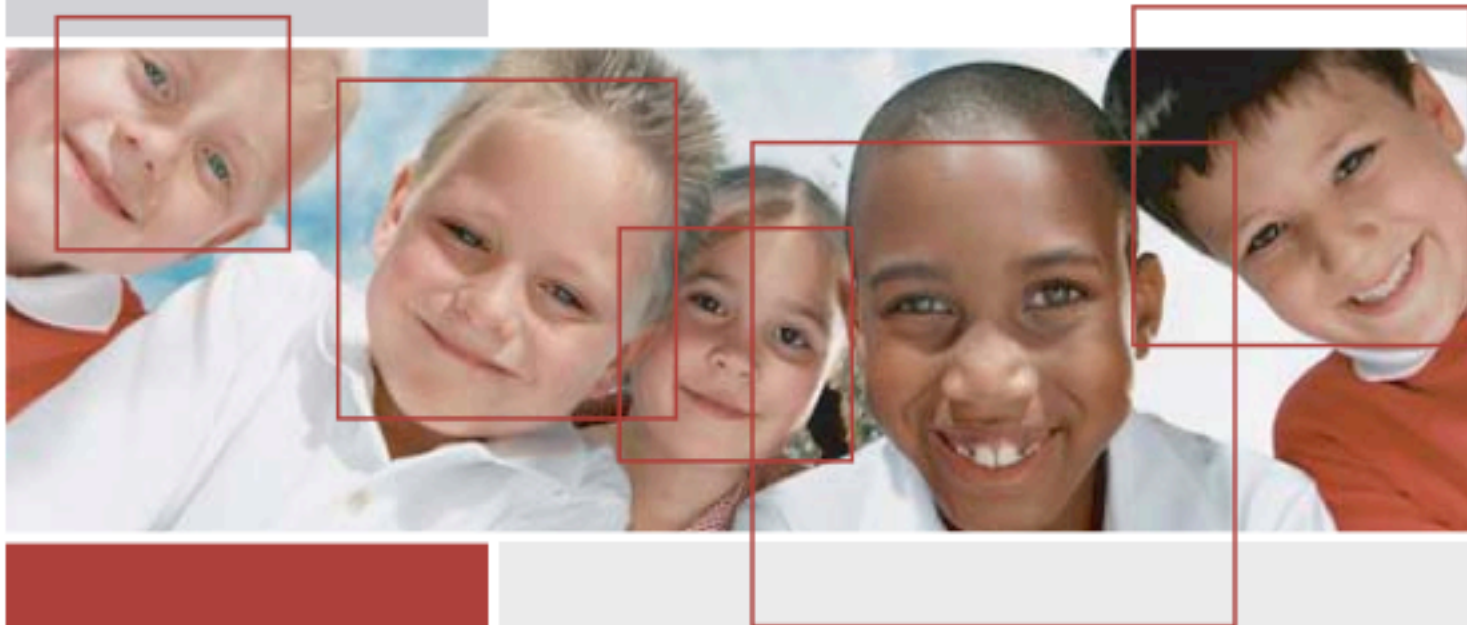


**Encouraging Adoption and Helping Families:  
The case for refocusing federal funding on post-  
adoption services**

July 2009



*Voice for Adoption*

SPEAKING OUT FOR OUR NATION'S WAITING CHILDREN

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## **ABOUT VOICE FOR ADOPTION**

Voice for Adoption (VFA) develops and advocates for improved adoption policies. Recognized as a national leader in special needs adoption, VFA works closely with federal and state legislators, as well as other child welfare organizations, to make a difference in the lives of the **130,000 children in foster care** who are waiting to be adopted and the families who adopt children from foster care.

## **ABOUT THIS REPORT**

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## **Encouraging Adoption and Helping Families: The case for refocusing federal funding on post-adoption services**

**Voice for Adoption (VFA)** is a coalition of national and state organizations that develops and advocates for improved adoption policies. Recognized as a national leader in special needs adoption, VFA works closely with federal and state legislators, as well as other child welfare organizations, to find and advocate for families who are willing and able to make a lifelong commitment to the **130,000 children in foster care** freed for adoption. Voice for Adoption also advocates for community services and supports to help those families sustain their lifelong commitment to these children.

### **What is the Current Picture of Children in Foster Care Related to Adoption?**

- There are 130,000 children in foster care in the United States who cannot return home to their birth families and are waiting for a permanent family. These children have needs and backgrounds that require special considerations:
  - They tend to be older; 47 percent of the waiting children are age 9 or older;
  - They have spent significant time in foster care; on average they have been in the foster care system for almost 42 months;
  - They are disproportionately children of color, experiencing even longer stays in care and fewer adoptions than their white peers;
  - Nearly 90 percent of the children adopted from foster care in 2006 were classified as having special needs – many with complicated traumatic histories exacerbated by separation from birth family, multiple moves and unresolved grief;
  - These issues put the children and youth at risk of emotional and mental health challenges that can be barriers to adoption.
- In addition, more than 26,000 youth “aged out” of foster care in 2006, exiting the child welfare system without any permanent family connections. Aging out of foster care without strong family relationships puts youth at risk of negative outcomes, including homelessness and poor educational, career, health and economic prospects.
- We have made significant progress by increasing adoptions from foster care over the past 13 years. In 1996 there were only 28,000 adoptions, which grew to 51,000 in 2002. However, despite intensive national and local efforts to recruit more adoptive parents, since 2002, the number of children adopted from foster care annually has remained at approximately 51,000.
- Adoption provides waiting children with the benefits of true permanence, helping them begin to heal from their traumas and manage the grief and loss issues resulting from lost connections with birth families, foster families and other essential relationships.
- Adoption saves the government a significant amount of money in both the short and long term, through reduced foster care administrative and placement costs in the short term and improved outcomes for youth in the long term.

