



DAVE THOMAS  
FOUNDATION  
FOR ADOPTION®

Finding Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

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## **A Guide to Child-Focused Recruitment**

*The Proven Model from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's  
Wendy's Wonderful Kids Program*

October | 2011

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*signature program*

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## Introduction

For the more than 137,000 children who entered foster care in the U.S. and Canada as a result of child abuse, neglect or abandonment and are not able to return to their birth families, there are two very different paths — be adopted or age out of the system without the care and support of permanent, loving families.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption designed and implemented the Wendy's Wonderful Kids Program in 2004 to increase adoptions from foster care — focusing especially on children for whom it has traditionally been difficult to find families: primarily older children, children with siblings who are also available for adoption, and children with physical or emotional disorders. The goal: find an appropriate, permanent and loving adoptive family for each child waiting in the foster care system.

A five-year independent evaluation conducted by Child Trends compared a control group of children with those served by the program, and found that children served by Wendy's Wonderful Kids are **1.7 times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by the program. Furthermore, its impact on adoption is strongest among older youth, and children with mental health disorders — groups that have traditionally waited the longest for adoption or that are least likely to achieve adoption — with adoptions **three times more likely**.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption awards grants to public and private adoption agencies to hire adoption professionals who implement proactive, child-focused recruitment strategies targeted exclusively on

At age 16, Dana had been in foster care for eight years, and had lived in 22 different foster care placements. He seemed destined to join the ranks of the nearly 28,000 children who age out of foster care each year, which meant he would be more likely to end up in jail, underemployed or homeless, and less likely to graduate from high school.<sup>1</sup>

Dana's future changed when he was added to the caseload of a Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) recruiter. The WWK model begins with an exhaustive case file review, where the recruiter found the name of a paternal aunt who had expressed an interest in adopting Dana in the past. The recruiter discovered the barrier to adoption had been inadequate housing. The recruiter provided the aggressive, persistent work needed over many months to help the aunt work with the housing authority, complete training, complete a home study, navigate the interstate adoption rules and — finally — adopt Dana.

moving America's longest-waiting children from foster care into adoptive families. During the evaluation, more than 120 Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters worked in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and four Canadian provinces.

Effective, aggressive and accountable recruitment activities are critical to the success of Wendy's Wonderful Kids. Rather than casting the broad net of general awareness and recruitment campaigns or defaulting to internet photo listings, media profiles of children or public photography displays, WWK adoption professionals are expected to be agents of change in the lives of the children for whom they are recruiting families by employing an intensive and exhaustive child-focused recruitment model.

## **The Wendy's Wonderful Kids child-focused recruitment model**

### **Children served**

Children are eligible for WWK services if they have a permanency goal of adoption, or are free for adoption, and do not have an identified adoptive resource. The program is designed to serve children who are considered challenging to place in adoptive homes due to factors such as age, sibling group membership, or disability. Children served by WWK can be in any type of out-of-home care placement setting, including family foster care, group care, and residential settings. A child's desire to be adopted is not a prerequisite for participation in the program.

Because the WWK program is intended to be very intensive with regard to the recruitment activities provided by staff, WWK recruiters are expected to carry small caseloads. Some WWK program sites focus on specific subgroups of waiting children, such as older teens, children in care for the longest periods of time, or those who have already had significant adoption recruitment activities conducted on their behalf.

The recommended caseload size for each recruiter is 20, with a maximum of 25. At any given time the recruiter should be intensively recruiting for 12 to 15 children. The remaining children on the recruiter's caseload may be in a less intensive phase of the recruitment process. For example, a child who is matched with a family and is in a pre-adoptive placement, or a child who requires greater adoption preparation, may not be in the active recruitment phase but is still on the recruiter's caseload and being monitored by the recruiter. A child may also be considered part of the caseload but "inactive" if he or she is a runaway, continuously and adamantly opposed to adoption, or physically unavailable due to incarceration or hospitalization. Even if a child is not being actively recruited for, recruiters must have periodic contact with the children or the child's worker.

There is no set time limit for the provision of WWK services for a particular child. Recruiters remove children from the caseload when the child's adoption has

been finalized, the court has granted legal guardianship, the child welfare worker has changed the child's permanency goal and the recruiter no longer has access to the child and child's files, or the child ages out of foster care and his/her case is closed. It is possible for a WWK recruiter to work aggressively on a child's behalf for years before finding an appropriate adoptive family.

## **Wendy's Wonderful Kids works for the longest-waiting children**

Since the program's inception, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has served nearly 7,500 children through the program, matching 66% of them with families and finalizing the adoptions of more than 2,500 children.

The children served are among those who have traditionally had the least success in adoption recruitment:

- 68% are age 9 or older at time of referral  
45% are age 12 or older at time of referral
- 48% have at least one disability
- 30% have had six or more placements at time of referral  
9% have had 10 or more placements at time of referral
- 50% have been in the system for more than four years at time of referral  
10% have been in the system for more than 10 years at time of referral
- 21% had failed or dissolved adoptions prior to Wendy's Wonderful Kids

## **Grantee organizations**

The Foundation's Wendy's Wonderful Kids grantees are both public child welfare agencies and private adoption agencies. Agencies with WWK recruiters either have custody of the children in foster care whom they are serving, or have access to these children and the children's files. One in 10 grantees are public/governmental child welfare organizations.

