

Witness Statement for the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives

Sarah A. Font, Ph.D.

Thank you for the invitation to speak to the Committee on a topic of great importance: the adoption of children from foster care.

I have spent my career focused on child welfare, first as a caseworker and then as a researcher and professor. I am currently a Professor at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, though my testimony today reflects my views and not those of my employer.

For this testimony, I first explain why adoption is an essential option for children and provide an overview of the key barriers to timely and stable adoption. Lastly, I discuss the role of federal funding in improving adoption practice and outcomes and discuss needed changes to current programming, data collection, and evaluation.

1. Why Adoption Matters

All children deserve the opportunity to grow up in a family where they are loved, protected, and supported as they grow into productive and healthy adults. Federal policy has long recognized that prolonged periods of uncertainty impose tremendous psychological harm on children. Children cannot plan for their futures or build trusting relationships when they do not know where they will be tomorrow.¹ Adoption is an essential service for children who cannot safely remain with their families of origin and I am grateful to the Committee for elevating this topic.

2. The Slow Path to Adoption

States have routinely failed to facilitate timely, safe, and stable adoptions for children in need. Federal data show that children spend a *median* of 31 months in foster care before exiting to adoption; in several states, the median time exceeds 45 months.² Given that most children who exit to adoption entered care before their 3rd birthday, many of these children spend substantially more time in foster care than they ever spent with their biological parents.

In 2023, I completed a project comparing states' permanency outcomes – that is, whether and how quickly children exit foster care to reunification, adoption, or guardianship.³ Three years after entering foster care, only 57% of infants who were not reunified had been adopted. But

¹ E. Susana Mariscal et al., “Exploring the Path from Foster Care to Stable and Lasting Adoption: Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 55 (August 2015): 111–20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.05.017>; Sarah A. Font and Lindsey Palmer, “Timely Permanency for Children in Foster Care: Revisiting Core Assumptions about Children’s Options and Outcomes,” *Court Review* 58, no. 1 (2022): 26–32.

² Based on the AFCARS 2022 6-month file.

³ Sarah Font, *How Long Do States Let Children in Foster Care Wait for Permanent Families? Timely Permanency Report Cards* (American Enterprise Institute, 2023), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/how-long-do-states-let-children-in-foster-care-wait-for-permanent-families-timely-permanency-report-cards/>.

states varied substantially: In Iowa and Arizona, over 85% of infants who were not reunified were adopted within 3 years; in New York, only 28%. Older children faced much worse odds. For children who entered care at ages 7-10 and were not reunified, fewer than 1 in 4 exited to adoption within 3 years.

3. Barriers to Timely Adoption

Nearly three decades have passed since Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) to prevent children from languishing in foster care indefinitely. Today, the key provisions of ASFA continue to be poorly implemented and unenforced in many jurisdictions. Consequently, too many children spend too many of their formative years in temporary settings.

a. Dangerous and Inappropriate Reunification Plans

ASFA permits states to bypass reasonable efforts for reunification in cases of aggravated circumstances; however, the use of bypass is not required. Since ASFA was enacted, research suggests little use of the aggravated circumstances provision.⁴ Thus, states may continue to draw down federal funds to reunify children with parents who sexually abused⁵ and inflicted severe physical abuse on them⁶ or caused the death of their sibling.⁷ Youth also report that reunification plans are sometimes forced on them when they did not want to reunify.⁸ Even when a parent acknowledges their inability to safely parent and requests voluntary relinquishment, judges may reject such requests and force reunification efforts to continue.⁹

Even when children are not reunified in these egregious circumstances, it is not harmless to spend years in foster care, often enduring continued visits with their abusers and without the security of a permanent legal family. A child should never have to wonder if they are going to be sent back to the parent who caused their sibling's death or severely abused them.

⁴ Jill Duerr Berrick et al., "Reasonable Efforts? Implementation of the Reunification Exception Provisions of ASFA," *Child Welfare* 87, no. 3 (2008): 163–82; U.S. General Accounting Office, *Foster Care: Recent Legislation Helps States Focus on Finding Permanent Homes for Children but Long-Standing Barriers Remain*, Report to Congressional Requesters GAO-02-585 Adoption and Safe Families Act (2002), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-02-585>.

⁵ Sarah A. Font and Naomi Schaefer Riley, "Why Are States Putting Child Sex Abuse Victims Back in the Home of Their Abusive Parents?," *USA TODAY*, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/12/03/child-sex-abuse-parents/8807597002/>.

