From OFC Deputy Director Carla Carpenter – 11/3/17

This month I have decided to let November’s focus, “National Adoption Month,” do the talking. How can I top the stories of what we all hope to achieve for each and every child: to have a place to unconditionally and forever call home. Thank you to our public and private agency partners who submitted articles and shared their success stories.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Adoption Recognition and Recruitment Month

In conjunction with National Adoption Month, which occurs each November, Gov. Kasich and Lt. Gov. Mary Taylor have declared November 2017 to be “Adoption Recognition and Recruitment Month” in Ohio.

“Public and private child caring agencies throughout the state work diligently in search of safe, stable and permanent homes for Ohio’s most vulnerable children,” they said in a resolution. “These children can succeed and reach their full potential when they are prepared for adoption and their voices are heard.”

This year’s theme is “Teens Need Families, No Matter What,” highlighting the importance of identifying well-prepared and committed families for the thousands of teenagers in foster care. Many of these young people are less likely to be adopted, often because of their age, and more likely to age out of the system without a healthy, stable support system. Securing lifelong connections for these teens, legally and emotionally, is an urgent need and critical for their well-being and future.

In Ohio, more than 15,000 children live in foster homes or other out-of-home placement settings. Of those, nearly 2,700 are waiting to be adopted. More than 1,100 of those children waiting are teenagers, and they’ve been in foster care an average of four and a half years.

This month’s First Friday highlights some of the statewide and local efforts to help these youth find homes.
Partnering for Children and Youth: Unadoptable is Unacceptable

By Rita L. Soronen
President and CEO

When the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption began Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) child-focused recruitment as a pilot project in 2004, Columbus agreed to be one of the first seven sites across the U.S. to help us to test providing intensive, personalized and accountable adoption recruitment for our longest waiting youth in care and to counter the prevalent practice that many children were simply unadoptable. Ohio has frequently led the nation in innovative partnerships when it comes to our children, and the current work with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, an extension of that first Ohio commitment 13 years ago, continues this rich tradition.

As we celebrate National Adoption Month, we also applaud the 54 Wendy’s Wonderful Kids adoption professionals who serve children and youth waiting to be adopted in nearly every county in Ohio. The child-focused recruitment model used by the recruiters is an evidence-based*, result-oriented strategy that is anchored on 1) carrying smaller caseloads of children; 2) having regular meetings with the children on the caseload to develop trust and understand each child’s unique journey and needs; 3) diving into the casefile and managing regular contact with all individuals connected to the child; 4) identifying potential adoptive resources based on the child’s input, mining the casefile and the discoveries made through contacts with others; and 5) maintaining a dogged pursuit of permanence for each and every child on the caseload, through adoption or guardianship.

And the model works. Nationally, more than 6,600 permanent placements have resulted from the work of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids; in Ohio, as a result of recruiters funded through ODJFS and the foundation, 717 adoptions have occurred and another 102 children are in their pre-adoptive placement, simply waiting for finalization.

Significantly, the 852 children in Ohio currently being served by Ohio’s recruiters are an average age of nearly 14 years old; have been in care more than five years prior to WWK and have had an average of three placements; 63 percent are in a sibling group; 73 percent have identified special needs; and 18 percent have experienced a failed adoption or a disrupted pre-adoptive placement prior to WWK. Wendy’s Wonderful Kids works most successfully for these children who are at an elevated risk of aging out of care – older youth, children in sibling groups, children with special needs and youth opposed to considering adoption.

During National Adoption Month, it is appropriate to focus on not only the successful dynamic partnerships that work best for children, like the one between the foundation and ODJFS, but also on individual stories of success – one child at a time. These stories exemplify the results of this partnership for youth who would have otherwise left care without permanency.

Adoption of a Youth in Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (PPLA)

James came into care in 2004 at age 5 and moved multiple times until he was placed back with his mother. In 2009, though, his mother again lost custody (James’ birth father has a traumatic brain injury and could not care for him) and James was placed back in foster care and with a PPLA status. In 2010, he was placed in a residential treatment facility and in January of 2014 was referred to WWK. Conversations with James were important in preparing him for permanency and learning about what he wanted from a family. The WWK recruiter helped him understand the adoption process and offered support when he told his birth father that he wanted to be adopted. The recruiter also supported him when he asked his father to terminate his parental rights so that he could be adopted. James was adopted two months before his 18th birthday.

