

AdoptOHIO

Focus Group Results

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The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
Office for Children and Families
Adoption and Kinship Section

By
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This focus group interviewing report is being submitted to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) as a product of the evaluation of the *Adopt*Ohio program being conducted by Steven R. Howe and Associates, LLC. Groups were conducted by Erinn Green, Steven Howe, Heather Lehmkuhl, Laura Nabors, Shelley Rooney and Kristin Valerius. The primary author of this report was Erinn Green. For further information, please contact:

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Court System	2
Collaboration	4
Incentives	5
Recruitment	6
Standards	10
State Leadership and Vision	12
Subsidies	12
Children's groups	15
Schools	18

Focus Group Results

Introduction

Twenty-five focus groups with 150 adoptive parents, foster parents, and children in foster care were conducted between March and July 2002. The following table shows the distribution of participants by type.

Table 1: Participant types

Category	Number	Percentage
Adoptive parent	54	36%
Foster parent	27	18%
Adopted children	20	13%
Foster to adopt parent	17	11%
Foster children	12	8%
Agency workers	10	7%
Not specified	10	7%

The groups were conducted across the state of Ohio, including 14 in southwestern Ohio, 7 in northeastern Ohio, 2 in central Ohio, and 2 in northwestern Ohio.

Participants were paid for their participation in the focus groups. Adults were paid \$50 each and children were paid \$25 each. Participants could designate if the money went directly to them or to a charitable organization.

Ninety-nine females (66%) participated in these focus groups, along with 51 males (34%). The majority of focus group participants (60%) were white; 32% (N=42) were African American and 8% (N=10) were Hispanic.

Organization of Report

The following summary of results is organized into nine sections: court system, collaboration, incentives, recruitment, standards, state vision and leadership, subsidies, children’s groups and schools. These first seven were priority areas identified at the *Adopt*Ohio large group assessment held in Columbus in March 2002. However, because children’s comments often didn’t fit into the above sections and because parents had so many comments about schools, these

results are discussed in their own separate sections. In many of the sections, strategies for improvement are included. These recommendations are directly from the focus group participants, and do not necessarily represent the judgments of the researchers.

Court System

Overall Comments

THE COURT SYSTEM was a source of frustration for many participants who reported that they believe the system promotes impermanency because it disrupts stable placements. Parents feel court-induced turnover hurts children, while also recognizing that there are natural tensions among biological parents, adoptive parents, and the courts. Adoptive and foster parents often reported that they feel as if they have no rights and there is nothing they can do to influence the system. Many parents who adopted internationally reported that an incentive to international adoption was they would not have to deal with the court system, and run the risk of having their children removed from their care and returned to the biological family.

TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS happens “too slowly and after too many chances,” according to participants. There is sometimes a prejudice toward reunification; courts give parents too many chances. Judges should say “three strikes and you’re out” and stop putting children back into homes that do not work for them. As one parent said, “The motto for the court system should be ‘children first,’ not ‘biological parents first.’” The participants felt that the children spend too much time in limbo before being permanently committed and that the process needs to be expedited.

WAIT TIMES for adoption are too long, according to participants, who reported that it often takes three to four months for the initial hearing and can take up to two years for finalization. Parents felt that it was often the courts that held up the finalization stage of the adoption process. Both foster and adoptive parents report that they feel powerless during this process.

CONSISTENCY across counties, and even across courtrooms within counties, was an issue for parents. The parents find the court system frustrating because they are unsure what to expect—even if they have been through the process before. The procedures are always different, especially in different counties and with different magistrates.

LENIENCY by the court system was an issue for some parents, who feel the courts are not strict enough with children who violate the law. According to parents, this consequence-free environment leads to continued misbehavior.

Players

JUDGES varied greatly in the participants’ opinions. Some parents had great things to say about judges, who might, for example, go out of their way to make adoptions a ceremony for the new family. Some saw judges as a great resource, and would go to the judge directly to get help with the adoption process. Others complained that judges often disregard the recommendations of those

who know the child best (the foster parent, caseworker, or therapist). Another complaint was that judges often make promises that the system is unable to keep. For instance, one woman told the group she was promised that matching would take place within 60 days; instead it took 2 years.

GUARDIAN AD LITEMS also received mixed reviews. Some parents found GALs to be more helpful than the caseworkers, especially in the finalization process. Others reported poor experiences with these professionals. There was a sense among some parents that the GALs have little contact with the children themselves, and therefore cannot do a good job of representing the children's needs. Some felt that GALs support the agency they work for more than the children. One adoptive parent complained, "GALs behave like lawyers instead of thinking about what is best for the child."