⁶ Jerry Lambe, "Dad Who 'crushed' 4-Year-Old Son's Skull 'by Hand' Sentenced for Boy's Death," *Law & Crime*, June 30, 2025, <https://lawandcrime.com/crime/dad-who-crushed-4-year-old-sons-skull-by-hand-sentenced-for-boys-death/>; IN RE: N.N. (2024) (Court of Appeals of North Carolina 2024), <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/nc-court-of-appeals/116624670.html>.

⁷ "Opinion | New Law Could Make It Harder to Protect Kids from Abuse," accessed February 5, 2026, <https://www.startribune.com/indian-child-welfare-act-mn-family-reunification/601438206>.

⁸ Susana Mariscal et al., "Exploring the Path from Foster Care to Stable and Lasting Adoption"; L. Patty Flores, "Noah Cuatro and the Double Standards in Child Welfare," *The Imprint*, October 23, 2025, <https://imprintnews.org/uncategorized/noah-cuatro-and-the-the-double-standards-in-child-welfare/268039>.

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Freeing Children for Adoption within the Adoption and Safe Families Act Timeline* (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2021), <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/freeing-children-adoption-within-adoption-safe-families-act-timeline>.

b. Long Reunification Timelines

ASFA also implements timelines for termination of parental rights (TPR) to free children for adoption if reunification efforts have failed. This rule, known as the “15 of 22” rule, requires agencies to file for TPR when a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months, unless certain exceptions apply. However, states face no consequences for failing to comply. In a 2021 study, Illinois child welfare staff reported that federal timelines were “not a priority.”¹⁰ States may also comply with the letter, but not the spirit, of ASFA timelines. A 2023 lawsuit against the state of Indiana revealed that agencies would file for TPR on time to comply with ASFA, but then immediately withdraw the petition without a hearing.¹¹

Broad exceptions further limit ASFA’s application. For example, ASFA timelines do not pertain to a child living with relatives. States have extended the definition of ‘relative’ to include distant genetic relations who may have never even met the child, persons who “self-identify” as relatives¹², and former spouses of relatives¹³. In some states, a relative is any person with a “familial relationship *to a relative of the child*”,¹⁴ meaning they may literally have no relationship with the child at all. As states continue to stretch the definition of kin beyond any reasonable interpretation, ASFA is increasingly obsolete.

Justification for extending ASFA timelines is typically to give parents additional time to meet reunification standards. Many believe such extensions are necessary for parents with substance use problems. However, there is limited empirical evidence that additional time substantially increases safe and stable reunifications. Decades of research demonstrate that reunifications are often followed by recurrent concerns about maltreatment and reentry to foster care.¹⁵ Children

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Freeing Children for Adoption within the Adoption and Safe Families Act Timeline*, 7.

¹¹ *Annabel B. v. Holcomb Class Action Complaint*, Case 3:23-cv-760 (United States District Court For The Northern District Of Indiana South Bend Division, 2023), <https://www.classaction.org/media/ab-et-al-v-holcomb-et-al.pdf>.

¹² Oregon Secretary of State, Department of Human Services. Child Welfare Programs – Chapter 413, Division 70. Substitute Care, Definitions. <https://secure.sos.state.or.us/oard/viewSingleRule.action?ruleVrsnRsn=330833>

¹³ Kinship Guardianship as a Permanency Option - New Mexico. Ann. Stat. § 40-10B-3. From <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/kinship-guardianship-permanency-option-new-mexico/>

¹⁴ California Department of Social Services. Kinship Care. <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/foster-care/kinship-care#:~:text=In%20California's%20foster%20care%20system,%2C%20neighbors%2C%20and%20family%20friends>

¹⁵ Dylan Jones and Melissa Jonson-Reid, “Child Protective Services Reports after Reunification: An Examination of the Risk of Being Rereported to Child Protective Services after Returning Home from Foster Care,” *Child Maltreatment*, October 18, 2023, 10775595231208705, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595231208705>; Lindsey Palmer et al., “Lifetime Rates and Types of Subsequent Child Protection System Contact Following a First Report of Neglect: An Age-Stratified Analysis,” *PLOS ONE* 18, no. 4 (2023): e0283534, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0283534>; Orion Mowbray et al., “Parental Substance Use and Foster Care Reentry,” *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions* 17, no. 4 (2017): 352–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533256X.2017.1361832>; Anthony N. Maluccio and Frank Ainsworth, “Drug Use by Parents: A Challenge for Family Reunification Practice,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 25, no. 7 (2003): 511–33, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0190-7409\(03\)00042-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0190-7409(03)00042-2); Sara E. Kimberlin et al., “Re-Entering Foster Care: Trends, Evidence, and Implications,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 4 (2009): 471–81,