Guardianship

Marcus was 16 and living in a residential facility when the WWK recruiter began working with him. His mother had passed away when he was an infant, and his father was unknown. His aunt raised him, and life was chaotic. He witnessed domestic violence and became aggressive himself. At the age of 14, he was sent to juvenile detention and into the custody of the county. After he was placed in a foster care home, Marcus had multiple episodes of aggression and self-harm, along with some significant medical issues. The WWK recruiter brought Marcus’ extended birth family members together to discuss permanency for him, and two siblings expressed interest in providing permanency. The WWK recruiter, with the child’s team, supported the family throughout the transition and while they determined which sibling was best for Marcus. It was a happy day at the court hearing; he was thrilled to be out of foster care and with family. His guardianship was granted shortly before his 17th birthday.

Sibling Adoption

When the WWK recruiter was first assigned to two siblings, there was discussion of splitting the boys; however, the sibling relationship was the only consistent thing in

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each other’s lives. Although Jack presented with few needs, his brother Jarrod had significant medical and physical challenges and was non-verbal. As recruitment progressed, the recruiter never gave up hope that she would find a family that could meet the needs of both boys. She eventually identified a potential family, and after much information sharing, exploration of resources for the family and advocacy to consider this option, the boys were matched. At the same time the recruiter was engaging the family and advocating to keep the boys together, she was working to prepare the boys for adoption. Jack initially struggled with the notion of permanency because he felt safe where he was. The recruiter helped him understand that his foster family was just his “right now” family and that his “forever family” was still out there. He became engaged in the process and interested in having a “forever family.” Once the match was official, the recruiter helped to prepare the boys to become part of their new family. After the adoption, Jack shared that he prays nightly that he is thankful he was a “Wendy’s kid and hopes other kids find good moms and dads, too.”

Wendy’s Wonderful Kids works – and for those children and youth, like James, Marcus, Jack and Jarrod, who are most at risk of aging out of care without the family promised placement. The placement was unusual in that it was with the birth father’s girlfriend. The brothers had several other siblings who were adopted by family members, and neither Josh nor Mark were open to anyone adopting them but family. The boys were in a foster home where they were cared for, but permanency through adoption was not an option.

Adoption Academy

Each fall and spring, the Family and Youth Law Center at Capital University Law School and Nationwide Children’s Hospital present an eight-week “Adoption Academy” course. The goal is to give prospective adoptive parents neutral information about adoption options to help them make informed decisions. Here are some of the topics covered:

- Adoption Options and Choosing your Adoption Service Provider
- Step-by-Step Domestic, Foster Care and Intercountry Adoption
- Court Processes
- Emotional, Social and Cultural Considerations in Adoption
- Affording your Adoption, Subsidies and Tax Implications
- Finding your Adoptive Child
- The Future of Adoption
- Medical and Behavioral Issues in Adoption

The next academy will begin on March 19, 2018. For more information, visit familyyouthlaw.org/academy.php or email FYLaw staff attorney Megan Heydlauff at mheydlauff@law.capital.edu.

Teen Adoption Success Stories

We reached out to some of our local partners and asked them to share their stories about teen adoptions. For tips and tools for helping the teens in your care find forever families, visit childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/nam.

Clermont County

A sibling group of two – Josh, age 16, and Mark, age 15 – were placed adoptively with a kinship
who expressed the ability and willingness to take the boys into her home. All the family members, including the mother’s family, were in favor of her taking them.

Lynn completed all the pre-service classes and a home study, which was approved. Josh and Mark were placed adaptively in her home in March. They were able to remain in the same school they had attended while in foster care and have regular visits with their siblings, grandparents and other family members. After being placed with Lynn, the boys’ grades improved, as well as their outlook on life. Josh got a job and planned to try out for the school basketball team. At the boys’ request, the adoptions were finalized on Sept. 18, four years to the day after they had entered foster care.

Mahoning County

Sometimes in life you have to take matters into your own hands, and this is exactly what 16-year-old Randy Madison did to find himself a family. It’s hard to imagine that Randy, a bubbly, funny, friendly and outgoing teen, was at one time the victim of physical abuse. He had been in foster care twice, experienced group home living and disrupted out of several foster placements. It’s no wonder he became an angry, non-trusting teen who would often act out.

Little did Randy know that his situation was about to improve. While attending church with a previous foster family, he had met youth group leader Anthony Madison and his wife, Jacinda. When Randy left the placement and stopped going to church, the Madisons missed him. In fact, they missed him so much that they contacted Karen Tesyk, Randy’s caseworker at Mahoning County Children Services, and asked if they could make arrangements for him to return to church and participate again in the youth group and choir.

