



## Additional Strategies Would Help Address the Barriers to Successful Adoptions

### *at a glance*

Barriers to successful adoptive placements include finding families who want to adopt children with special needs, a lack of information about the children available for adoption, potential parents' confusion and frustration in navigating the adoption process, a lack of post-adoption services, and the unwillingness of relatives to disrupt a biological family.

Lead agencies, their subcontractors, and the department use various strategies to address these barriers. They use multiple strategies for recruiting adoptive parents, matching adoptive families with available children, and helping ensure post-adoption permanency. The department has developed initiatives to assist lead agencies in recruiting adoptive families and finding placements for children.

To better ensure successful adoption placements, the department and lead agencies should improve potential adoptive families' access to information, address frustrations and make the process less cumbersome, change policies and practices, and establish lead agency positions to help manage post-adoption services.

### Scope

At the request of the Legislature, OPPAGA examined how community-based care lead agencies contract with adoption agencies and seek successful placements of foster children with adoptive families. This is the second of two reports and answers four questions about barriers to adoption.

- What barriers exist to making successful adoptive placements for foster children?
- Are any barriers unique to making successful adoptive placements for minority foster children?
- What strategies have lead agencies and the Department of Children and Families used to address barriers to making adoptive placements?
- What other strategies could the department and lead agencies use to maximize the extent to which foster children can be successfully placed with adoptive families?

A companion report examines how lead agencies contract with adoption service providers and transfer cases between foster care and adoption case managers.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Adoption is a permanency option considered by the state when a foster child cannot be safely reunified with his or her biological parents. Most of the children available for adoption from the state's child welfare program are considered special needs children. Such children are those in the custody of the Department of Children and Families or a licensed private child placing agency who meet at least one of the following special needs criteria: at least eight years old, mentally retarded, physically handicapped, emotionally handicapped, black or of racially mixed heritage, a member of a sibling group

<sup>1</sup> *Lead Agencies Structure Their Adoption Programs in a Variety of Ways*, [OPPAGA Report No. 08-05](#), January 2008.

being placed for adoption together, or has significant emotional ties with the foster parents.

The process of finalizing an adoptive placement is complex and involves several entities and multiple steps for both the child and the adoptive parents.

The process for moving a child toward adoption involves participation by the Department of Children and Families, community-based care lead agencies, other contracted providers, and the court system. The child welfare system is highly outsourced, and responsibilities are divided between the department and community-based lead agencies. The department is responsible for program planning; informing lead agency staff about changes in the law, rules, and policies and procedures; training lead agency adoption staff; and contacting the Federal Bureau of Investigation to conduct background checks on potential adoptive families. The department's Child Welfare Legal Services staff also assist case managers with the legal components of the adoption process and working with the court system.<sup>2</sup>

Lead agencies are private, community-based agencies or county governments responsible for planning, administering, and delivering client services; ensuring that services are delivered in accordance with state and federal laws; and coordinating with other local public or private agencies that offer services for clients. The 19 lead agencies hold 22 contracts with the department making them contractually responsible for providing foster care and related services to children removed from their homes, including case management and adoption services.<sup>3</sup> To implement their foster child adoption programs, some lead agencies subcontract for the provision of these services, others provide these services with their own staff, and some use a combination of in-house staff and subcontractors.<sup>4</sup>

There are multiple steps in moving a child through the system to become available for adoption. As shown in Exhibit 1, the process begins when the child's case manager determines that reunification with the biological family may not be possible.<sup>5</sup> Once the case manager makes this determination, the case manager schedules a meeting called the permanency staffing, which includes the case manager, the foster parent(s), and others involved in the case, such as child advocates and mental health professionals. At the permanency staffing, participants decide whether adoption is in the best interest of the child.

If adoption is considered the best option, a department Child Welfare Legal Services attorney schedules a permanency hearing with the applicable court. Federal law stipulates that a court-held permanency hearing must take place within 12 months of the child's removal from his or her home. Once the judge determines that the child's official permanency goal is adoption, Child Welfare Legal Services begins the process of terminating the biological parents' rights. Attorneys must initiate this process within 30 days of the permanency hearing. During this time, lead agency staff are responsible for conducting a diligent search to determine if there are relatives who would want to have custody of the child.