who reunify also have poorer life outcomes than other children with foster care experience.¹⁶ Some timeline extensions reflect workforce issues: court proceedings are frequently delayed due to missing paperwork, unprepared caseworkers, or inadequate efforts to notify one or more parties. States also may require that the adoptive family be identified before TPR can occur.¹⁷ Thus, many children are not legally free for adoption while the agency is actively seeking an adoptive family. There is limited information about how “legal risk” affects identification of adoptive families or the success of pre-adoptive placements. However, prospective adoptive parents may avoid legal risk placements out of fear that the child’s goal could be changed back to reunification at any time.¹⁸

c. Finding an Adoptive Family for Each “Waiting” Child

Children’s foster parents often pursue adoption if reunification efforts end; thus, for many children, no search for an adoptive family is needed. (Exact statistics on this are unavailable, as existing federal data do not consistently track whether a specific “waiting” child is already residing with their intended adoptive family.)

Yet, when a search for an adoptive family for a specific child is required, current processes are antiquated and ill-suited to the task. Limited research evidence is available to guide effective strategies.¹⁹ Typical approaches to identifying adoptive families include posting pictures and brief descriptions of children on the federally funded AdoptUSKids.org or associated state websites; distributing fliers to agencies with this same information; and holding adoption matching events where caseworkers are available to discuss “waiting children” with prospective adoptive parents who are licensed/approved. With all the technology available today, children deserve better.

Why are these approaches inadequate? Thousands of children are listed on these sites. A

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2008.10.003>; Jody Brook and Tom McDonald, “The Impact of Parental Substance Abuse on the Stability of Family Reunifications from Foster Care,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 2 (2009): 193–98, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2008.07.010>.

¹⁶ Heather N. Taussig et al., “Children Who Return Home from Foster Care: A 6-Year Prospective Study of Behavioral Health Outcomes in Adolescence,” *Pediatrics* 108, no. 1 (2001): e10–e10, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.108.1.e10>; Sarah A. Font et al., “Permanency and the Educational and Economic Attainment of Former Foster Children in Early Adulthood,” *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 4 (2018): 716–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418781791>; Sarah Font and Lindsey Palmer, “Left behind? Educational Disadvantage, Child Protection, and Foster Care,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 149 (March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106680>; Sarah A. Font et al., “Foster Care, Permanency, and Risk of Prison Entry,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 58, no. 6 (2021): 710–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224278211001566>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Freeing Children for Adoption within the Adoption and Safe Families Act Timeline*.

¹⁸ Abbie Goldberg et al., “‘When You’re Sitting on the Fence, Hope’s the Hardest Part’: Challenges and Experiences of Heterosexual and Same-Sex Couples Adopting Through the Child Welfare System,” *Adoption Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2012): 288–315, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2012.731032>.

¹⁹ Amy Cressman, “Foster Care Adoption Recruitment Methods: A Review of the Literature amid Calls for Reform in the United States,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 166 (November 2024): 107962, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107962>.

prospective adoptive family would need to narrow down that list, ask their caseworker to contact the caseworker for each child to obtain additional information, wait to see whether the child's caseworker responds and what information is provided, and then determine whether to follow up with further questions or to request to meet the child.

But the information provided is far too generic to assess fit, leading to missed match opportunities as well as unsuccessful matches. For example, most prospective adoptive families are unprepared for a child with needs such as sexually acting out or aggression/violence toward caregivers. But this type of information is not – understandably – put on these websites, so caseworkers seeking families for children with substantial needs may be inundated with unproductive inquiries. This is a slow, inefficient process.

An alternative approach has caseworkers – who know the child well and are equipped to assess prospective families for fit – identify and contact suitable families based on their home studies or with the assistance of algorithmic matching tools.²⁰ Other approaches that can be useful, particularly for older children or children with special needs, involves diligent search and recruitment of individuals in the child's life already (including but not limited to relatives).²¹

Both approaches remove the burden of matching children to families away from the prospective adoptive parents, relying instead on caseworkers. Although these approaches require dedicated staff time (and thus increase initial costs), they could reduce long-term costs by identifying suitable families more quickly, reducing time spent on unproductive inquiries, and reducing the share of families who end their adoption search out of frustration with a slow and poorly communicated process. Cautious experimentation and rigorous evaluation of alternatives to current recruitment and matching strategies is sorely needed.

d. Misuse of Guardianship

Over several decades, Congress has expanded federal funding for “relative guardianships” as an alternative to adoption. The intent – to allow, for example, a grandmother to provide permanent care to her grandchild without taking on the legal title of ‘mother’ – is reasonable. Guardianship is also faster and less laborious than adoption, because termination of parental rights is not required. Thus, the median time spent in care for children exiting to guardianship is 19 months,²² roughly one-third less than for adoption and far closer to the timelines encouraged by ASFA.