Before long, Randy was accompanying the Madisons to church and going out for dinner afterward. The couple was active in community theater, and Karen thought this was the perfect opportunity for Randy to get involved, too – not only because he could be dramatic at times, but because he had a great singing voice. They readily agreed. Randy ended up auditioning for a role in the Youngstown Youth Theatre Production of Charlotte’s Web!

Before long, even though they never thought they would have children, the Madisons committed to Randy. They bought their first home, registered to take foster parenting classes, and began working with Mahoning County Children Services to make Randy an official and permanent family member.

At times during the adoption process, Randy felt like things weren’t progressing quickly enough. He was frustrated and experiencing difficulty at his group home. Karen reassured him and worked as fast as she could to obtain approval for a kinship care placement with the Madisons. Then one day, when the Madisons had Randy at their home for a visit, they happily informed him that he would NEVER have to return to the group home and that now his home was with them!

Now 17, Randy is an Honor Roll student and a member of the football team. He acts in school plays, participates in church activities and sings with his parents at various community events. Last Thanksgiving, a Youngstown TV station featured their story to raise awareness of National Adoption Month. This family has many things to be thankful for—most importantly, each other!

Montgomery County

Megan and Rodolfo were in the process of becoming licensed foster and adoptive parents when Megan met teenagers Hope and Anthony during a permanency roundtable. Megan was impressed with them and mentioned to a caseworker that she would love to adopt them. However, they had been in the same foster home for three years, and the foster parent was interested in adoption.

Megan was disappointed but understood. Then, due to unforeseen circumstances, the children had to leave that home. A caseworker called Megan, who said her family was absolutely still interested. A matching conference and preplacement visits were scheduled immediately.

The children were initially upset about leaving their previous foster home, as the foster mother had told them she would be adopting them. However, once they met Megan and Rodolfo, they were happy about joining their family. The children were placed with Megan and Rodolfo in December 2016, and the adoptions were finalized on June 30. Five months later, they continue to be successful. This has been a wonderful match for the entire family.

How Will You Celebrate?

Flyers for National Adoption Month events in Summit and Trumbull counties are attached to the emailed version of this month’s First Friday. How is your county planning to recognize adoptive families and raise awareness? Let us know by emailing Tara.Shook@jfs.ohio.gov.

Principle of the Month

There is urgency and importance to our work.
Adoption Network Cleveland Events

Adoption Network Cleveland supports anyone touched by adoption: adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, foster youth and alumni, foster parents and professionals. Below are some meetings, workshops, trainings and other events it has scheduled during National Adoption Month. Unless otherwise indicated, the events will take place at 4614 Prospect Ave., Suite 550, Cleveland. To learn more, visit AdoptionNetwork.org.

Adoption Network Cleveland Annual Meeting
Friday, Nov. 17
Reception: 5:30 p.m.
Program: 6-7:30 p.m.
Advance Ohio Building (formerly the Plain Dealer Building)
1801 Superior Ave., Cleveland
RSVP to Evan at (216) 482-2312 or evan.clark@adoptionnetwork.org

State Rep. Sarah LaTourette, who formerly worked at Adoption Network Cleveland and is now assistant majority floor leader, will give the keynote address. In addition, several awards will be presented: the Triad Advocate of the Year Awards, Founder's Award and Year in Review.

General Support and Discussion Meetings
Nov. 2 – Rocky River (Cuyahoga County)
Nov. 7 – Columbus*
Nov. 8 – Summit County* (Cuyahoga Falls) – Topic: “Loss as a Core Issue in Adoption”; for CEUs, email traci.onders@adoptionnetwork.org at least 48 hours in advance
Nov. 16 – Cleveland Heights (Cuyahoga County)
Nov. 16 – Miami Valley – Topic: Showing and discussion of the documentary “A Girl Like Her” by Ann Fessler

Adoption 101: Where Do I Begin?
Saturday, Nov. 4, from 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Members: $20/person, $35/couple
Non-Members: $30/person, $55/couple + $5 if paying same day
RSVP: julius.jackson@adoptionnetwork.org

This workshop is for those just beginning to look into adoption. It includes information on the three main paths: public system, private infant and international.

Ohio Child Welfare Training Program Parent Trainings
Nov. 8, 6-9 p.m. – Topic: “What’s Normal, What’s Not in Children’s Behaviors”
Nov. 18, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. – Topic: “Adoption and Healthy Adult Relationships”
Nov. 28, 6-9 p.m. – Topic: “Verbal De-Escalation in Child Welfare”
To register, call Edwin Lebron at (216) 881-5390 or Nefertiti McKinney at (216) 881-4048.