Once the initial legal proceedings are complete, the child is considered available for adoption and the state focuses its efforts on finding the child a suitable placement. In most areas of the state, lead agency adoption specialists (either lead agency staff or subcontractors) conduct recruitment efforts to find an adoptive family for the child. In others areas, this task is completed by the original case manager. Recruitment efforts include placing the child's profile on the Adoption Exchange, which is an automated statewide list of potential adoptive parents and adoptable children. The department and lead agencies can view and edit the information on potential adoptive parents and the children available for adoption on this website. The public can view children without an identified placement.

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<sup>2</sup> Child Welfare Legal Services attorneys represent the Department of Children and Families during the various stages of dependency proceedings. Their responsibilities include advising investigators, case managers, and administrators regarding legal sufficiency for shelter, dependency, and termination of parental rights petitions and other issues.

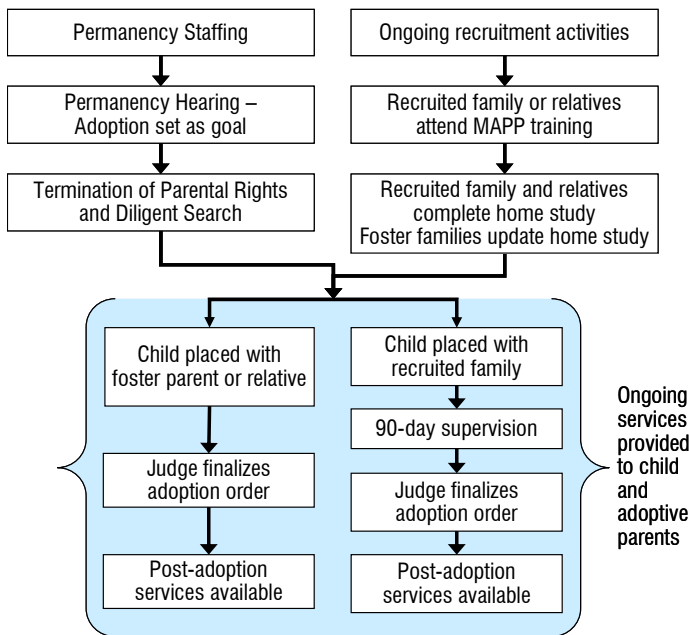
<sup>3</sup> As of September 1, 2007, there were 22 contracts and 19 lead agencies because two prior lead agencies failed and one voluntarily dismantled, and their contracted responsibilities were assumed by other lead agencies.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of these models and an exhibit showing the model used by each lead agency, see [OPPAGA Report No. 08-05](#).

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<sup>5</sup> Factors that influence this decision include the parents' attitude toward reunification with their child, visiting patterns and degree of interest in the child during visitation, and substance abuse history; whether the parents accept services intended to help them address problems that led to their child being placed in foster care; and the child's attachment to the biological parents.

**Exhibit 1  
The Adoption Process for Foster Children  
Involves Several Steps**



Source: Department of Children and Families.

Potential adoptive parents must go through training, a home study, background screening, and a matching process to make sure they are the best placement for a particular child. Families interested in adoption can access information on children available for adoption and how the adoption process works from many sources. Anyone interested in adopting can call 1-800-96-Adopt, the state’s adoption resource center and/or visit the Adoption Exchange website. In addition, the department’s website, lead agency websites, and the resource center have information about the adoption process that assists potential adoptive parents in deciding whether or not to pursue adopting a child with special needs.

The next steps for potential adoptive parents vary depending on whether they are new to the state foster care system, relatives of the child in question, or are already foster parents. Those new to the system must attend parenting classes and relatives are encouraged to do so, and both groups must complete a home study. These parenting classes, called the Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting (MAPP), are designed to prepare potential adoptive parents in how to address the special needs of children in foster care and to self-evaluate their ability to provide a home to one of

these children. Foster parents wishing to adopt have already received this training as part of their licensing process and do not need to repeat this step.