However, guardianship is not equivalent to adoption, legally or in its outcomes.²³ As more states

²⁰ Ludwig Dierks et al., “Search and Matching for Adoption from Foster Care,” arXiv:2103.10145, preprint, arXiv, July 10, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2103.10145>.

²¹ “Finding Permanent Families: Child-Specific vs. Child-Focused Recruitment,” *Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption*, March 28, 2025, <https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/resource/child-focused-versus-child-specific-recruitment/>.

²² Based on the AFCARS 2022 6-month file.

²³ Nancy Rolock and Kevin R. White, “Continuity for Children after Guardianship versus Adoption with Kin: Approximating the Right Counterfactual,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 72 (October 2017): 32–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.07.001>; Kierra M. P. Sattler and Sarah A. Font, “Predictors of Adoption and

apply “kin-specific licensing” requirements²⁴ (which, broadly, subject relatives to fewer standards and limited or no training) and expand the definition of relative to include people unknown to the child, the safety and quality of guardianships will become even less certain.

4. Unsafe and Unstable Adoptions

Children in foster care, particularly older children, may have difficulty trusting adults and struggle with mental and behavioral health problems stemming from their traumatic histories. Some also have profound physical and cognitive disabilities (which may be related to prenatal substance exposure or prior physical abuse) and thus require a high level of care and supervision. (Notably, however, current federal data do not accurately measure disability prevalence or severity for children in foster care.²⁵) Thus, it is of critical importance that adoption practices (1) prevent unsafe adults from becoming adoptive parents and (2) adequately prepare and support appropriate adults as they enter their new roles.

Yet, studies report that 2-8% of children reenter foster care following the finalization of an adoption and up to 30% of adopted children may reside apart from their adoptive parents prior to adulthood.²⁶ How much stock to put in such estimates is unclear due to differences in studies’ samples, measures, time frames, and geographies. Still, for far too long, the federal government has incentivized the finalization of adoptions without taking reasonable steps to promote and monitor quality and stability.

a. Insufficient Federal Data

National data on the maltreatment of children adopted from foster care or dissolution of foster care adoptions are not available. Despite federal data collection on maltreatment (through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System [NCANDS]), foster care, and adoption (through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS]), basic descriptive

Guardianship Dissolution: The Role of Race, Age, and Gender among Children in Foster Care,” *Child Maltreatment* 26, no. 2 (2021): 216–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559520952171>; Font et al., “Permanency and the Educational and Economic Attainment of Former Foster Children in Early Adulthood.”

²⁴ At least 18 states have approved plans: <https://acf.gov/cb/map/state-territories-separate-licensing-standards>

²⁵ Lindsey Palmer et al., “Rates of Emotional Disturbance among Children in Foster Care: Comparing Federal Child Welfare Data and Medicaid Records in Two States,” *Child Maltreatment*, August 11, 2022, 10775595221118931, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595221118931>.

²⁶ Kevin R. White, “Placement Discontinuity for Older Children and Adolescents Who Exit Foster Care through Adoption or Guardianship: A Systematic Review,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 33, no. 4 (2016): 377–94; Sattler and Font, “Predictors of Adoption and Guardianship Dissolution”; Nancy Rolock, “Post-Permanency Continuity: What Happens after Adoption and Guardianship from Foster Care?,” *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 9, no. 2 (2015): 153–73; Jesús Palacios et al., “Adoption Breakdown: Concept, Research, and Implications,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 29, no. 2 (2019): 130–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518783852>; Mark F. Testa et al., “Adoption and Guardianship: A Moderated Mediation Analysis of Predictors of Post-Permanency Continuity,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 85, no. 2 (2015): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000019>; Heather Ringeisen et al., *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) Adoption Follow-Up Study: Findings Report*, OPRE Report # 2022-306 (2022), <https://acf.gov/opre/report/national-survey-child-and-adolescent-well-being-nscaw-adoption-follow-up-study-findings>.

questions cannot be answered.