## **Hiring practices**

The Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter is an employee of the grantee whose salary, benefits and related costs are funded by a renewable grant from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. Recruiters should have a Master's degree in social work (or related field) with at least two years of child welfare experience with an emphasis on foster care adoption. A Bachelor's degree in social work or a related human service field and adoption experience may be substituted for a

Master's degree. If a license is required by state law, the Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter must be licensed.

The Foundation has learned that recruiters possessing certain qualities are more likely to be effective, including being able to work independently, being persistent when obstacles arise, having the interpersonal skills to work with diverse teams, engaging in creative problem-solving and being results-driven.

## Model components

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's Wendy's Wonderful Kids model contains eight major components, all of which are expected to be employed for each child being served.

- **Initial case referral.** Recruiters must contact the child's worker to introduce the role of WWK, gather initial referral information, establish a date to begin review of the child's case file, and schedule an initial meeting with the child. WWK recruiters generally make contact with the child's worker immediately or within days following a referral to obtain information about the child and the status of the child's case, such as current placement, background on the child's case, previous recruitment activities conducted for the child, the child's likes and dislikes, any past disrupted matches or pre-adoptive placements, and the child's level of understanding about adoption.
- **Relationship with child.** Recruiters must meet in person with the child monthly, at a minimum, to develop trust and openness and facilitate their assessment of the child's adoption readiness, prepare the child for adoption, and develop an appropriate recruitment plan, preferably one-on-one. Recruiters may meet with the child at his or her foster care placement, engage the child in an event or activity, take a walk, play games, etc.
- **Case record review.** Recruiters must conduct an in-depth review of the existing case file. An exhaustive case record review may take several days. The recruiter is expected to develop a system to document: date and reason child entered the system; child's most recent profile/assessment; chronological placement history; significant services provided currently or in the past; identification of needed services; all significant people in the child's life past and present including child welfare worker, foster parents, attorney, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer, teacher, therapist, relatives, mentor, faith-based representative, extracurricular activity leader, etc; and the next court date.
- **Assessment.** Recruiters must determine the child's strengths, challenges, desires, preparedness for adoption and whether the child has needs that should be addressed before moving forward with the adoption process. The recruiter is expected to work with the child's worker to ensure that these needs are met. The recruiter must develop a written assessment and update it quarterly to

enhance the child-focused recruitment plan. The assessment is formed from the recruiter's interaction with the child, and usually includes input from other members of the child's team.

- **Adoption preparation.** Recruiters are expected to ensure that the child is prepared for adoption (and for the recruitment process itself). Most recruiters use materials or tools such as handouts, books or videos and/or group-related activities for children, such as support groups or camps. During the matching process, the recruiter is expected to assure that the prospective adoptive family is adequately prepared to meet the needs of the child. In most cases, other child welfare professionals share this responsibility in a team approach.
- **Network building.** Recruiters must meet with persons close to and knowledgeable about the child (caseworker, foster parent, attorney, CASA volunteer, teacher, therapist, relative, mentor, faith-based representative, extracurricular activity leader, etc.) and maintain regular and ongoing contact to facilitate recruitment activities. Monthly contact with the child's caseworker is expected and seen as essential.
- **Recruitment plan.** Based on the case file review, interviews with significant adults, and the input of the child, recruiters develop a comprehensive recruitment plan or enhance the existing recruitment plan. The recruiter's plan for each child is expected to be customized and defined by the child's needs. It is expected that the plan will be reviewed and updated quarterly. The child may participate in developing the plan, depending on child characteristics such as age, cognitive ability, and physical limitations. Common forms of child participation include providing input on the type of recruitment activities included in the plan (e.g. the child asking not to participate in televised media recruitment), providing input on the type of family desired, and participating in the development of recruitment tools (e.g. helping to write biographical material for recruitment tools). Children may help identify individuals in their lives who they would like to consider as adoptive resources.
- **Diligent search.** Recruiters must implement the ongoing and intensive process of identifying, locating, and contacting persons with whom the child already has or had a bond or positive relationship. Recruiters are expected to conduct aggressive follow-up with contacts identified, with the knowledge and approval of the child's worker. Recruiters use every tool at their disposal, including their exhaustive review of the child's case file, online search tools, and conversations with the child, relatives, birth parents, other connections, and the child's worker.

## General recruitment activities outside the model

In addition to the above components, we are aware that many agencies utilize general public adoption recruitment efforts, such as internet photo listings and media profiles. However, these tactics are not part of a child-focused recruitment strategy and not accepted as either the initial or predominant recruitment activity.

## Every child is adoptable

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption Wendy's Wonderful Kids program provides a roadmap for giving the children who are most at risk of aging out of foster care something that every child deserves – a permanent home and loving family.

## About the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is a national nonprofit public charity dedicated exclusively to finding permanent homes for the more than 137,000 children waiting in North America's foster care systems. Created by Wendy's® founder Dave Thomas, who was adopted, the Foundation implements results-driven national service programs, foster care adoption awareness campaigns and advocacy initiatives.

Visit [davethomasfoundation.org](http://davethomasfoundation.org) or call **1-800-ASK-DTFA** to:

- Learn more about the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and its Wendy's Wonderful Kids program.
- Find out if your organization could be a potential Wendy's Wonderful Kids grantee.
- Sign up for email alerts about the availability of the Wendy's Wonderful Kids child-focused recruitment full curriculum, currently being developed.
- Learn more about Wendy's Wonderful Kids research at [davethomasfoundation.org/research](http://davethomasfoundation.org/research).

<sup>1</sup>Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth," 2010.



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