After completing parenting training, a lead agency or a subcontracted provider conducts a home study of the prospective adoptive family. The home study evaluates the strengths, weaknesses and overall ability of a family to provide a supportive environment for the child. Home study assessments are based on interviews with family members, references, and an in-home evaluation of living conditions. Specifically, they evaluate the health of family relationships, the family’s financial stability, and reasons for seeking an adoption. Lead agencies also request the department to submit request for background checks to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and conduct a review of abuse hotline calls on all members of the household over the age of 12. Foster parents wishing to adopt must update their foster care home study

Once potential adoptive parents have completed parenting classes and home studies, case managers and/or adoption specialists work to match children without an identified placement to an adoptive family. Staff match the needs of a child or sibling group with the strengths of the family in order to place children with the most appropriate family. Staff also determine the family’s eligibility for financial adoption assistance. The state offers many types of financial assistance to families who adopt children with special needs, including

- reimbursement of non-recurring expenses up to \$1,000 to cover legal and other costs incurred in finalizing an adoption,
- maintenance adoption subsidies ranging from \$296.80 to \$365.60 per month to assist in the support of special needs children, and <sup>6</sup>
- medical subsidies covering services refused by sources such as Medicaid, Children’s Medical Services, or the family’s health insurance for children with exceptional physical, mental, or emotional conditions identified prior to the adoptive placement.

<sup>6</sup> The amount of maintenance adoption subsidies can vary based on factors such as the age and needs of the child and the foster care rate at the time of adoption.

The Department of Children and Families and lead agencies finalized 3,079 foster child adoptions in Fiscal Year 2006-07. As of June 30, 2007, 3,629 foster children were available and awaiting adoption.

According to department data, in Fiscal Year 2006-07, 38.3% of finalized adoptions were with foster parents, while 36.2% were with relatives of the child. Recruited families accounted for the remaining 23.4% of all finalized adoptions.<sup>7</sup>

Exact Information is not available on lead agency adoption expenditures or budget allocations. In Fiscal Year 2006-07, the department reports that the lead agencies spent approximately \$142 million on adoption programs. However, this figure is estimated. Lead agencies receive a set amount of funding each fiscal year as specified in their contracts. Some of this funding is dedicated to specific uses such as adoption, but the majority can be used for multiple child welfare purposes and lead agencies have discretion on how to spend these funds. Lead agencies are not required to track the amounts actually spent on adoption, and their expenditures on case management for children with the goal of adoption are included with other case management activities, which covers both foster care and adoption cases.

## Questions and Answers

### *What barriers exist to making successful adoptive placements for foster children?*

Lead agency staff, department administrators, and adoptive parents cited multiple barriers to finding and maintaining successful adoptive placements for foster children. These barriers include identifying families who want to adopt special needs children, inadequate information about the children available for adoption, potential parents' confusion and frustration in trying to navigate the adoption process, inadequate post-adoption services, and relatives' unwillingness to disrupt a biological family.

Lead agencies may have difficulty finding families who want to adopt children with special needs. Many of the children in state custody are older, in large sibling groups, or have medical or behavioral conditions that can deter families from adopting. Lead agency administrators told us that families often want individual young, healthy children, who do not represent the majority of children in foster care. Fifty-five percent of children awaiting adoption are over the age of eight and about 36% are part of a sibling group.

Potential adoptive families may lack sufficient information about children available for adoption. One of the main ways for families to find information about the children available for adoption is the statewide Adoption Exchange website, but this website does not always reflect current information about the children available. Section 409.167(2), *Florida Statutes*, requires staff to place children on the exchange within 30 days of when a child becomes legally available for adoption. However, these deadlines are not always met by lead agency staff or their subcontractors. Adoption exchange data shows that in Fiscal Year 2006-07, over half (55%) of children were added to the exchange more than 30 days after becoming legally available for adoption.

