey of almost 250 families conducted by Children’s Rights in 2005 found that 81\% of parents said the availability of adoption subsidies was important in their decision to adopt, and 58\% said they could not adopt without a subsidy.\textsuperscript{16}

Funding for pre- and post-adoption support. A second solution is to increase funding that focuses on pre- and post-adoption support services. Families must not feel that they are on their own in deciding to adopt out of foster care. The 2008 Congressional Interns at the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) provide an excellent list of services that would promote adoption out of foster care, including: support groups for parents, adopted children, and other children in the home; professional counseling services; respite care services; and educational conferences for adoptive families.\textsuperscript{17} The need for support services was


\textsuperscript{17} Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute’s 2008 Foster Youth Internship Program. (2008).
highlighted by a recent news story from the United Kingdom, in which a survey found that the number of disrupted adoptions doubled in the past five years (from 26 to 57). The advocacy group Adoption UK is cited as saying that they believe the increase in the number of disruptions reflects insufficient support and preparation for adoptive families.18

Getting More Individuals Involved in the Lives of Foster Children---Issues

It is important to make the American public aware that becoming a foster parent or adopting is not the only way to help; Americans need to be encouraged to simply get involved in the lives of children in this country. As the Urban report on foster parent recruitment and retention cited above states, “There are many ways to support the foster care adoption process other than by adopting. With so many individuals interested in adopting but not taking steps, the field might consider strategies to encourage these individuals to support foster care adoption in other ways” (p. 24).

Getting More Individuals Involved in the Lives of Foster Children---Solutions

One example of a national campaign working toward this goal is Raise Me Up, funded by Casey Family Programs. With the motto, “You just have raise your hand/raise awareness/raise your voice and say you’ll help”, Raise Me Up is national campaign committed to giving individuals a concrete way to make a difference in the lives of children in their communities. The approach is three-pronged:

• Raise Your Hand links individuals to opportunities to volunteer, mentor, or make a donation
• Raise Awareness connects people to local events designed to strengthen children and families and increase public awareness about foster care
• Raise Your voice helps individuals get involved with efforts to lobby elected officials at the local, state, and national levels to support children in foster care

For more information visit www.raisemeup.org

Furthermore, in their report on strategies for improving the foster care system, the 2009 Congressional Interns at CCAI stress the importance of mentoring. They argue for two federal policy changes to promote mentoring: allowing foster care maintenance payments to be used for extracurricular and social activities and giving foster parents the authority to allow youth in their care to participate in extracurricular activities.19 Legislation such as the Foster Care Mentoring Act described below would further promote the role of mentors in foster children’s lives.

Support/Training for Frontline Child Welfare Workers---Issues

A strong child welfare staff is crucial to both support children and families in the foster care system and to help facilitate children’s transitions out of foster care. However, the situation is dire among child welfare and social service workers in the foster care system. Problems stem largely from high vacancy rates and high turnover rates. In a survey of 42 states conducted in 2004, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) found that, for child protective service workers, the average vacancy rate was 8.5% and the average turnover rate was 22.1%. These high rates are, in no doubt, largely due to low wages. The average salary for

18 Bennett, R. (2009, July 10). Number of adopted children returned to care has doubled in five years. The Times. Retrieved from http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/families/article6675966.ece

child protective service workers was $35,553, which is lower than salaries for nurses, public school teachers, police officers, and firefighters. In the most extreme cases, these deficits in the child welfare workforce result in true tragedy. For example, according to a recent article in The Miami Herald, it was discovered in July of 2009 that more than 70 child welfare workers in Florida falsified records over the course of two years. As a result, 14 children were left in unsafe homes and six children were temporarily lost track of. When questioned, workers blamed the falsifications on unduly high caseloads. While the Child Welfare League of America recommends that case workers have no more than 15 foster care cases at any one time, the Department of Children and Families in Florida does not cap caseloads. They reported that the average caseload in Florida is 14-22 cases per caseworker.

In all but the most extreme cases, these challenges with the workforce are not insurmountable. If the reasons for high vacancies and high turnovers can be identified, then they can be addressed and fixed. In the APHSA survey cited above, state administers reported that the two biggest problems with recruitment and hiring were the perceived imbalance between the demands of the job and the compensation and the fact that starting salaries were not competitive with comparable positions. Furthermore, when asked about factors contributing to turnover, the two most severe problems reported were workloads that were too high and demanding and caseloads being too high.