In many states, once children are adopted, they do not retain their previous identification number.²⁷ Thus, child A who exits to adoption becomes child B if they return to foster care or are reported as a suspected victim of maltreatment. This inhibits meaningful understanding of where and how adoptions are breaking down. Although unique identifier and linkage problems are pervasive across federal child welfare datasets,²⁸ this problem is far worse for adopted children. Because child protective services and foster care records are already confidential, privacy concerns do not provide a compelling justification for de-linking records. Absent substantial improvements in current federal data collection and state capacity to conduct research, it is difficult to say how safe or stable adoptions are.

b. Targets for Improving Adoption Outcomes

To date, federal policy has focused on getting children adopted, and far less so on the quality of care children receive through those adoptions. Broadly speaking, there are three areas to focus on when seeking to improve post-adoption outcomes: (1) recruitment and screening of adoptive families; (2) matching of prospective families and children; and (3) preparation and post-adoption support. Some of these topics are addressed in earlier sections.

i. Recruiting and Approving Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents

Many families who begin the approval process for foster care or adoption²⁹ never have a foster or adoptive placement.³⁰ Unresponsive and unsupportive agency practices are commonly cited as reasons:³¹ prospective families cannot rely on the agency to provide accurate and complete information, return their phone calls, or to help them identify and access appropriate services.

The licensure process is also burdensome and slow; creating substantial barriers for families with employment or other children in the home.³² Orientations and training often focus on the

²⁷ Office of Planning Research and Evaluation, *Understanding Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Project: Study Design Options*, OPRE Report #2020-35 (2020), https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/pagitask7designoptionrptfinal_8_17_20508.pdf.

²⁸ Hyunil Kim et al., “Lifetime Prevalence of Child Maltreatment Reports and Child Protective Services Involvement in Illinois,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 169, no. Pt 2 (2025): 107756, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107756>.

²⁹ Depending on the state, a family may be licensed for foster care, adoption, or both. Generally, these processes have similar, if not identical, standards and thus dual licensure is more efficient (meaning that the orientation and training are also the same).

³⁰ Fred Wulczyn et al., *The Dynamics of Foster Home Recruitment and Retention* (Chapin Hall; The Center for State Child Welfare Data, 2018), https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Foster-Home-Report-Final_FCDA_October2018.pdf.

³¹ Amy Chanmugam et al., “Agency-Related Barriers Experienced by Families Seeking to Adopt From Foster Care,” *Adoption Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (2017): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2015.1121187>.

³² Maureen Riley-Behringer and Jamie Cage, “Barriers Experienced by Kinship and Non-Relative Caregivers During the Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensure and Home Study Process,” *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 8, no. 2 (2014): 212–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2014.893223>.

financial aspects of fostering and may depict fostering as a job comprising a series of tasks³³ – an approach unlikely to appeal to families who pursue foster care or adoption to care for children.

Current processes not only deter appropriate applicants,³⁴ but they also fail to prevent inappropriate adults from becoming state-approved caregivers for our most vulnerable children. There are very few automatic disqualifications for being a licensed foster or adoptive parent.³⁵ And because the number of recruited families is a metric that may be tracked in performance contracts, few are turned away. Indeed, with the recently announced “Home for Every Child” initiative,³⁶ whereby states are expected to have a surplus of licensed families, the incentives to license low-quality homes may increase.

ii. Pre-Adoption Preparation and Post-Adoption Support Services

For decades, research has highlighted the inadequacy of pre-placement and in-service training for foster parents,³⁷ which is similar to the training provided to adoptive parents. Despite the emergence of evidence-based training programs (such as the KEEP model³⁸) or promising models (such as Together Facing the Challenge³⁹), many agencies continue to use ineffective models that emphasize the rules and regulations of the child welfare system. Effective training focuses on parenting skills, such as behavior management and deescalation, that are essential for maintaining safe placements for children with challenging behaviors. In addition, many agencies exempt relatives from completing any pre-service or ongoing training,⁴⁰ regardless of whether the relative has any direct experience caring for the child in question, or for children who have

³³ Laurie Friedman, “An Exploratory Study of Prospective Foster Parents’ Experiences during the Licensing Process,” *Child Welfare* 97, no. 1 (2019): 135–70.

³⁴ Naomi Schaefer Riley, *No Way to Treat a Child* (2021), <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/No-Way-to-Treat-a-Child/Naomi-Schaefer-Riley/9781642936575>.

³⁵ Administration for Children and Families, *Information Memorandum: National Model Foster Family Home Licensing Standards (ACYF-CB-IM-19-01)*, IM-19-01 (2019), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/im1901>.