### **What are Post-Adoption Services?**

Post-adoption services include an array of community services and support provided to adoptive families designed to achieve and sustain child and family well-being. These services are best provided

by adoption-competent service providers, working in partnership with the family and the community to meet each family’s specific service and support needs. Examples of services may include support groups, crisis intervention, family counseling, and respite care.

## Why are Post-Adoption Services Important?

### Congress Acknowledges the Need for Post-Adoption Services

“The rapid increases in the annual number of adoptions since the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 have created a growing need for post-adoption services and for service providers with the particular knowledge and skills required to address the unique issues adoptive families and children may face.”

*Congressional Findings and Purpose, Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001  
(Public Law 107-133), Section 430(a)(4) of the Social Security Act*

Post-adoption services help adoptive families and children move through the predictable stages of becoming a family – working through past traumas and strengthening the well-being of all family members. Children in foster care receive critical services to address their complex needs; most of these services cease to be provided once the child is adopted, but continuing these services could preserve adoptions by helping families overcome both expected and unexpected challenges.

The potential lack of future services may be a concern for foster families when making the decision about adoption of their foster child. Thus, post-adoption services, while critical to families that have already adopted, also serve as an effective tool to recruit adoptive parents, by reassuring them that the services their children need will be available after the adoption is finalized.

*“Adopting a special needs child is hard enough on a family, but to lose all of the services you have just because you choose to make this child a part of you're family is a travesty.” –Adoptive parent, Nevada*

## Why is there a Continuing Need for Post-Adoption Services?

Post-adoption services provide both an incentive to adopt as well as the support to sustain adoptions over time.

- Families who may be willing to adopt waiting children report a lack of community-based supports and services that can respond appropriately to mental health, educational and developmental issues resulting from past traumatic experiences and years in the foster care system. They may be hesitant to adopt without these critical supports.
- Adoptive families report multiple struggles to find and/or access *adoption-competent* community-based supports to meet their children’s needs and stabilize their families.
- States also struggle to find the sustainable funding to provide adequate post-adoption services. Recent state surveys have found that these services are provided inconsistently across the country and with limited and unreliable funding.
- Adoptive families report that there is a continuing need for an established set of principles for adoption-competent mental health services.

- With limited funding available for post-adoption services, very little emphasis is placed on research and evaluation of post-adoption service models, resulting in a lack of an evidence base for service development.

## How are Post-Adoption Services Currently Funded?

Families who adopt children from the foster care system are generally eligible for adoption assistance – subsidy to support the basic cost of caring for a child. While medical assistance may also be available, it does not always adequately cover the special needs of these families and children.

A mix of diverse federal funding sources can currently be used to support an array of post-adoption services, some of which are matched by state dollars:

- Title IV-E of the Social Security Act administrative funding for case management, administrative support and training
- Promoting Safe and Stable Families program (Title IV-B, subpart 2 – 20 percent designated for adoption promotion and support)
- Adoption Incentive program
- Adoption Opportunities program
- Social Services Block Grant (SSBG)
- Medicaid
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Despite the appearance that many programs support post-adoption services, the reality is that these funding streams are intended to cover a much wider range of purposes than post-adoption services; there is no federal mandate or funding directed solely toward post-adoption services. Even within the 20 percent of each state’s Promoting Safe and Stable Families program allocated funding designated for “adoption promotion and support,” the funding is for both adoptive parent recruitment and post-adoption support, meaning that states may need to choose between investing in finding more families for waiting children in foster care or providing support for adoptive families.

## What are Voice for Adoption’s Recommendations?

1. *Federal funding for post-adoption services should be enhanced and improved*  
Funding should be 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.

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.

2. *Adoption-competent post-adoption services must be developed and mental health providers must be trained*  
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.

- a. 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.
  - b. Child Welfare and Medicaid agencies can collaborate to support the training of mental health practitioners on these standards. This training is critical to ensuring that best-practices are incorporated into the work of professionals working with families touched by adoption.
3. *The development and evaluation of post-adoption services must be improved to focus on outcomes and enhance best practice knowledge*
- 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. These grants provide a key opportunity to learn about the most effective ways to provide services that adoptive families need and to inform future investments in post-adoption services.
4. *Specifically, Voice for Adoption recommends that the federal government begin to address the critical lack of post-adoption services in the following ways:*
- a. Congress has appropriated \$36 million in Adoption Incentive funding in FY 2009. HHS should encourage states to re-invest their Adoption Incentive funds into post-adoption services and share models for replication.
  - b. If the entire \$36 million in Adoption Incentive funding is not drawn down by states, Congress should act through legislation or appropriations directives to assure that HHS retains unspent funds and re-invests them into technical assistance to promote and strengthen post-adoption services, rather than have funds returned to Treasury.
  - c. When Congress reauthorizes the Adoption Opportunities Act, the goals of the program must be strengthened to assure that post-adoption services is one of the high priority funding areas for HHS – particularly because this was an initial priority of the program when it was created.

Adoption offers developmental benefits to children and provides economic benefits to federal and state governments. Funding for adoption and post-adoption services is an investment in longer-term child and family well-being and stability. It can prevent the unnecessary re-entry into the foster care system or the need for high-end mental health residential treatment. To fulfill the promise of achieving permanency through adoption—that each child can have a lifelong family and be able to thrive despite a difficult beginning—dedicated, sustainable federal funding for post-adoption services is essential and one of the best investments we can make.

Voice for Adoption hopes that these specific recommendations can be implemented within the next year and that in the future the critical importance of these services will be recognized and funded by a dedicated federal funding stream.