Adoptive Family and Youth Support Group
Thursday, Nov. 9 from 6-8 p.m.
RSVP: ayanna.abi-kyles@adoptionnetwork.org
This monthly meeting will recognize National Adoption Month and feature a Thanksgiving potluck dinner. There will be shared activities with parents, youth and children, a concurrent group for youth ages 11-18, and child care available for preschool and elementary-age children.

Adoption 201: Adopting Infants Domestically
Wednesday, Nov. 29
Members: $15/person, $25/couple
Non-Members: $20/person, $35/couple + $5 if paying the same day
RSVP: julius.jackson@adoptionnetwork.org

This workshop will expand on the workshop Adoption 101: Where Do I Begin? and provide more information about domestic infant adoption.

The Ohio Adoption Photolisting
Amazing Ohio children waiting for forever families continue to be featured on the Ohio Adoption Photolisting (OAPL), including 323 active individual child profiles and 36 active sibling group profiles. Many county agencies use this tool, which allows them to create profiles and share photos of waiting children with prospective adoptive parents. OAPL also provides a great way to share information about agency information sessions, support groups and other resources, both for prospective adoptive parents and for families touched by adoption. If you have events to share on OAPL, or questions about how to post a profile, please email Megan Heydlauff at the Family and Youth Law Center: mheydlauff@law.capital.edu.
Bridges: From the Mailbox

Each month we share a few emails sent to the Bridges@jfs.ohio.gov mailbox. Thanks so much to everyone who has taken the time to share their questions, opinions and ideas. Your insight is invaluable as we develop this program.

Q: I was told that in order to qualify for Bridges, I would have to be in work AND college. Is that true?

A: No, this is not true. Young adults must qualify for at least ONE of the five criteria in order to enroll and maintain eligibility:

- Completing a secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential
- Enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education
- Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment
- Employed for at least 80 hours per month
- Incapable of doing any of the activities described above due to a diagnosed physical or mental health medical condition.

If you are not fulfilling at least one of the above criteria, you may use multiple activities to reach the required 80 hours of activity per month. For example, if you’re working an average of only 50 hours a month, you could enroll in a post-secondary or vocational program, or participate in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment, to reach the required 80 hours.

For more information about Bridges, visit jfs.ohio.gov/ocf or email Bridges@jfs.ohio.gov. We’d love to hear from you!

Global Emails for October

The following emails were sent in October to PCSA directors and/or private agency directors. They are organized below by mailing date and key words.

10/10/2017 – SACWIS Releases 3.12 and 3.13
10/13/2017 – Foster Care Licensing Annual Meeting
10/23/2017 – Independent Living Toolkit Demonstrations at Upcoming Regional Meetings
10/23/2017 – Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development–Request for Information
10/27/2017 – Invitation to CPOE Overview, Cycle 11
10/31/2017 – November is National Adoption Month

Early Thanksgiving Dinner for Current and Former Foster Youth

Ohio Thanksgiving Together

Northeast Regional Thanksgiving,
Cleveland
Saturday, Nov. 4

Southwest Regional Thanksgiving,
Cincinnati
Saturday, Nov. 11

Southeast Regional Thanksgiving,
Athens
Sunday, Nov. 12

Central Regional Thanksgiving,
Reynoldsburg
Sunday, Nov. 19

Questions? Please contact Lisa Dickson, Communications Chair, ACTION Ohio, (614) 787-5257, lisa@fosteractionohio.org

Coming Soon: Early Thanksgiving for Teens and Young Adults!

For the past ten years, Thanksgiving has been a time for Ohio foster care youth, alumni and allies/adult supporters to gather and share their voices, insights, talents, abilities and goals for the future. ACTION Ohio again will welcome the attendance of current foster care youth ages 14 and up and former foster care youth ages 18 and up. Registration is free but required. Youth and alumni are welcome to bring a guest(s), but please include them when registering at thanksgivingtogether.wikispaces.com.
Rule Review Update

The following Ohio Administrative Code rule was posted to ohiorulereview.org on Oct. 30 for 14 days:

• 5101:2-42-65-1, “Exit interviews when a child in custody leaves an out of home placement”

Please continue to visit the site periodically for new postings. We welcome your input and hope you use this opportunity to share your experiences and suggestions. The website received 378 page views in October.

Feedback and Subscriptions

If you want to subscribe to First Friday, have comments or ideas about content, or wish to be removed from the mailing list, please send an email to First_Friday@jfs.ohio.gov. For additions to or removals from the list, be sure to include your name, organization and email address.