³⁶ <https://acf.gov/a-home-for-every-child>

³⁷ Andrew S. Benesh and Ming Cui, “Foster Parent Training Programmes for Foster Youth: A Content Review,” *Child & Family Social Work* 22, no. 1 (2017): 548–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12265>; Morgan E. Cooley et al., “A Systematic Review of Foster Parent Preservice Training,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 107 (December 2019): 104552, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104552>; Trudy Festinger and Amy J. L. Baker, “The Quality of Evaluations of Foster Parent Training: An Empirical Review,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 35, no. 12 (2013): 2147–53, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.10.009>; Jane H. Lee and Thomas P. Holland, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Foster Parent Training,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 1, no. 2 (1991): 162–74; Richard W. Puddy and Yo Jackson, “The Development of Parenting Skills in Foster Parent Training,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2003; Shannon Dorsey et al., “Current Status and Evidence Base of Training for Foster and Treatment Foster Parents,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 30, no. 12 (2008): 1403–16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.04.008>.

³⁸ Joseph M. Price et al., “Effects of the KEEP Foster Parent Intervention on Child and Sibling Behavior Problems and Parental Stress during a Randomized Implementation Trial,” *Prevention Science* 16, no. 5 (2015): 685–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-014-0532-9>.

³⁹ “Together Facing the Challenge,” accessed April 16, 2025, <https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/738/show>.

⁴⁰ U.S. Children’s Bureau, *Report to Congress on States’ Use of Waivers of Non-Safety Licensing Standards for Relative Foster Family Homes* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2011), 1–14.

experienced maltreatment generally.

Children who are older, experienced more foster care placement changes prior to adoption, and have behavioral health problems are at the greatest risk of adoption dissolution.⁴¹ Adoptive families may not learn important details of a child’s experiences (such as a history of sexual abuse victimization) and complex behaviors (including aggression toward caregivers, destruction of property, and self-harm) until after placement occurs, leaving parents unprepared for the needs of the child and fracturing trust in the agency.⁴²

Post-adoption services to prevent dissolution can be funded through the Family First Prevention Services Act (2018), but states continue to face barriers in utilizing those funds.⁴³ Moreover, there are few post-adoption services that are evidence-based.⁴⁴

5. Improving the Impact of Federal Funding Related to Adoption

The administration’s executive order on foster care⁴⁵ in November 2025 acknowledges many of the structural problems addressed in this testimony: inadequate data systems, outdated use of technology, and an overburdened workforce. Specific to adoption, we can add agency and court disregard for ASFA timelines; inadequate recruitment, screening, training, and matching strategies; and lack of evidence-based post-adoption supports. Executive action can only go so far, because adoption-related federal spending is not well-situated to address these problems.

a. Title IV-E Adoption Subsidies

Most federal spending on adoption goes toward Title IV-E subsidies. Indeed, federal spending on IV-E adoption subsidies now substantially exceeds (both in number of children and total costs) spending on IV-E foster care maintenance payments.⁴⁶ Many research studies have found that these subsidies increase the likelihood of adoption, or reduce time to adoption, for children in foster care by removing the disincentive to adopt imposed by loss of the foster care

⁴¹ Bonni Goodwin and Elissa Madden, “Factors Associated with Adoption Breakdown Following Implementation of the Fostering Connections Act: A Systematic Review,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 119 (December 2020): 105584, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105584>.

⁴² Palacios et al., “Adoption Breakdown”; Anca Bejenaru et al., “‘We Thought We Were Stronger than We Were’: Adopters’ Narratives about the Adoption Journey and Disruption,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (April 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1381050>; Bethany R. Lee et al., “Parent Perspectives on Adoption Preparation: Findings from the Modern Adoptive Families Project,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 85 (January 2018): 63–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.12.007>.

⁴³ U.S. Children’s Bureau, *Title IV-E Programs Expenditure and Caseload Data 2023: FY-2023-Title IV-E Prevention Services Claims and Caseload*. (2024), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/programs-expenditure-caseload-data-2023>.

⁴⁴ Joan Zlotnik and Terry Shaw, “The Impact of Targeted Permanency and Post-Permanency Services on Continued Family Stability: An Introduction,” *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 15, no. 1 (2021): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1859065>.

⁴⁵ The White House, *Fostering the Future for American Children and Families*, Executive Orders (2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/11/fostering-the-future-for-american-children-and-families/>.