Support/Training for Frontline Child Welfare Workers—Solutions

Additional funds to improve conditions for workers. The issues of insufficient salary and too demanding a workload can be addressed, but doing so requires federal leadership and funding. The APHSA study found that states reported they could not implement any strategies that required new resources, so additional funds must be directed toward child welfare workforce issues. With additional funds, money could go toward areas that have been identified as making a difference retaining workers. These include: reducing caseloads, increasing salaries, improving supervision, creating career ladders and opportunities for professional growth, and improved training.

Different hiring practices. A report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlights a change in hiring practices that was made in Michigan that translated to lower caseloads for caseworkers, which, in turn translated to better care for children and families. In 2001, the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) instituted a central hiring and training system. As a result, vacancies among child welfare workers that had previously taken four months to fill were being filled in two weeks. This meant that caseworkers no longer had to take on the caseloads of workers that had left during the four months when a replacement was being hired. Michael Downer, the director of personnel for FIA’s human services office, explained why the new system worked: “The key to the whole process was having a centrally managed pool of extra staff that we could hire, put through training, and manage from here in Lansing...So, if we knew that someone is needed in Alpena County, we could ship a person to Alpena County” (p. 20). They found that, as a result of the reforms, not only were vacancies being filled faster, but FIA was also attracting stronger applicants than they ever had before. There is also a new training facility tied in with the hiring pool, meaning that new hires are not only starting more quickly, but

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they are also starting better trained and more prepared. 22

Federal workforce initiatives. The changes listed above are local, although they are dependent on federal dollars. There are also federal initiatives that could make a difference. In the recommendations from the CCAI 2008 Foster Youth Interns, the interns put forward a series of suggestions for ways to increase the number of qualified social workers and professionals who are working in the foster care system. These include:

- establishing a National Foster Care Services Corps which would help communities that have a large number of job openings find qualified workers
- using federal funding for states to provide bonuses for child welfare workers who serve for 5, 10, 20, etc. years of service
- encouraging states to include actual foster care youth in child welfare workforce trainings. 23

Along similar lines, in the introduction to The Future of Children special issue on foster care, the authors recommend a federal loan forgiveness program for social work students. As with established loan forgiveness programs in other disciplines (e.g. health professionals who participate in health disparities research; lawyers who practice public interest law), students who graduate and work for a child welfare agency for a specific amount of time would have their loans forgiven. 24


Encourage States to Provide Care Until Age 21—Issues

As reviewed in the introduction, youths who age out of foster care at age 18 show significant negative outcomes, as compared to nationally representative samples of their peers.

Encourage States to Provide Care Until Age 21—Solutions

Recent legislation has begun to address this issue. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 amends Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to give states the option of covering children in foster care, as well as certain children in an adoption or guardianship placement, after age 18 (for full text, see http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-6893). Using data from the Midwest Study described in the introduction, Courtney and colleagues “…find strong evidence that allowing foster youth to remain in care past age 18 promotes the pursuit of higher education, and more qualified evidence that extending care may increase earnings and delay pregnancy” (p. 2). 25

For example, 67% of 19-year-olds who were still in care were enrolled in a school or training program (compared to 31% for those who were not still in care). Furthermore, 37% of the 19-year-olds still in care were enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared to 12% for those not in care. Furthermore, individuals who remained in care were 38% less likely to become pregnant by age 19.

There is also a cost-benefit argument to be made for extending care to age 21. According to Amy Dworsky of Chapin Hall, the average annual cost in Illinois of extending foster care to

age 21 is $38,000 per youth. However, the average increase in lifetime earnings that can be expected from youth remaining in care and completing postsecondary education is $72,000. This translates to a 2:1 benefit-to-cost ratio. 

Focus on Permanency---Issues

The passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 increased the focus on permanency for children; that is achieving reunification or adoption for children in a timely fashion. The landmark report from the Pew Commission on Foster Care states permanency as one of the guiding principles of its work: “All children must have safe, permanent families in which their physical, emotional and social needs are met” (p. 12).

Focus on Permanency---Solutions

Agencies need to adopt programs and practices that promote permanency. For example, researchers at Chapin Hall recently evaluated the Legal Aid’s Foster Children’s Project (FCP) in Palm Beach County, FL. The program was designed to expedite children’s exits to permanency (reunification or adoption) by providing legal representation to children ages three and under who entered shelter care. The evaluation found that children who were represented by FCP exited to permanency at a much higher rate than children not represented by FCP.