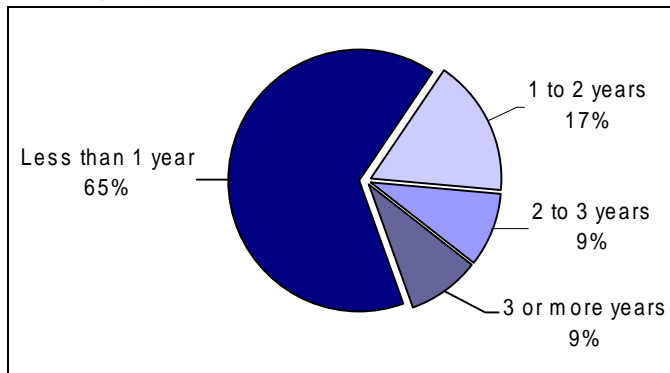
Staff also do not always frequently update children's biographies and pictures to show the most current information about each child. Staff are required by s. 409.167, *Florida Statutes*, to conduct monthly updates of child profiles on the Adoption Exchange. However, instead of monthly updates many lead agencies require monthly supervisory reviews of these profiles to ensure staff update the profiles at least annually or whenever a change to the child's case occurs. Our review of Adoption Exchange data showed that 35% of active cases have not been updated for more than one year, 18% for more than two years, and 9% for three years or more (see Exhibit 2).

As a result, potential adoptive parents do not always have access to complete and/or accurate information on the children available for adoption. For example, if staff do not update a four-year-old child's picture or profile for two years, it will show the picture and describe the interests and needs of a four-year-old, even though the child is six.

<sup>7</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100% because the department did not have placement data for a small number of adoption finalizations.

## Exhibit 2

### Adoption Staff Have Not Updated the Profiles of More Than One-Third of Children in the Statewide Adoption Exchange System Within the Last Year



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Children and Families data.

The adoption process can be confusing and frustrating to potential adoptive families. Adoptive parents who participated in our statewide focus group expressed frustration with navigating the adoption process due to lack of information, problems inherent in the state's foster care and adoption casework system, court delays, paperwork, and requirements to update home studies.<sup>8</sup>

The focus group adoptive parents noted that it can be difficult for potential adoptive parents to obtain information on the adoption process and required steps such as completing home studies and parenting classes. This information is not consistently available on the department's and some lead agencies' adoption-related websites. For example, almost half (9 of 19) lead agency websites lack descriptions of the steps in the adoption process, information on the children available for adoption, or contact information. Further, while the department's website provides adoption information, it does not provide links to each of the lead agencies for potential parents to know whom to contact in their area.

The focus group adoptive parents also reported that potential adoptive families can encounter frustrations in navigating the state's foster care and adoption casework system. Potential adoptive parents are given a contact telephone number when they call about a child on the Adoption Exchange.

<sup>8</sup> We asked potential adoptive and adoptive parents questions regarding the adoption process during a Florida State Foster and Adoptive Parent Association statewide conference call. Forty-two foster and adoptive parents participated on this call.

However, this telephone number is often that of a foster care case manager or adoption worker who may not return calls in a timely manner due to caseload or other priorities. In addition, due to the structure of the system, there are sometimes multiple workers and/or subcontractors involved in a child's adoption case.<sup>9</sup> Adoptive parents noted that it can be confusing to have to interact with multiple subcontracted foster care case managers, subcontracted adoption case managers or specialists, and lead agency staff. These parents reported that they do not always know who they are supposed to contact for specific issues, particularly when they are dealing with a child's foster care case manager and an adoption worker who work for separate entities.

In addition, focus group adoptive parents and lead agency staff stated that turnover in foster care case managers can contribute to delays in achieving a finalized adoption. Our June 2006, report on the child welfare system noted that the statewide case manager turnover in Fiscal Year 2004-05 was 31%.<sup>10</sup> New foster care case managers must spend time getting to know a child and their case, which can delay the adoption process, particularly if the new case manager must prepare for court hearings to terminate parental rights. Court delays, sometimes due to turnover in the attorney assigned from Child Welfare Legal Services and legal decisions that give biological parents multiple chances to complete the tasks on their case plans, can also lengthen the time it takes to move a child's case through the adoption process.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lead agencies use one of three structures for providing adoption services: services provided primarily by subcontractors, a combination of in-house and subcontracted staff, or services provided primarily in-house. In addition, lead agencies use multiple models for managing cases as children progress toward adoption: keeping a child's case with one case manager for the life of the case, transferring a child's case from the original case manager to an adoption specialist, and assigning an adoption specialist to coordinate with the primary case manager. For more information, see [OPPAGA Report No. 08-05](#).

<sup>10</sup> *Child Welfare System Performance Mixed in First Year of Statewide Community-Based Care*, [OPPAGA Report No. 06-50](#). Our interviews with adoptive and potential adoptive parents indicate turnover is still a problem that affects the adoption process.