Others, such as **CONCURRENT PLANNERS** and **CITIZEN REVIEW BOARDS**, were mentioned as having key roles in the court process. Concurrent planners were said to be helpful in overseeing cases and adding an extra layer of support for children. However, some parents felt that the planners sometimes get involved too soon to determine if things are really working out. Some parents had experiences with Citizen Review Boards. The purpose of these groups is to analyze the court process and help remove obstructions for parents. Parents praised these efforts as valuable. However, these types of boards do not exist in many areas.

Strategies

QUICKER ELIGIBILITY for adoption would help children get placed in a permanent home faster. This would help the child achieve permanency and would make the court process less intimidating and frustrating for the adoptive parents. In addition, if adoptive parents felt more confidence that an adoptive placement was not likely to be disrupted by a reversal in the court's custody decision, it may encourage more parents to adopt locally rather than internationally.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION about adoption for those in the court system is needed. Judges, in particular, should have a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of adoption in general. Parents thought that court personnel of all types would benefit from learning more about adoption.

CONSISTENCY was an issue for parents, who were frustrated with red tape. Parents felt that adoption laws should be set at the federal level so that laws are the same state-to-state and county-to-county. That way, parents would have a better idea of what to expect when they walk into a courtroom.

INVOLVING ALL KEY PLAYERS in legal proceedings was a strategy that parents suggested. Foster parents felt that they know the child best and should be invited to court hearings regarding the child. These participants felt that children would benefit by having someone who really knows them speak on their behalf during proceedings. By involving the adoptive parents in the

proceedings, they will feel as if they are a partner in the process and won't be as frustrated with the system as a whole.

Collaboration

General Topics

PLACEMENTS should be based on the best interests of the child regardless of county and state lines. Some parents have learned to navigate the system by going to different counties and private agencies until they find one that has children who fit their adoption criteria. This is especially true for parents in unique situations such as single or older parents. If there were better collaboration among counties, many of these efforts by parents could be eliminated. Improved collaboration would result in better matches with less effort.

Collaboration Partners

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE AGENCIES need to collaborate more effectively. Many people who feel as if they have been unjustly treated at a county agency will go to a private agency to complete an adoption. Others get tired of waiting for a child in the public system and move to the private system. Parents mentioned that because some children are contracted to specific agencies, you end up working with twice as many workers. This is because both the workers at the contracted agency and the worker assigned to you are involved. This makes the adoption process take longer. One parent mentioned that private agencies and public agencies should collaborate in their recruitment and matching efforts and share information about children and adoptive families. To encourage this practice, the parent believed the system should be restructured so that private agencies get a share of the financial incentives for successful matches.

COUNTY-TO-COUNTY collaboration was another area where parents felt there were deficiencies. Participants believe that counties do not communicate well with one another and that there are inconsistencies from one county to another. One parent said, "It comes across like each county is operating on its own." Another parent reported that one county told her she could not adopt because she was single. When she went to the neighboring county, she was matched with a child in three months. Participants were also frustrated that paperwork backs up from county to county and slows down the matching process. Also, parents are acutely aware that subsidy amounts and policies are not consistent from one county to another. Foster parents cited this disparity as a major problem, making it difficult to care for kids in the care of certain counties.

STATE-TO-STATE collaboration was reported by participants to be slow and inconsistent. One parent reported, "The interstate compact order is slow because it takes forever for paperwork to get done in Ohio." It was also frustrating for parents that adoption laws are so different across states. A parent suggested that it would be better for laws to be made at the federal level in order for state-to-state adoptions to proceed more smoothly.

SCHOOL AND AGENCY personnel need to collaborate more. School issues were a large problem for many parents and were discussed in almost every focus group. They are addressed in a separate section at the end of the report.

Strategies

UNIVERSAL HOMESTUDIES could be implemented across the state. Parents felt that they should be able to adopt through any agencies once they have had a home study completed. Instead, they are limited to adopting through the agency that did the home study. Currently, each agency does home studies differently, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to use a home study conducted by one agency when working with a second. If there were a universal format, agencies could more easily share home studies.

CONSISTENCY OF FORMS in general was another issue for foster and adoptive parents. They often voiced dissatisfaction with the fact that because forms are different, working with multiple agencies was much harder and more labor intensive than necessary. By having universal forms, different agencies can collaborate more easily.

Incentives

Many of the parents knew little about incentives. Often they were entirely unaware of *AdoptOhio* incentives and how those incentives affected agency efforts. Those who were more familiar with the *AdoptOhio* program made the following suggestions for improvements in the incentive system. These participants tended to be the few agency workers who participated (some of whom were also adoptive parents) or parents who were active in statewide organizations advocating for improvements in foster care and adoption.

Strategies

REWARD SUCCESSFUL PLACEMENTS instead of paying incentives for any placement. A few participants felt that the rewards agencies receive should be contingent on the success of the placement.

USE VARIABLE INCENTIVES that depend on the difficulty of the placement. Participants felt this practice would help place more children with special needs. The few agency workers that participated in these groups noted that the effort it takes to place high need or hard to place children is often not worth the incentive payment. If there were a sliding scale for incentives based on the difficulty of the placement, these types of children might have more of a chance of being matched.

