



A national evaluation of

The Impact of Child-Focused Recruitment on Foster Care Adoption: A Five-Year Evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids Executive Summary

October | 2011

Prepared by:



“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 aged out of foster care last 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 recruiter found the name of an aunt who had expressed interest in adopting Dana in the past and discovered the initial barrier to adoption had been inadequate housing. The recruiter provided the aggressive, persistent work needed to help the aunt work with the housing authority, complete training, complete a home study, navigate the interstate child welfare rules and finally — adopt Dana.”

For the 107,000¹ children who are available for adoption in the U.S. foster care system, there are two very different paths — be adopted by a permanent family or age out (leaving the foster care system by age 21 or younger) without the care and support of a permanent, loving family.

The human cost of children not being adopted from foster care is staggering — with youth experiencing higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, unintended pregnancy and truncated educations. By every measure, children adopted from foster care have better outcomes than children who age out. Multiple research studies have found that adoption represents a cost savings to taxpayers, with one indicating that each dollar spent on the adoption of a child from U.S. foster care yields three dollars in benefits to society,² demonstrating that investment in adoption not only benefits the child, but society as well.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) designed and implemented Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) in 2004 to increase adoptions from foster care — focusing on children for whom it has traditionally been difficult to find adoptive families — primarily older children and children with mental health disorders, as well as children who are part of sibling groups, those with previously failed adoption efforts, children with special needs, and children who have lingered in foster care. In order to learn what works in adoption recruitment, DTFA commissioned an unprecedented, five-year research effort that presents the most comprehensive, rigorous empirical evaluation of child-specific adoption recruitment practices completed to date. This long-term, evidence-based study evaluated the outcomes of children served in 21 grantee

agencies by WWK recruiters with a control group of children receiving traditional adoption recruitment methods in the same localities.

The research, conducted by Child Trends in Washington, D.C., documents much-needed information about practices and policies that improve the likelihood of adoption for children in foster care — comparing the WWK model of child-focused recruitment to “services as usual.” For evaluation purposes, “services as usual” was defined as traditional adoption recruitment services, for which there is no standard and practices vary widely across states and agencies — depending on location and resources.

The evaluation shows children served by Wendy’s Wonderful Kids are **1.7 times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by WWK. Furthermore, its impact on adoption is strongest among older youth and those with mental health disorders — groups that have traditionally waited the longest for adoption or that are least likely to achieve adoption.

The authors of the study highlight five key findings from the evaluation:

1. Children served by the WWK recruitment program are **1.7 times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by WWK.
2. The WWK program has greatest impact among older children and those with mental health disorders. Children with mental health disorders **are three times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by a WWK recruiter. The WWK model yields increasingly larger impacts among children referred at older ages: for children referred to WWK at age 8, the likelihood of adoption is 1.5 times higher for a child served by WWK than a child who was not; among those referred at age 11, the likelihood was twice as high; among those referred at age 15, the likelihood of adoption was three times as high.
3. A key component of the WWK model involves establishing one-on-one relationships with children.
4. A second WWK model component that is of particular importance is the diligent search for potential adoptive families and aggressive follow-up with identified contacts.
5. Clarity is needed on responsibility for preparing children for adoption. A clear designation of who holds responsibility for adoption preparation, along with an opportunity for that individual to meet with the child regularly to establish rapport and trust, are important contributors to program success.

Children served by the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids program are more than 1.7 times more likely to be adopted than those not served by WWK.

This evaluation demonstrates that the use of innovative strategies can lead to higher rates of adoption, especially for children for whom it has traditionally been difficult to find permanent adoptive families. Moving children out of foster care and into permanent loving families is both a moral and fiscal imperative, and improvement is possible with relatively modest resources. Policy makers and practitioners should view these findings as a roadmap for what works in foster care adoption and consider policies and programs that promote the use of child-focused recruitment practices as a means to increase the number of children in foster care who find loving and permanent homes.

For more information on the research, please visit davethomasfoundation.org/research. For more information on the Foundation, visit davethomasfoundation.org, or call 1-800-ASK-DTFA.

¹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report18.htm Preliminary Estimates for FY 2010 as of June 2011 (18).

²Mary Eschelbach Hansen, “The Value of Adoption,” *American University Department of Economics Working Paper Series No. 2006-15*; Hansen, Mary, and Bradley A. Hansen. (2006).

Barth, Richard P. Kwon Lee Chung, Judith Wildfire, and Shenyang Guo. (2006). A comparison of the governmental costs of long-term foster care and adoption. *Social Service Review*, 80(1):127-158; The economics of adoption of children from foster care. *Child Welfare: Journal of Policy, Practice, and Program*, 85(3): 559-583; Zill, Nicholas. (2011).

Adoption from foster care: Aiding children while saving public money. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2011/05_adoption_foster_care_zill/05_adoption_foster_care_zill.pdf September 15, 2011.