⁴⁶ U.S. Children’s Bureau. FY2023 Title IV-E Adoption Assistance Claims and Caseload. <https://acf.gov/cb/report/programs-expenditure-caseload-data-2023>; [FY 2023 Title IV-E Foster Care Claims and Caseload](https://acf.gov/cb/report/programs-expenditure-caseload-data-2023). <https://acf.gov/cb/report/programs-expenditure-caseload-data-2023>

reimbursement payment.⁴⁷ However, the factors that increase the probability of adoption do not necessarily assure safety, stability and wellbeing in adoptions. Although monetary support may help some adoptive families purchase specific support services, many children who are adopted do not cost much more to care for than a biological child given that health-related expenses are typically covered by Medicaid. Children adopted from foster care may, however, require parents with greater patience, knowledge about trauma and loss, and behavior management skills, but money does not buy these things.

b. The Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Payment Program

The Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Payment Program (hereafter, “incentives program”) provides a monetary award to states for increasing their rate of adoption, with guardianship incentives added in 2013. The exact formula is somewhat complicated, but the incentives program has distributed over \$1B to states since its enactment in 1998.⁴⁸ I am aware of no studies demonstrating that the incentives program has improved practices related to adoption (or guardianship). One of the only rigorous studies of this program found that federal incentive payments to states are ineffective at increasing adoptions for older children,⁴⁹ which is where states struggle the most.

This is unsurprising, as it is unclear how the incentives program would meaningfully impact practice. Since the federal match for adoption subsidies is untethered from the income criteria attached to IV-E foster care eligibility, states are already financially incentivized to move children off of their foster care caseloads and into adoption. Yet, much of the work of facilitating adoption falls on contracted (private) agencies that may benefit financially from children remaining in care.⁵⁰ These same private agencies are often tasked with, and subject to benchmarks for, foster home recruitment. Yet, because foster families often close their licenses following an adoption – and thus are no longer available to foster⁵¹ – agencies have little

⁴⁷ Kelly C. Bishop and Diana E. Mac Donald, *The Effect of Paying Parents to Adopt: Evidence from Minnesota’s Foster-Care System*, Working Paper nos. 2022–01 (Working Papers, 2022), <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/251298>; Mary Eschelbach Hansen, “Using Subsidies to Promote the Adoption of Children from Foster Care,” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 28, no. 3 (2007): 377–93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-007-9067-6>; Laura Argys and Brian Duncan, “Economic Incentives and Foster Child Adoption,” *Demography* 50, no. 3 (2013): 933–54; Kasey S. Buckles, “Adoption Subsidies and Placement Outcomes for Children in Foster Care,” *Journal of Human Resources* 48, no. 3 (2013): 596–627, <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.48.3.596>.

⁴⁸ Administration for Children and Families. *Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Payment Program - Earning History by State: FY 1998–FY 2024*. (2025): <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/algipp-earning-history-state.pdf>

⁴⁹ Margaret E. Brehm, “The Effects of Federal Adoption Incentive Awards for Older Children on Adoptions from U.S. Foster Care,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 37, no. 2 (2018): 301–30, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22040>.

⁵⁰ “How Misaligned Incentives Hinder Foster Care Adoption,” Cato Institute, January 27, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/cato-journal/winter-2021/how-misaligned-incentives-hinder-foster-care-adoption>.

⁵¹ Jennifer Mullins Geiger et al., “Should I Stay or Should I Go? A Mixed Methods Study Examining the Factors Influencing Foster Parents’ Decisions to Continue or Discontinue Providing Foster Care,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 35, no. 9 (2013): 1356–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.05.003>.

incentive to recruit families interested in adoption.

c. Adoption Opportunities Program

The Adoption Opportunities Program began in 1978 as an effort to reduce adoption barriers for children with special needs,⁵² and has been reauthorized and expanded multiple times since. The program has spent \$323M since 2013, with annual funding ranging from \$26M to \$29M since 2022.⁵³ This program currently funds various efforts aimed at improving adoption options for older children and children with special needs, as well as improving post-adoption outcomes through enhanced training and support.

A large share of this funding is spent on AdoptUSkids, which includes “managing the Center for Diligent Recruitment, national adoption internet photo-listing service, national adoption recruitment campaign, national adoption and foster care information exchange system, and other adoptive and foster family support activities.”⁵⁴ Many dollars, through AdoptUSkids and other grantees, is spent on “training and technical assistance” or T/TA to states and tribes. Evaluations of T/TA in related areas raise substantial questions about utility and impact.⁵⁵ In some cases, the federal government spends millions simply to help states and tribes navigate barriers to using other sources of federal funding (often, barriers stemming from federal regulations or staffing/infrastructure gaps within states).⁵⁶ In this sense, T/TA becomes a workaround, not a solution.