SHARING INCENTIVES between public and private agencies was an issue for some of the workers in the field. Participants felt that incentives need to be available to public and private collaborators who make matches together. Some felt that private agencies need to receive incentive and recruitment funds comparable to what public agencies receive.

Recruitment

Barriers to Adoption

LACK OF SUBSIDIES AND SERVICES was frequently cited as a significant barrier to becoming an adoptive parent. Maintenance of services such as medical insurance, dental insurance, mental health services, child care and respite care were often identified as critically important if an adoption were to be arranged. The prospect of losing financial support and ancillary services are disincentives for foster parents to adopt. Foster parents perceive inconsistencies in cash incentives from county to county. Also, parents felt the subsidies should not be automatically set at the low end of the scale.

POOR COMMUNICATION was cited repeatedly as an obstacle to retaining prospective adoptive parents. Parents reported that the process of adopting is arduous and that caseworkers do not do enough to help them navigate through the steps. This leaves them feeling left out of the loop and ignored. Prospective parents would like to be provided with both an overview of the process as well as an estimate of how long each step may take. In addition, there needs to be more consistent help with answering questions and returning phone calls. Parents often wait in suspense once the home study and training are completed regarding the next steps, and start to feel discouraged when they do not hear anything in a timely manner.

DISTRUST was another significant issue raised as a barrier to recruitment of adoptive parents. Foster and adoptive parents want more realistic information on the children they are interested in adopting. There were concerns that special needs are glossed over for the sake of placing the child. Parents asked for open, honest communication about the child and the extent of his or her needs. Parents want honest background information on the child and his or her family history. Parents suspect professionals of withholding information about the number of placements children have been in previously.

LIABILITY was a concern for the parents. They cited increased liability in moving from being a foster parent to an adoptive parent. They were particularly reluctant to take responsibility for children with many special needs. Liability concerns may make it impossible to put the needs of the child first. There is also a feeling within the foster parent community that foster parents are judged to be guilty until proven innocent, and their level of exposure to risk strikes some of them as unbearable.

PRESSURE applied by caseworkers in their push for adoption, especially in foster care situations, was mentioned as a concern. Foster parents reported being told that they had the sole responsibility for whether the child was adopted or not. One parent reported a caseworker saying, "If you don't adopt this child, no one will" in front of the foster child. This pressure about adoption often means that stable, healthy long-term foster placements are disrupted. Occasionally, children have been removed from stable foster placements only to have their adoptive placement disrupt. Some families and agencies report strategies that capitalize on permanency regardless of the type of placement (i.e.,

foster vs. adoptive). Some children reported the same type of adoption pressure being exerted on them, as well. A child's hopes for re-establishing a placement with their biological family may cause them to resist adoption.

LACK OF FUNDING for recruitment was cited as a barrier by the professionals. They believe recruitment dollars should be built into the state funding formula. Without specific funding earmarked for it, recruitment becomes a low priority.

What Kinds of People Adopt

INFERTILITY was a frequently mentioned reason why couples, especially, were interested in adopting. These couples may place particular value on adopting infants, and are thus sometimes compelled to arrange adoptions privately or internationally if infants are not available through a public agency. Rarely women would confess to not wanting to experience childbirth.

PERSONAL CALLING was frequently cited as a reason to adopt children. This came in many forms. Some of the parents had themselves been in the foster care system or had been adopted. Others came from abusive homes and wanted to help kids who were in similar situations. Some felt they had a higher calling of a religious nature to do this. Several parents talked about wanting to embrace the challenge of helping children with special needs. Helping children in need in order to make the world a better place was an overarching theme when parents were asked why they wanted to adopt.

CONNECTIONS, both with the children and with professionals in the system, were a reason why some parents chose to adopt. Some parents had formed a special bond with a child as a result of being a foster parent or a relative of the child. Others reported that a connection with a social worker or agency executive moved them to seriously consider adoption.

PATIENCE was cited as a crucial skill by many parents. They have to be patient to go through a lengthy and confusing process. Patience is required with children who have substantial needs, as often times adoptive parents need to be able to invest in the child for years before seeing a payoff.

NON-TRADITIONAL PARENTS exist in many forms. Some participants were single parents who wanted to raise children without a partner. Other participants were homosexual. Some were retired and wanted children in their home again.