Court-Related Problems---Issues

A report from the GAO clearly identifies issues with the court system as a barrier in moving children from foster care into permanent homes. In a survey of all 50 states, the GAO found that the barriers were due to the following factors: insufficient numbers of judges and attorneys to handle the caseload; lack of cooperation between courts and child welfare agencies; and inadequate training of judges and attorneys in child welfare cases. NCFA, in our policy priorities, states that, “One of the greatest problems with foster care today is dysfunctional family courts that trap children in a lengthy process of hearings and legal technicalities, with the result that they grow older in foster care and less likely to be adopted.” Clearly, this is an area where change is necessary and could have meaningful impacts.

Court-Related Problems---Solutions

15 of 22 provision of ASFA. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFSA) requires that parental rights be terminated for children who have been in foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months. This is intended to move children out of unsafe situations and into positions where they can be eligible for adoption. However, a GAO
A report in 2003 found that states exempt a large number of children from the “15 of 22” provision, especially for children who may be more difficult to place, such as adolescents. (This information was based on data from only nine states, as the other states did not even collect data on use of the 15 of 22 provision.)

Officials in the six states that the GAO visited as part of the report did say, however, that the establishment of specific timeframes, such as the 15 of 22 provision, did help states focus their priorities on finding permanent placements for children. This suggests that this is an important tool which, if used appropriately and on a more wide-spread basis, could help move children out of foster care in a more timely manner.

Using flexibility in adoption incentive payments to increase the number of people working on child welfare cases. Consider this example from the GAO report:

...[W]e found that some states are taking advantage of the flexibility allowed in the use of adoption incentive payments to increase the number of people working on child welfare cases. During our site visit to Oregon, child welfare officials told us that the lack of legal resources has inhibited the state’s ability to quickly pursue court cases against birth parents to terminate their parental rights and thereby free a child for adoption. To address this issue, Oregon has used its adoption incentive payments to contract for additional lawyers to litigate these cases. According to our survey results, 6 states have used the incentive payments to hire or contract additional legal staff and 13 states have used these funds to hire or contract additional social workers (p. 39). This creative use of funds to increase the legal staff working on cases could prove to be an important solution. According to findings from the Fostering Results project from a survey of 2,241 judicial officers nationwide, for judges for whom abuse and neglect cases make up more than 25% of their docket, 52% say that overcrowded court dockets delay finding safe, permanent homes for children in foster care. That percentage goes up to 64% for judges for whom abuse and neglect cases make up more than 75% of their docket. Furthermore, 46% of the judges reported that the lack of available services for children and families in need was their greatest frustration with the child welfare system.

Clearly, this is an area where an infusion and/or redistribution of resources could make a significant difference.

Legislation---Issues
There are numerous pieces of recently passed and pending legislation which, if passed, could greatly improve the lives of children in foster care in this country. There is also a need to set-up mechanisms to ensure that passed legislation is uniformly enforced across the country.

Legislation---Solutions
Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. States should take advantage of the opportunity provided by the recently passed Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act to increase the age at which youths legally exit the system from 18 to 21. This would give youths in foster care more time to form family connections and prepare for life as an independent adult.

Tax credits. Research has shown that government financial support for adoptive parents leads to higher adoption rates for children in foster care, however some of those supports are scheduled to disappear. Improvements to the


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Adoption Tax Credit made under the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001, need to be reauthorized prior to their scheduled sunset in 2011. EGTRRA increased the amount parents of children adopted out of foster care were eligible to claim under the tax credit from $6,000 per special needs child (and $0 per non-special needs child) to $10,000 for any child. EGTRRA also mandated that parents of children adopted from foster care do not have to document their adoption-related expenses to claim the credit, thus removing a lot of confusing paperwork from the process and increasing the number of adoptive parents claiming the tax credit. If these improvements are allowed to sunset in 2011, adoptive parents will receive far less government support than they are currently receiving, and fewer children will be adopted from foster care. It is vital that legislation be passed to keep the tax credit provisions of EGTRRA from expiring.