<sup>11</sup> Lead agency staff develop a case plan for each child placed in their custody. Case plans must include a plan for assuring that the child receives safe and proper care and the parents, child, and foster parents receive appropriate services. The biological parents may need to complete specific tasks to address the contributing factors and conditions that lead to maltreatment such as attending parenting classes, getting a job, finding housing, and receiving mental health or substance abuse treatment.

Focus group adoptive parents also expressed frustration about the amount of paperwork required in the adoption process, and they noted that at times they have been told that lead agency adoption staff lost their paperwork and they have to complete it again. Finally, foster parents, who are often one of the first options considered to adopt a child, expressed frustration with the state's home study process. The department requires them to update the home study they completed to become foster parents if they wish to adopt their foster child(ren).

A lack of post-adoption services can negatively affect the permanency of adoptions. Post-adoption services are provided by lead agency, subcontracted, or fee-for-service staff after a finalized adoption to keep the adoption stable. These services often include mental health services to help children cope with their experiences while with their biological families and in foster care and adjust to being adopted by another family. However, due to limited resources and a lack of adoption-competent mental health professionals, these services are limited. Lead agencies and other stakeholders stated that the limited availability of these services once cases are closed is one of the main barriers to maintaining stable adoptive placements. The extent to which a lack of post-adoption services has resulted in a child returning to the foster care system is not known because the department does not track the number of adopted children coming back into the child protection system or the reasons for failed adoptions.

Family members may be reluctant to adopt because of their relationship with the biological parents. Relatives of children in foster care are a primary source of adoptive placements for these children, and over a third of adoptive placements are with relatives of the child. However, child welfare staff noted that many relatives are willing to provide a home for a foster child, but do not wish to pursue adoption to avoid permanently severing the child(ren)'s ties with their biological parents. When this occurs, adoption workers place the child(ren) in a long-term guardianship placement as opposed to an adoptive placement.

***Are any barriers unique to making successful adoptive placements for minority foster children?***

Minority children represent almost half (49.8%) of the total child population in Florida, and 45.9% of children available for adoption as of June 30, 2007. However, minority children represented only a third (32.8%) of finalized adoptions during Fiscal Year 2006-07.

Half of lead agency administrators did not think minority children in their caseloads faced unique barriers to being adopted. Half of lead agency representatives responding to our survey said that they did not encounter unique barriers to adoptive placements for minority children in their caseloads or in recruiting minority families in their communities. They indicated that the greatest barriers to successful adoption of minority children was that these children are often older or part of large sibling groups, which are generally hard-to-place populations regardless of race. Department data shows that more than half of children available for adoption are over the age of eight (57% of minority children and 52% of non-minority children). However, minority children are more likely to be part of a sibling group awaiting adoption. Approximately 36% of children listed on the statewide Adoption Exchange (437 out of 1,206) are identified as being part of a sibling group, and of these children, 77% (336) are of a minority race/ethnicity.

However, some lead agency staff note that some minority children do face barriers to successful adoptive placements. Staff told us that traditional adoptive parent recruitment efforts do not always reach minority families. As a result, these families may not be aware of the number of minority children who need adoptive placements. Adoption literature indicates that minority families can have an historical distrust of the child welfare system and government because of past abuses and discrimination. As a result, some minority families may be unwilling to work with the child welfare system to adopt a child.

### ***What strategies have lead agencies and the department used to address barriers to making adoptive placements?***

Lead agencies and the department have implemented three types of strategies to overcome barriers to adoptive placements. These initiatives include efforts to recruit families, match children with families, and ensure adoption permanency.

Lead agencies take many steps to recruit adoptive families. Lead agencies and their subcontractors use multiple strategies for recruiting adoptive parents.

- Adoption staff seek out relatives willing to adopt the child. Over a third (36.2%) of finalized adoptions of foster care children are with relatives.
- Most lead agencies seek to raise adoption awareness through print and television media, billboards and flyers, community events, and events that display professional pictures of children available for adoption.
- All lead agencies place available children on the Adoption Exchange and some also use national websites of this type.
- Lead agency staff participate in speaking engagements at various organizations such as churches and community groups.
- Some lead agencies conduct targeted recruitment for hard-to-place children. For example, to raise awareness regarding the need for placements for older children, they recruit among persons who regularly work with teenagers.
- Some lead agencies have staff positions dedicated specifically to recruiting adoptive families.
- To address barriers to finding placements for minority children, lead agencies conduct targeted recruitment for minority families at minority churches or events at which minority families are likely to be present, and/or advertise in media outlets with a predominately minority audience.