Reaction to Recruitment Efforts

The **OAPL WEBSITE** was a topic of conversation in many of the focus groups. Often, it was the only identifiable contact parents had had with the *AdoptOhio* program. While parents liked the idea of the website, and appreciated the available pictures and information, they reported many problems in the actual execution. The most common complaint was that many of the children listed had already been placed. For example, one participant said, "It's a powerful tool, but it's sad that about 99% of the kids on the web are already in the process of being adopted." Parents reported their experiences with the website

as being frustrating for that very reason—they get their hopes up, only to learn that the child is already matched with someone else. Often parents reported being told, when they inquired about children who were listed on the website as not having a match, that the child did indeed have a match (and therefore should have had a heart on their listing). For this reason, parents called for the website to be updated more frequently. Parents felt that pertinent information was often left out of the descriptions of the children. The modal view was that the website was slow to be updated. Also, parents expressed disappointment that when they did call with interest in a child, their calls were often not returned, or returned only after the child was placed elsewhere. Some parents mentioned that the contact person listed on the website sometimes was no longer an employee at the agency.

The **OAPL CHILDREN'S BOOK** was less familiar to the parents in the focus groups than the website. Often, they mentioned only the web when asked where they had searched for potential adopted children. Several people did mention that they felt that the book contained only limited information and that the write-ups should include more detail. There was also a sentiment that the book only contained “old news,” and that it wasn't worth looking at because it was already outdated by the time you had access to. One success story was mentioned in the focus groups—a parent reported that they found the child they eventually adopted in the book.

The **OAPL PARENT'S BOOK** was discussed in only two of the focus groups. One parent said, “The state should save their money in printing the OAPL book of waiting parents because no one looks at it.” Although that was the overall sentiment in one group, a parent in a second group did report that someone called her to adopt a child because of the entry in the book. Overall, parents seem to have little much exposure or experience with the OAPL parent's book.

Strategies

PUBLIC AWARENESS was often cited when parents talked about how to recruit more adoptive parents. They called for everyone to have an understanding of the system and for there to be more supportive, positive information about adoption. They called for greater education through the media and other outlets such as churches. Many participants talked about how powerful word of mouth can be. Everyone who is in contact with the adoption process is a recruiter, including agency staff and adoptive parents. Several adoptive parents said they chose to adopt because of media events, such as the Wendy's TV special, or spotlights of children who need to be adopted on the evening news. Being able to see the children was important, be it via OAPL or media events. Participants suggested recruitment efforts be targeted toward faith-based organizations, labor groups, social organizations, parent support groups, single adult groups and kinship groups.

PROVIDING SUPPORT in the form of training and mentoring was seen as important. This support can come in many forms. One suggestion was to have classes on special topics relevant to adoption available for all parents. Others

mentioned having booster session trainings to supplement the knowledge gained in the required classes. There was a strong desire to have these trainings serve the dual requirements of being both a foster and adoptive family. This way, foster parents could move right into being an adoptive family without the burden of additional training. Families want a support system to help them with the process, which could take the form of a support group or mentoring. One person suggested that each prospective family could be matched with another family further along in the process that could provide mentoring. Hearing other families' stories and feeling supported was important. Also, there was a desire to have increased post-adoption support. Parents sometimes felt stranded or abandoned once the adoption was finalized.

INCREASED COLLABORATION across systems was another theme. There was a call for greater collaboration among agencies, both public and private, and across counties. Both parents and professionals believed that increased collaboration and the sharing of information about prospective parents and children across different systems would lead to more appropriate matches at a higher rate.

KINSHIP ADOPTIONS should be easier; too many barriers to this kind of arrangement exist. For instance, it takes 12 months to finalize a kinship adoption, while a non-kinship adoption takes only 6 months. To increase adoption within family groups, participants called for increased financial incentives, access to support services and training geared specifically toward kinship adoption.

MATCHING PROCEDURES should be driven by the child's needs. The professional must be familiar with both the child and the family in order to make a successful match. High caseworker turnover rates are a barrier to this familiarity. Failed placements are devastating to both the parents and the children. Failed placements can be minimized if the child's needs are considered paramount in the matching process.

RETENTION of waiting parents should be emphasized as strongly as recruitment. There is a sense that good families are lost because the process is so burdensome. The system needs to emphasize not only recruiting families, but also treating them well enough so that they are willing to complete the entire process. Even when a potential adoptive match cannot be found, parents need contact from an agency to remain engaged in the system. There are some parents whose only contact with an agency is to complete the training and home study. Once these steps are completed, they often report feeling completely disconnected from a system that will not respond to their inquiries regarding available children. Several parents made statements like the following, "If there are so many children waiting to be adopted, why doesn't anyone care that I want to adopt?"

Standards

The parents in the focus groups did not specifically articulate their thoughts in terms of standards, although they did identify flaws in the system that can be translated into a need for standards to be created or revised. Their comments centered on their main contact with the system—the frontline workers, services and processes that they, as prospective adoptive parents, deal with in the adoption process.