ICPC. The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) establishes uniform legal and administrative procedures which govern the interstate placement of children. It was originally designed in 1960 to make it easier to place children across state lines. However, over time, the flaws in the ICPC became apparent. The ICPC suffered from lack of accountability and enforcement, outdated bureaucratic processes resulting in long delays in private agency adoptions. As a result of these problems, the Association of Administrators of the ICPC (a subgroup of APHSA) proposed regulations to reform the ICPC in 2007. However, critics of the ICPC believe the reforms did not go far enough. For example, NCFA recommended removing private placements by licensed child placement agencies from ICPC completely. This would allow states to focus more on children in public care, who were the intended audience of the Compact initially. However, this did not occur and, in fact, NCFA argues that the new ICPC actually gives the receiving states increased authority for supervising a private agency that arranged an adoption. As NCFA argued in 2007, “The ICPC was a broken system long before APHSA accepted responsibility for drafting new standards, but the new proposed regulations make a bad system potentially even worse” (p. 423). According to APHSA, as of July 15, 2009, 10 states have enacted the new ICPC (Ohio, Alaska, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma). (Information obtained from Carla Fults, personal communication, July 15, 2009.)*

Foster Care Mentoring. For children remaining in foster care, having a mentor can make a huge difference. An example of a piece of legislation that supports this is Senator Landrieu’s Foster Care Mentoring Act of 2009, introduced in May of 2009. The bill provides $15 million to establish statewide foster care mentoring programs, as well as $4 million to establish a national public awareness campaign to recruit mentors. It also allows for up to $20,000 in federal student loan forgiveness for volunteers who mentor a foster child. (See http://landrieu.senate.gov/issues/adoption.cfm) In the press release introducing the bill, Landrieu’s office cites research which finds that children who are mentored are 45% less likely to use illicit drugs, 59% more likely to succeed in school, and 73% more likely to attain higher life achievement goals.

Putative Father Registry. Largely as a result of two high profile cases in the 1990s in which biological fathers disputed adoptions, there has been increased attention paid to the role and

35 Ibid.
rights of biological fathers. Some potential adoptive families might worry that, even after an adoption is finalized, the biological father could surface and contest the adoption. This issue has been addressed by The Protecting Adoption and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Act of 2009 (S.939). Introduced by Senator Landrieu on April 30, 2009, the act establishes the creation of a National Putative Father Registry and provides grants to states to create individual state registries which feed into the national registry. (Several states already have state registries, the most recent being South Carolina, which was signed into law in June of 2009.) The way the registry works is that men who are having extramarital sexual relations with a woman have the option of submitting their names and contact information, as well as the names of their sexual partners, to the registry. Then, before a private or public agency or attorney is facilitating an adoption, the registry can be checked first to ensure that the putative father is contacted and notified. Not only would this bill serve to make sure that men have the opportunity to waive their parental right to a child conceived out of wedlock, but it would also help reduce the number of adoptions being disrupted or disrupted by men who many not have even been aware that they fathered a child.37 The bill also provides for the establishment of a national media campaign to inform individuals of the existence of the registry and of the role that registry could play in pending adoptions.

Resource Family Recruitment and Retention Act of 2009. This bill (S. 410), introduced by Senator Blanche Lincoln in February of 2009, is an example of legislation designed to address the issue of family recruitment and retention highlighted above. Among other things, it would amend Title IV-B to allow for awarding grants to states who are implementing innovative programs in the areas of foster parent recruitment, training, retention, and support. This would allow for states to engage in more of the activities highlighted in the recruitment and retention section above.


Conclusion
There is no reason that the foster care system in this country should be in its current state of insufficiently serving children and families. Surveys consistently show more than adequate support for and interest in foster care adoptions to ensure loving, permanent families for every child in state care. The problems, therefore, lie in multiple areas: insufficient and ineffective parent training and recruitment efforts; a lack of focus on increasing adoptions out of foster care; not enough families in this county involved in the lives of children in foster care; the need for more support and training for child welfare workers; the need to encourage states to provide care until age 21; a lack of focus on permanency; problems with the courts that deal with children and families around the issues of foster care; and legislation that needs to be passed. This paper provides concrete solutions to all of these problems. These are solutions that were chosen because they can be implemented relatively quickly and would have near-immediate results. It is NCFA’s hope that individuals, agencies, local governments, and the federal government will begin to implement these solutions in order to live up to our potential as a compassionate nation that cares for its children.
*Subsequent revisions to the ICPC proposal by APHSA have addressed several of NCFA’s initial concerns, but NCFA suggests additional revisions are necessary before NCFA could fully endorse the proposed new ICPC.