Lead agencies have implemented various initiatives to match adoptive families with available children. All lead agencies conduct match staffings, which are meetings that involve the primary case manager, supervisor, adoption specialist, relatives, mental health professionals, and others involved in the case. At these meetings, participants discuss the needs of the child(ren) available for adoption and review the profile of

potential families to determine if there is a good adoptive match.

Lead agencies also host events that give potential adoptive families the chance to interact with children. These events include picnics and trips to theme parks or other recreational locations where families can meet and interact with the children available for adoption. These events give lead agency staff the ability to observe the interactions and use this information to help make matching decisions.

Finally, lead agencies use strategies to help ensure post-adoption permanency. Most lead agencies inform adoptive families about the availability of counseling for children with mental health and behavioral problems. Some lead agencies have created positions to link families with available services such as therapy to help ensure post-adoption permanency. One lead agency has established an adoption-competent counselor to assist families who are experiencing difficulty with an adoption.

The department has developed initiatives to assist lead agencies in recruiting adoptive families and finding placements for children. Department strategies include organizing monthly conference calls with lead agencies, administering two contracts with One Church, One Child, and improving its adoption-related technology. The department is holding monthly, statewide "home finder" conference calls with lead agencies to give them an opportunity to share information about hard-to-place children. During these calls, lead agency staff present information on one of their hard-to-place children so other lead agencies can look through their available families for any potential matches.

In addition, the department manages a contract with the fee-for-service entity One Church, One Child to assist lead agencies in recruiting minority families. This contract pays some of the administrative costs for One Church, One Child to recruit adoptive families and conduct home studies and parenting classes. The contract requires One Church, One Child to conduct four presentations a month in churches, recruit one church a month to display adoption information, and recruit 48 adoptive families during the fiscal year.

The implementation of community-based care has created challenges for One Church, One Child. When the system was established, the department redistributed a portion of the funding formerly used, to support One Church, One Child to the lead agencies. This resulted in a funding reduction for One Church, One Child, which has scaled back its services and no longer has staff located statewide. Many lead agencies reported they do not work with One Church, One Child because they have not budgeted for the fees it charges for family recruitment and training, home studies, and adoptive placements.<sup>12</sup>

In order to more effectively use the services One Church, One Child offers, the department recently funded a pilot project in which the organization will focus on recruiting families willing to adopt older minority children. The pilot started in September 2007 in Tampa and Jacksonville. At the pilot sites, One Church, One Child will provide recruitment services and will refer families to the applicable lead agency for parenting classes, home studies, and eventual matching with available children. The contract requires One Church, One Child to refer a total of 36 families willing to adopt older minority children to lead agencies for parenting classes during Fiscal Year 2007-08.

The department is working on changes to improve its adoption-related technology. Staff are developing plans to merge the Adoption Exchange into the department's child welfare database, the Florida Safe Families Network. This merger will allow lead agency and contracted staff to perform less data entry into the two systems and could improve reporting and analysis of information on children available for adoption. Department managers expect the combined system to be available in September 2008.

Department staff also are developing a way to open and identify post-adoption cases in the Florida Safe Families Network when families who have adopted call and say they need services to keep the placement from disrupting. Improved information on post-adoption services will help the department and lead agencies better serve families and track the number of post-adoptive placements that need services, the types of services provided, and the

outcome of these services. Department managers expect this option to be available in September 2008.

***What other strategies could the department and lead agencies use to maximize the extent to which foster children can be successfully placed with adoptive families?***

To better ensure successful adoption placements, there are several actions the department and lead agencies should take, including improving access to information for potential adoptive families, addressing frustrations encountered by potential adoptive families, changing some policies and practices, and establishing lead agency positions to help with post-adoption services. The Office of Adoption and Child Protection also has recently made several recommendations to improve the adoption process for potential adoptive families.