Standards for Service in General

CASEWORKERS were viewed by participants as being critical to success. They are the parents' connection to the system and serve as a liaison between parents and all other components of the system. The largest concerns parents had with caseworkers involved turnover rate and caseload burden. Some parents reported having as many as six caseworkers a year. Participants said that the case volume workers handle is too high. Parents also reported variability in the competence of caseworkers; some workers have extensive system knowledge while others seem not to know the system very well. There is also variability in accessibility for communication. Parents mentioned that the transfer of information such as medical records, school information, etc. should be quicker from the worker to the parent so that the adoption process is not slowed down or forsaken. One parent believed that "Ohio social workers can be very discriminatory," although she did not elaborate.

POLICIES AND RULES were another source of frustration for parents. Policies change frequently, and parents feel that "it's a new rule every day." There are inconsistencies in rules from county to county, which confuses those trying to interact with multiple counties in the system. Other parents complained that there was no clear process to file a complaint. Furthermore, when a complaint is registered, parents feel the response is poor or even retaliatory. One parent summarized the feelings of others when he said, "There is no uniformity in requirements across the state. Things can vary widely from county to county. Each county has its own games and rules you have to play by."

RECORD KEEPING needs to be performed more carefully and in a more consistent manner. Many parents expressed deep frustrations with the lack of family medical history records for the children they adopted. Parents felt that caseworkers need to make this more of a priority when they first remove the child from the home because the chances of getting the information after that initial contact are slim to none.

PAPERWORK is a major hassle for families who want to adopt. Parents would like to see the paperwork involved in getting services streamlined and standardized. One parent reported that the paperwork involved in the interstate compact order moved very slowly due to delays in the state of Ohio. If there were standards around these paperwork processes, and especially if there were consistency across counties, it would become less of a barrier to adoption.

**Standards for
Specific
Services**

SUBSIDIES were another area where parents needed clearer standards. Parents do not know what subsidies they are eligible for. Participants reported that subsidies are even more confusing when you are trying to adopt from multiple counties because the subsidies can vary so much from county to county.

HOME STUDIES have to be repeated from agency to agency because each agency has asks different questions, or asks the same questions in different ways. Parents think there should be a universal home study form that could be used no matter what agency they work with. Focus group participants also thought that the foster and adoptive home study deadline for updates should be standardized to minimize confusion. Many parents reported that, because their caseworker had given them the wrong date, their home study had lapsed and they then had to redo the entire home study process.

TRAINING content needs to be more consistent across the state. Parents asked for trainings to contain specific pieces of crucial information, and wanted all training agendas to include that information no matter where the training was conducted. One example of a training topic given by parents was an overview of the adoption system including detailed descriptions of the major players in the system. Another training topic participants asked for was one to help them determine if they could successfully parent children with special needs. Overall, parents indicated that they would like more input into the types of trainings that are offered.

PLACEMENTS were another area where parents thought policies needed to be more consistent. They feel children are being moved around too much, and that the system should emphasize permanent placements rather than family reunification. Participants felt that the system does not follow through with placements very well. Another area for standards in placements mentioned was around the children's past relationships. Many parents reported having problems when the child would have relationships with birth parents, birth family members and former foster parents post adoption. Participants believed if there were supervised visitation by a neutral third party (the state) available upon request, it would make these visits much easier on everyone.

OTHER SERVICES that parents thought needed to be standardized were the availability of daycare and respite care. Parents felt that there needs to be consistently available daycare in both foster and adoptive placements. Also, respite care needs to be more universally accessible. They felt that it was hit or miss if these services were available to foster and adoptive parents.

Strategies

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SOURCES should be analyzed throughout the system. Often, input on important decisions is not sought from foster parents who know the children the best. It should be standard practice to solicit input from foster parents and other sources close to the child in situations such as court proceedings and educational meetings.

RESOURCE FAMILIES could be used. Parents suggested that these would be families that were more child-centered and permanent. Resource families would be alternatives to foster or adoptive families. Rather than families having to choose if they were going to be labeled as a foster family or adoptive family, families could be designated as being available to do whatever is necessary to serve the needs of the individual child.

KINSHIP ADOPTION is much too cumbersome according to those who have been through the process. Often, the requirements for kinship adoption are more strenuous than for traditional adoption. The process for relatives to adopt needs to be made easier and quicker.

State Leadership and Vision

Many parents reported having no real experience with the *AdoptOhio* program at the state level. A few comments made from a handful of caseworkers and activist parents are reported below

General Topics

COMMUNICATION is an issue. Parents think that it is impossible to get in touch with anyone in Columbus. One caseworker reported that it took a year to get anyone at the state to even look at their agency's application to become an *AdoptOhio* agency.

CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE STATE is absent in Ohio, according to parents. From participants' viewpoints, it seems as if each county operates independently. Parents think that there are guidelines at the state level that never trickle down to the county level. One parent said, "The turnover for the state is so large that *AdoptOhio* isn't the same from year to year. They keep starting over. There is no consistency and they don't get off the ground. At some point they will need to make *AdoptOhio* a 'set aside' and leave it alone and no matter what new government comes in they leave it alone so it will stay the same. They need to leave people there to run it. As a parent, you don't know who to call."

