

Game changer

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption builds momentum

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—RITA SORONEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
DAVE THOMAS FOUNDATION
FOR ADOPTION

Thanks to its clear mission and ties to The Wendy's Co., the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has always had a national presence. Now, however, it's gone from talk to action.

“We moved from an awareness organization, although we still do that, to an organization that directly works to get these children out of foster care and into adoptive homes,” says President and CEO Rita Soronen.

Prove the model

Wendy's Wonderful Kids started in seven pilot sites in 2004. Adoption professionals try to place children most at risk for leaving foster care without a family. Soronen says recruiters carry a smaller caseload and get to know the children, who often can be placed with a former foster parent, extended family member, counselor, etc.

Since then, the innovative program expanded on a small scale to all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and seven Canadian provinces, and research shows children in the program were up to three times more likely to be adopted.

“We had maybe one or two recruiters that we were funding in some states, which was lovely for those 30 children

that were being served. But if there were 500 children in that position, we weren't really making a dent,” she says.

Going full scale

With a co-investment from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Wendy's Wonderful Kids has tested its model on different child welfare systems and populations in varying political environments. It has expanded its presence and scaled up in eight states and Ontario, Canada, and expects to scale across the country by 2029.

“When a child ages out of care at 18, not because they're bad kids, not because they're any less capable than any other child, but because they don't have the safety net of family, they're at a much higher risk of negative outcomes,” Soronen says. “Things like homelessness, being under-educated, unemployed, early parenting, substance abuse — all those things can happen to a child that can't go home and say, ‘I need some help, mom. I need some help, dad.’”

Sustainability is key, she says. Through a public/private partnership, 53 Ohio recruiters help move children out of expensive foster care and into adoptive homes.



Wendy's Wonderful Kids

To help the 20,000 children who age out of foster care each year, the program funds and manages 437 recruiters across the U.S. and Canada. By the time children are referred to a recruiter:

- 90 percent are older than age 8.
- 33 percent have had six or more placements.
- 52 percent have been in foster care more than four years.

“The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption continues to do things like data management, training, technical assistance, so it's a true partnership. But the bulk of the funding ultimately, over a three- to five-year period, will gently slide over to the state, and it simply becomes how they do business,” Soronen says. “That's what's happened in Ohio, and we believe it will happen in other states.” ●