The department and lead agencies should improve access to information for potential adoptive families. To help ensure that families can readily access information on the adoption process and children available for adoption, the department should revise the information on its website and ensure that lead agencies update the Adoption Exchange as required and improve the adoption-related information on their own websites.

- The department should revise its website to provide links to the lead agency websites. This list of lead agencies should be displayed by geographical area.
- The lead agencies should place children on the Adoption Exchange within 30 days of when the children become legally available for adoption and update information and pictures of children on the Adoption Exchange at least annually and/or when a child's case status changes. Lead agencies should ensure these changes occur timely through the monthly supervisory reviews.
- Lead agencies should ensure their websites include a detailed description of the adoption process, a schedule of local parenting classes, contact information, and how to find information on children available for adoption.

<sup>12</sup> Prior to community-based care, the department paid these fees as part of its contract with One Church, One Child. The organization now charges these fees to lead agencies.

Lead agencies should address frustrations encountered by potential adoptive parents. To address the problems reported by potential adoptive families, some lead agencies have established policies requiring their staff or subcontracted adoption staff to return calls from potential adoptive parents within three days. Other lead agencies should establish similar requirements to help ensure parents who initially contact the lead agency about adoption will not become discouraged.

Lead agencies should also develop more ways to support potential adoptive parents who are trying to navigate the system. Some lead agencies send out monthly newsletters, develop and encourage potential adoptive parents to join local support groups for adoptive families, hold “parents night out” events for families that have expressed an interest in adoption, and host matching events that enable potential families and available children to interact. Other lead agencies should adopt these initiatives to keep potential adoptive parents informed and involved until they can adopt a child.

Lead agencies and the department should change policies and practices to help find permanent homes for more children. These steps should include making changes to home finder calls, carefully considering long-term guardianship with relatives, and developing a way to prevent and track adoption dissolutions. As previously noted, the department hosts statewide monthly calls with lead agencies to exchange information on available hard-to-place children. The department could change the format of these calls to include exchanging information about potential adoptive families, which would enable lead agency staff to compare the traits of potential adoptive families statewide with the needs of the children in care.

The department and lead agencies should also continue to consider using long-term guardianship with relatives as a permanent placement when staff have exhausted other avenues for finding an adoptive placement. Lead agencies should carefully consider and the department should provide policy guidance about using long-term guardianship, as this practice has benefits as well as potential consequences for children, families, and the state. Long-term guardianship allows relatives to provide a home for a child while avoiding disputes with birth parents during court

proceedings, which can increase the chances that relatives will be willing to provide a permanent placement. Such placements with a relative guardian can frequently be less traumatic for the child than placement with non-relative caregivers, because family and cultural ties are maintained.

However, adoption should be the preferred placement option for relative caregivers whenever possible. The process for ending a placement is less complicated for a custodial relative than an adoptive family. Some stakeholders report that custodial relatives are more likely than adoptive parents to return a child to foster care when children are older and start to exhibit behavioral problems that did not occur at a younger age. In addition, the amount of funding given to relative caregivers is lower than the amount they would receive for a maintenance adoption subsidy, which lessens the department’s ability to provide such families resources to address the child’s special needs.

The department should also continue with its efforts to develop a system to track troubled adoptive placements. The department currently does not have a way to track post-adoption services if a family calls and requests help in stabilizing a placement. The department has developed a plan to identify and track these cases within the Florida Safe Families Network, which will give it and the lead agencies information on how to better stabilize adoptive placements, and maximize the use of adoption funds by placing services dollars where they are most needed.

Finally, the department should develop the means to track child abuse and neglect allegations involving former foster children. The department currently cannot readily determine whether these children become re-victimized because their new parents have the option to change a child’s last name and social security number upon adoption. Developing a capability to match new investigations to adopted children would enable lead agencies to help prevent adoption dissolutions by intervening with families who did not call to request assistance. This would also help ensure the state maximizes the use of resources by preventing families who no longer have adopted children in their homes from receiving state adoption subsidies.

Lead agencies should consider creating positions to better ensure post-adoption permanency. Some lead agencies have established positions devoted specifically to linking families with available post-adoption services such as counseling and adoptive parent support groups, and one has established an adoption-competent counselor position to assist families after adoptions are finalized. Other lead agencies should consider creating or subcontracting for similar positions.