ORGANIZATION ACROSS THE STATE was also perceived to be absent. One parent said, "The state needs to know that it is a very long wait to get a child. They need to hire more competent workers and develop a smoother process. This will help the Ohio kids move." Comments such as this indicate that parents are often unclear about the role of the state in adoption proceedings.

Subsidies

Subsidies were the most frequently discussed topic in the focus groups. Participants had a lot of opinions on the topic. Most of what they had to say was not positive. For instance, one participant said, “Ohio is one of the worst states to get subsidies from. You must bleed and beg to get any money.” However, participants were able to generate many recommendations for improvement, which are reported below.

Post-Finalization Service Availability

PASS FUNDS are more often promised than delivered. Parents felt misled and lied to about what PASS money is available. There was the perception in many groups that little PASS money was actually available. Parents thought that you had to offer extensive documentation to get services and that it takes a long time for the money to come through. Several parents in one group said that they applied for PASS funds in order to get their child school services that they could not afford. The money was not delivered when promised. Other parents said that they were too embarrassed to take PASS funds, even for educational needs.

ANCILLARY SERVICES are frequently needed post-adoption. Many parents report needing help with ancillary services more than they need monetary subsidies. Parents reported needing psychological services (including therapy and residential treatment), medical coverage, child care assistance, clothes and help locating other services for their children. Participants mentioned several times that the procedure to get Medicaid cards was laborious. The cards would be mailed every month, but often would not arrive until they were expired. This makes it difficult for foster and adoptive parents to plan doctor visits in advance or provide continuity of care. Parents reported that some programs will not serve you post-adoption, which is a disincentive to adopting. Other parents reported that they need more services later in the child’s life, and there is no way of getting them if you do not apply for them when you first get the child. Other parents just want information on who to contact and how to get services post adoption. Residential treatment is sometimes needed, but one parent reported that it is almost impossible to get the state to pay for it without filing neglect charges. There is also a lack of intensive mental health treatment that is non-residential. One parent lamented, “Give families what they need for the child when they adopt. It is so hard to get funding for needed services after the adoption has gone through.” Often, parents reported that what services they received were based on how savvy they were in dealing with the system. This indicates that the needed services may be out there; they are just not easily accessible to most adoptive parents.

STANDARDIZATION of subsidies across counties would reduce the perception of disparities. Many parents think that subsidies vary from person to person in the same agency. Some say that getting subsidies depends on your social worker. Others say that if you have been in the system a long time, you know how to “work the ropes to take care of the child,” including getting a larger subsidy. This also indicates that services need to be more consistently available

and publicized to all adoptive parents. Overall, parents would like to see the level of care standardized based on the child's need and for the level to be consistent from foster care to adoption.

**Role in
Specific
Adoption
Situations**

FOSTER TO ADOPT situations were ones in which subsidies played a large role. Parents felt that there was a large money gap between fostering and adoption, and that this served as a disincentive to adoption. Foster parents who have been caring for a high needs child may have met that child's needs only based on certain resources and, might not be able to care for the child at the same level if those resources were removed. Because the financial assistance changes when you move from foster care to adoption, you cannot maintain the same level of services. Many times, parents felt that they had more rights and resources to help the child as a foster parent than as an adoptive parent.

SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTIONS was another situation in which subsidies were important. Special needs children often require educational, vocational and mental health services, and the adoptive parents need respite. Unfortunately, as one parent said, "High needs kids in low subsidy counties don't have much of a chance of being adopted."

KINSHIP CARE subsidies are needed. Parents who have adopted within their family feel as if there are no subsidies available for them. This is another disincentive to adoption.

LIMITED RESOURCE ADOPTIVE FAMILIES need subsidies in order to adopt. The role of subsidies is crucial in low income or retiree situations. Medical insurance is also needed when the adoptive parent is retired or when the child is medically needy.

Strategies

EDUCATION is needed for both parents and agency staff. Parents could benefit from learning what subsidies they are eligible for and how to go about getting them. Agency staff members also need training about subsidies so that they can steer parents through the system effectively.

COMMUNICATION on subsidies should be improved. Participants suggested several ways this could happen. One suggestion was that the state might publish information about subsidies and about PASS funds on the website. Another suggestion was to create an adoption subsidy guide for both parents and agency staff to use. Parents also asked for clarification about adoption vouchers. They would like their caseworkers to be clearer about how much they are going to get and when they will receive the funds.

REDUCE SUBSIDY PAPERWORK so that it is less of a burden. Often, parents report, it takes months for needed services to be authorized because of the paperwork load. Parent suggested that there be a universal application form for all subsidies, possibly available on the web.

