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A national evaluation of



— signature program —

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## Wendy's Wonderful Kids: A Policy Maker's Guide to Child-Focused Recruitment

*Child Trends' Five-Year Study of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's  
Wendy's Wonderful Kids Program Finds Intensive Child-Focused  
Recruitment Model Effective for Longest-Waiting Children,  
Especially Older Youth  
October | 2011*

## Current outcomes are bleak for older youth in foster care

On any given day, as many as 107,000 victims of child abuse and neglect in U.S. foster care are available for adoption. More than 100,000 children do not have a plan to be adopted, or a plan to be reunified with their biological families.<sup>1</sup>

Even though overall numbers of adoptions increased in the years following the 1997 enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), the increase for adoptions of younger children has outpaced that for older children.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the number of older youth aging out of foster care rose 60 percent. One study concluded that a child's age is the most crucial characteristic affecting his or her likelihood of being adopted.<sup>3</sup>

We know that when nearly 28,000 youth age out of care each year, they will experience staggeringly higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, unintended pregnancy and truncated educations. Only half will be employed by the time they reach their mid 20s. Sixty percent of men will be convicted of a crime. Four out of 10 women who were formerly in foster care will be on public assistance. And only six out of 100 children formerly in foster care will attend community college.<sup>4</sup>

## The value of adoption

Adoption provides the stability, love and support of a family for children without parents. It allows children the opportunity to thrive and grow in a permanent home. Financially, adoption

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 thousands of 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.

Dana's future changed when he was added to the caseload of a Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter. The Wendy's Wonderful Kids model begins with an exhaustive case file review, in which the recruiter found the name of a paternal aunt who had previously expressed an interest in adopting Dana. 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 rules and – finally – adopt Dana.

offers immediate savings to the child welfare system, in the forms of foster care, independent living and general recruitment costs. It also represents a cost savings to taxpayers, as each dollar spent on foster care adoption yields three dollars in benefits to society<sup>6</sup>.

## Rigorous evaluation provides evidence of success

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption designed and implemented the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) Program in 2004 to increase adoptions from foster care — focusing on children who have traditionally waited the longest for adoption or were most likely to age out of care — older youth, sibling groups and children with physical or emotional challenges.

Recognizing that rigorous evaluation of adoption recruitment programs is rare but vital, the Foundation commissioned a five-year independent evaluation conducted by Child Trends, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan research center based in Washington, D.C. This research represents the most rigorous empirical study of child-focused adoption recruitment practices to date, involving 21 sites in 18 states. The study compared a control group of children with those served by the program, and found that:

- Children in foster care served by Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters are more than **1.7 times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by WWK.
- Older youth and children with mental health disorders served by Wendy's Wonderful Kids are **up to three times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by WWK.

## Adoptive families are found 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 percent 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

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

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption awards grants to public and private adoption agencies to hire adoption professionals. More than 120 Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters work in all 50 states,\* the District of Columbia and four Canadian provinces. Grantees are held accountable for employing an aggressive, proactive, child-focused recruitment model. The model contains eight major components to be implemented for each child being served:

- Building a caseload of children who are most likely to age out of foster care
- Developing a one-on-one relationship with the child
- Conducting an exhaustive case record review
- Developing an accurate assessment of the child's needs
- Assuring effective adoption preparation for the child and the prospective family
- Building a functioning network of all persons involved
- Creating a child-focused recruitment plan customized to the individual child's needs and desires
- Conducting a diligent search for persons with whom the child has had an existing bond or positive relationship

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 adhere to this aggressive and accountable recruitment model.

## A call to action

In spite of substantial effort and investment, the U.S. is not achieving successful outcomes for older youth in foster care. We now have a model with evidence-based success to radically alter this landscape. The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption urges government officials, child welfare practitioners, courts and communities to:

### **Change attitudes**

Insist on the beliefs that every child is adoptable, that no child should age out of foster care without a permanent family, and that we must act with urgency to give unparented children loving and nurturing families. Recognize that even though previous efforts to find families for older youth have not been effective, we now have a roadmap for success. Do not accept a child's opposition to adoption. We would not allow a child to decline other essentials, such as school or health care – a family is essential to a child's well-being.

\*At time of research

## **Change practice**

Train child welfare leaders, judges and current front-line workers on the benefits of adoption and the success of this model. Increase technical assistance to states and counties on child-focused recruitment. Revise social work curricula to train future workers.

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*Findings from this evaluation suggest that, if all children waiting for adoption were served by Wendy's Wonderful Kids, the number of children adopted from foster care would nearly double. This means that with Wendy's Wonderful Kids, an additional 36,000 waiting children might have been adopted from foster care in 2010, a substantial increase over the roughly 52,000 who were adopted.*

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## **Demand accountability**

One contributor to the success of the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program is the high standard of accountability to which the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption holds each grantee. Child welfare and judicial workers at every level accept responsibility for the lives of children without families, and work hard to achieve the best possible outcomes, but have limited success. We can dramatically improve adoption rates by making this model standard operating procedure for every child in U.S. foster care who cannot return home and is without an adoptive resource. We can hold ourselves accountable with regular reporting on the adoption progress of youth in our care.

## **Access existing resources**

Current financial and human resources can be shifted to invest in the well-being of youth through this evidence-based practice. In addition to shifting use of the funds already allocated for adoption, implementation of this model will result in a reduction in resources needed for traditional efforts to recruit adoptive parents and to prepare children for independent living. Shifting existing financial resources is possible through Title IV-E waivers available to states using IV-B waivers under the newly enacted "Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act," and by accessing funds to increase sibling placements through the "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act" – *41 percent of children adopted through Wendy's Wonderful Kids were adopted with biological siblings.*

\*Child Trends estimate based on Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS): Based on 109,871 children who experienced foster care in 2009 nationwide who either 1) have a goal of long-term foster care, living with relatives, or emancipation or 2) whose parental rights have been terminated and who do not have an identified case goal. See [davethomasfoundation.org/research](http://davethomasfoundation.org/research) for details.

## Conclusion

Aging out of foster care should be considered a government, community and practitioner failure. The WWK program proves that the presence of a full-time, dedicated recruiter, using an evidence-based model for recruitment, leads to higher rates of adoption, particularly among older children, and children with mental health disorders for whom it has traditionally been difficult to find permanent adoptive families. Knowing what works for youth in care waiting to be adopted must drive change. It is the right thing to do.

## 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.

For more information on the research, please visit [davethomasfoundation.org/research](https://davethomasfoundation.org/research). For more information on the Foundation, visit [davethomasfoundation.org](https://davethomasfoundation.org), or call 1-800-ASK-DTFA.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Preliminary FY 2009 Estimates as of July 2010

<sup>2</sup>DeVooght, Kerry, Karin Malm, Sharon Vandivere, and Marci McCoy-Roth. (2011). Trends in adoptions from foster care in the wake of child welfare reforms. Retrieved from [http://www.fosteringconnections.org/tools/assets/files/Connections\\_Adoption.pdf](http://www.fosteringconnections.org/tools/assets/files/Connections_Adoption.pdf) September 15, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Maza, Penelope. (2009). A new look at the role of ASFA and children's ages in adoption. *The Roundtable*, 23(1)

<sup>4</sup>Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth," 2010

<sup>5</sup>Mary Eschelbach Hansen, "The Value of Adoption," American University Department of Economics Working Paper Series No. 2006-15



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