The Office of Adoption and Child Protection recently made recommendations to improve the adoption process for potential adoptive parents. This office was created by Ch. 2007-124, *Laws of Florida*, and charged with promoting adoption and support of adoptive families. The office recently reviewed the state's processes for working with potential adoptive families and made several recommendations. These recommendations include using a single adoption worker as the point of contact for potential adoptive parents, holding adoption-specific orientation classes, timing background screenings to take place before parenting training, improving the curriculum of parenting courses, and standardizing home studies statewide so that a single study would suffice for adoptive and foster parents of various types. The department should work with lead agencies to implement these recommendations.

## Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Children and Families for his review and response.

The Secretary's written response is reproduced in its entirety in Appendix A.

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OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

**Florida Monitor:** [www.oppaga.state.fl.us](http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us)

Project supervised by Becky Vickers (850/487-1316)

Project conducted by LeNée Carroll (850/488-9232), Bill Zepernick (850/487-9267), and Holly Walter (850/487-9279)

Gary R. VanLandingham, Ph.D., OPPAGA Director

## Appendix A

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State of Florida  
Department of Children and Families

Charlie Crist  
Governor

Robert A. Butterworth  
Secretary

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January 25, 2008

Mr. Gary VanLandingham  
Office of Program Policy Analysis  
and Government Accountability  
111 West Madison Street, Room 312  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for your January 4 letter providing the Department of Children and Families a draft copy of your report, "Additional Strategies Would Help Address the Barriers to Successful Adoptions."

The report lists several actions the Department and lead agencies should take to maximize the extent to which foster children are successfully placed with adoptive families. The Department will convene a meeting and/or a series of calls with the lead agencies to discuss the report findings and develop plans for implementation of the recommended strategies. Our approach will be to involve staff from various sections of the Department including: Information Systems, Communications, Contract Administration and/or Management, Budget, Family Safety Program Office, and Children's Legal Services. Our goal is to implement these recommendations in a manner that is consistent with the unique service delivery models in each of the local systems of care.

**Recommended Strategy:**

The Department and lead agencies should improve access to information for potential adoptive families.

**Department Response:**

The Department concurs. Information Systems, Communications and Family Safety Program Office staff will meet to devise the most effective means for updating the Department's web site and for providing guidance to lead agencies about updating their web sites. In addition, the Department will provide training and technical assistance to

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1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

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lead agencies to ensure the Adoption Exchange System contains timely and current information about available children.

**Recommended Strategy:**

Lead agencies should address frustrations encountered by potential adoptive parents.

**Department Response:**

The Department concurs. The Department will convene a meeting and/or call(s) with lead agencies to devise strategies to address adoptive parent concerns. The approaches will be varied based on the system of care model implemented in each community.

**Recommended Strategy:**

Lead agencies and the Department should change policies and practices to help find permanent homes for more children.

**Department Response:**

The Department concurs. The Department anticipates developing a program improvement plan (PIP) to address needs for improvement in permanency achievement as indicated by the preliminary findings of the January 7-11, 2008 Federal Child and Family Services Review. The Department will address this recommendation through the PIP process.

**Recommended Strategy:**

Lead agencies should consider creating positions to better ensure post-adoption permanency.

**Department Response:**

The Department concurs. As above, the Department will convene a meeting and/or conference call(s) with lead agencies to explore and develop a plan for implementing approaches consistent with local systems of care to address the needs of children and their families after the finalization of adoption.

**Recommended Strategy:**

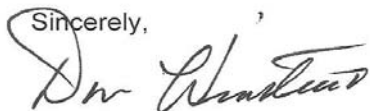
The Office of Adoption and Child Protection recently made recommendations to improve the adoptions process for potential adoptive parents.

**Department Response:**

The Department concurs. The Department will convene lead agencies in a mutually agreed upon forum to review the findings of this report and the recommendations made by the Office of Adoption and Child Protection. Each agency will be required to consider each of the proposed recommendations and develop an implementation plan.

Thank you for the work your staff completed on this project. This report will be very helpful as we continue to improve services to children and families.

Sincerely,



Robert A. Butterworth  
Secretary