FLEXIBILITY in the distribution of subsidies was important to parents. Many participants worried that they would need help later in the child's life for things they may not know about when the child is placed with them. Often, special needs cannot be determined if the child is young at the time of the adoption. Parents strongly felt the level of need should be re-evaluated on a regular basis.

Children's Groups

Five focus groups were conducted with 31 children. In these groups, there were eighteen adopted children, ten children in foster care and three foster children who were in the process of being adopted by their foster parents. Sixteen participants (52%) were male and fifteen were female (48%). The ethnic background of the children who participated was almost evenly split among three groups: 39% (N=12) were white, 32% (N=10) were Hispanic, and 29% (N=9) were African American.

Adoption

Children reported many **POSITIVE THINGS** about being adopted. They liked that they had more freedom in a family. Many also mentioned that they enjoyed having siblings in their family, be it related siblings, other adoptees, or natural children. Many participants said that being adopted "makes you special and unique." One child reported, "The day I got adopted was the happiest day of my life."

Children also reported **DIFFICULTIES** with being adopted. A theme present in every focus group was the children's relationship with their birth families. While not every child wanted to have contact with their birth parents, they all said they wondered about them. Many children said they often wondered if their birth parents were OK, and questioned if their birth families were thinking about them. Children said many times that it was very difficult not to know about your birth family. This was especially the case in international adoption situations where there was little hope of ever getting information about their birth parents. Many children reported that it was tough to be adopted because people automatically think that you're different. This leads to many questions about adoption, which are often hard for the children to answer (i.e. Why did your parents give you up?, etc.). Other children reported that, while they enjoy having siblings, it is hard when your parents have natural kids because they have more of a bond with the parents. Some children reported having trouble making a connection with extended members of their adopted families because of the lack of a blood relationship.

The **TRANSITION** to the adoptive home was often confusing and difficult for children. Most children who were old enough to remember when they were adopted didn't really understand what was happening to them, either because they were too young to comprehend the situation or because the adults did not explain to them what was occurring and why. Some talked about getting in a car and being permanently dropped off at a home with little or no explanation from

their caseworker. Others felt confused about how to initiate conversations with their new families about their questions or feelings.

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIONS had both positive and negative aspects, according to children who were adopted by a family of a different race. Many children reported enjoying the experience of knowing two different cultures. However, from the children's view, the downside to transracial adoption is that it makes you even more different. Children reported "people stare at me when I'm with my parents because we look different" and "people never know where I fit in." Participants said transracial adoptions were difficult because you can never hide that you are adopted, everyone knows it just by looking at you and your parents together.

CASEWORKERS were mentioned several times by the children. Similar to reports from the parents, the quality of the relationship with the caseworkers varied greatly from child to child and from worker to worker. Some participants reported their caseworkers were very helpful, especially in helping to deal with problems and anger. Others reported that their caseworkers sometimes made them feel uncomfortable. Several children expressed a mistrust of their caseworkers. These children thought that caseworkers should be more honest with them about their birth families.

Foster Care

EXPERIENCES reported by foster children were mostly negative. Foster children, like adopted children, expressed an overwhelming feeling of being different from their peers. While most foster children admitted that there were really good foster homes out there, they mainly talked about the ones they had problems in. There was a lot of anxiety expressed in switching homes due to the fear of mistreatment. As one child said, "You never know if they [foster parents] are going to do you right. You don't know if they are going to love you and care for you. If they don't love me, I don't care what I do when I am there." A similar comment came from another participant, "If they don't treat me right, I treat them wrong, too. All I want is to be loved and hugged and cared for." Foster children also expressed an overall lack of trust with everyone in the system—including caseworkers, counselors, foster parents and even other foster children. Many of the children were embarrassed to be in the foster care system because they feel others look at them as if they did something wrong.

HOPES AND FEARS for foster children mainly centered on relationships with their birth family. Many children talked about other siblings in the system that they were separated from, and were fearful they would lose touch with each other. While some children were adamant that they would be reunited with their birth families when they turned 18, others expressed fear in ever seeing them again. Some children were worried that if they did reunite with their birth parents, they would learn that they had not changed at all. One child said that she was worried that by wanting to be reunified with her birth family, she would hurt her foster parents.

MOVING HOMES was reported to be very difficult by almost every foster child in the focus groups. Fear of the unknown and distrust of the new family was present in almost every story. As one child said, “You never know what you are getting into.” Another reported, “I was scared every time I moved that the new family was going to beat me.” Children also expressed a great sense of loss in being in multiple placements. As one child reported, “You are constantly losing your family and friends. You have to start all over again at every house.” Another lamented, “Just when you make friends, then they move you to a different place.” Children thought it was much easier and safer to stay in one home. As one foster child reported, “It’s a lot easier to stay in one home because I don’t have to worry about anyone hurting me. And, I don’t have to change schools and meet new people.” Many children reported that it was very hard to get adjusted to new schools with different placements. Only one participant reported that she didn’t mind switching homes. When asked why she didn’t mind, she said it was because she made friends easily.

Strategies

PUBLIC AWARENESS about adoption is needed, according to the children in the focus groups. They suggested many forms this could take. Several suggested that television shows could include families that have adopted children or multiracial families. Children thought it would be a good idea to interview children who were waiting to be adopted and have them tell how they feel about wanting a parent. Overall, children wanted everyone to know more about adoption so that it was viewed as being more normal.

SUPPORT of adopted children could improve. For instance, children wanted more adoption support groups to be available to them. Several participants also mentioned that there could be a mentoring program for adopted children to help others who are adopted. Children wanted families to celebrate their adoption day along with their birthday. Another idea for supporting children in adoption situations was to make a “life book” for each child to record their history and birth family. This would give the children a sense of their own history, which is often lost in foster care and adoption situations.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE ADOPTION PROCESS was important to many of the children. They wanted to be given a choice about where they would live whenever possible. They also wanted to get a chance to know the parents before the adoption was finalized. Children expressed a need to be listened to throughout the foster care and adoption processes.

ORGANIZATION in the foster care system was seen as deficient. One child suggested that to better organize the system, children should be placed with others in their age group. That way, foster parents could be trained to deal with children in that specific age range. Children seemed to think their placement in foster homes was often arbitrary and ill fitting.

COMMUNICATION with the children throughout the process was deemed to be crucial. Children really wanted their caseworkers, counselors and foster parents to be sincere with them, and to let them know what was going to happen. They

wanted honest answers about the reasons they were in foster care, how the adoption process would proceed and other crucial issues.

Schools

Issues

A **LACK OF RESOURCES** evident when it comes to meeting children's educational needs. Parents often struggle to get their children the services they need. Parents felt the education system evades responsibility for foster and adopted children. Parents reported problems getting schools to complete a Multi-Factored Evaluation (MFE) in a timely manner. Also, once children do get an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the services mandated are often not provided. Schools often do not have sufficient resources to manage children with severe behavioral issues, and participants felt that schools need to focus on more than just academics with these children because traditional educational programs may not work. Parents expressed frustration with the state's lack of resources for school services. Many mentioned that they were promised PASS funds for their children with special needs, but that the funds never came through. Even when the funds do come through, there are often billing discrepancies and problems with the school getting the money from the state. Participants felt there should be funding exclusively set aside at the state level for adopted children's educational needs.

UNEARNED PROMOTION of foster and adopted children to the next grade is a problem for some parents. Parents feel children are being passed even when they do not meet developmental guidelines. This causes the children to fall even further behind in school.

SUSPENSIONS AND EXPULSIONS are used too often as solutions to behavior issues often exhibited by adopted and foster children. Participants felt children in foster care or adopted children are being removed from school too often, which causes disruptions in the child's educational progress.

SPECIAL EDUCATION LABELS are a concern for parents of children in the special education system. Participants felt that children are given special educational and mental health labels too quickly in schools, and that these labels then follow them throughout their academic career.

LACK OF DIVERSITY in schools is an issue in many transracial and international adoptions. Often these children are in schools where there is little diversity. As one adopted child said, "Kids make fun of me because I don't look like anyone else at school and because I don't look like my parents."

Players

FOSTER PARENTS feel left out of the school process. They are often not invited to participate in any proceedings regarding the child. If they are invited, there is no consideration of their schedule and meetings are almost always scheduled in the middle of the day. Overall, foster parents expressed a desire to have more participation in their child's school experience.

PARENT SURROGATES are individuals appointed by the school to represent the educational needs of children who are wards of the state. Foster and prospective adoptive parents felt like they have no say in the process when these surrogates are involved. The surrogate parent often makes all IEP decisions, which is frustrating for the foster parents because they feel the parent surrogates do not really know the child very well, and therefore cannot fully determine his or her needs. While participants seemed to agree with the concept of a parent surrogate, they felt that meeting need to include the viewpoints of all the key players.

TEACHERS are often insensitive to adopted and foster children's situations, according to participants. This is especially true when children are asked to do family tree or genealogy projects. Some parents feel teachers have strong stereotypes about adopted and foster children that are often hard to break. Overall, participants cited a need for increased teacher and school sensitivity to their foster and adopted children.

Strategies

TRAINING for school personnel and for foster and adoptive parents is crucial. Foster and adoptive parents report a low level of familiarity with the education system. This causes them to feel helpless in advocating for their child's school rights. In addition, participants cited a need for teachers and other school personnel to be trained about the realities and needs of foster and adopted children. This will help to increase sensitivity and understanding.

COLLABORATION between schools and agencies is crucial. Often, the two systems work at odds with one another rather than working together to meet the needs of children. Foster and adopted children's school experiences would benefit from this type of collaboration.