Many of the organizations funded under this program have been continuously funded for decades, but it is difficult to say with confidence what has been achieved for children. To some extent, this reflects problems with the evaluation process. For some programs, evaluations focus on short-term, self-report outcomes related to participant satisfaction or implementation (rather than impact). Some funded projects use randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or apply other rigorous outcome evaluation strategies, but simply conducting an RCT is not enough – effective programs must be refined, scaled, disseminated, and continuously monitored for implementation fidelity and impact. Many social programs that show initial success in an RCT do not scale well: once they are implemented more broadly, the original impact findings cannot be replicated. Lastly, an RCT is no guarantee of quality, given myriad problems with attrition and non-response, and limited use of administrative records to verify findings. On the whole, this grant-

⁵² Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act of 1978

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/95th-congress/house-bill/6693>

⁵³ Administration for Children and Families. Adoption Opportunities Assistance Listing. (2025):

https://taggs.hhs.gov/Detail/CFDADetail?arg_CFDA_NUM=93652

⁵⁴ https://taggs.hhs.gov/Detail/AwardDetail?arg_AwardNum=90CO1143&arg_ProgOfficeCode=187

⁵⁵ *Lessons Learned from Evaluating a Complex, Multi-Tiered T/TA System Focused on CCDF Grantees*, OPRE Report #2023-141 (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

⁵⁶ “GAO-25-107154, FOSTER CARE: HHS Should Help States Fully Use Federal Funds for Programs Serving Youth Transitioning to Adulthood,” accessed February 13, 2026, <https://files.gao.gov/reports/GAO-25-107154/index.html>.

making program would benefit from a long-term strategic plan, focused on refining, sustaining, and disseminating effective interventions.

6. Conclusions

In all areas of social programming, how performance on a given goal or objective is measured and how performance information is used can induce perverse incentives. *“The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.”*⁵⁷ In child welfare, there has long been a reliance on crude measures – how many children are in foster care, what share live with relatives, how many exit to adoption, and so forth. In each of these examples, it is possible – likely even – for states to change their numbers on a given metric without improving, and perhaps worsening, the experiences and outcomes of children. Improving the rate, timeliness, and quality of adoptions from foster care starts with recruitment, both of foster families open to adoption and families specifically pursuing adoption. But it is not a numbers game. Many of the youth who ultimately age out of care experience unsuccessful pre-adoptive placements or dissolved adoptions. Signing up more families will not change that, and – if states are recruiting ill-suited families or poorly preparing them – real harm will be done to our most vulnerable children. Instead, we should be focused on (a) supporting and retaining our highest performing foster families; (b) tailoring recruitment for foster care and adoption to target families with the specific traits and skills that align with the needs of children in care; and (c) providing the follow-up and support needed to ensure that “forever family” is more than a slogan.

I respectfully offer the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Modernize the process through which children are matched with prospective adoptive families. Adoption Opportunities funding could be redirected toward child-specific recruitment and building integrated cross-state platforms where caseworkers can search for, view, and contact approved families. Public-facing websites that post photos and information about children are antiquated and show little evidence of positive impact.

Recommendation 2. Experiment with new strategies to verify adoption continuity and prevent breakdown. Nearly all families adopting from foster care receive federal subsidies, which can be tens of thousands of dollars annually — particularly for families adopting sibling groups or children with substantial health care needs. Yet, current monitoring processes fail to even confirm that adopted children are still residing with their parents. Post-adoption support programs rely on adoptive families requesting assistance, but families may be reluctant to reach out for help or unaware of available programs. In the worst-case scenarios, where adoptive families are abusive or neglectful, there are few safeguards in place. Given that existing

⁵⁷ Donald T. Campbell, “Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change,” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 2, no. 1 (1979): 85, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189\(79\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189(79)90048-X).

programs are unlikely to reach the children and parents at greatest risk, The Adoption Opportunities Program grantmaking process could be leveraged to test proactive outreach efforts. Such efforts may be especially needed with adoptive families of large sibling groups, older children, or children with complex medical or behavioral needs.

Recommendation 3. Improve federal data collection and linkage capacity. States and the federal government need better information on adoption dissolution, maltreatment within adoptive families, and the health and wellbeing of adoptees. This information is needed to improve the screening, training, and matching of prospective adoptive families, as well as the targeting and delivery of post-adoption supports. At a minimum, agencies should retain the same AFCARS ID for all children adopted from foster care through age 18, and the AFCARS ID and the Child ID (from NCANDS) must be linkable and subject to routine quality checks.⁵⁸ Given that most adoptees retain Medicaid coverage, linkages between federal child welfare data (specifically NCANDS and AFCARS) and the Medicaid Claims database provides the best opportunity to understand the health and wellbeing of adoptees from foster care nationwide. Incentive funds could be provided to states that provide quality data submissions, or grants from Adoption Opportunities could be used to improve data linkage capacity for states in need of assistance.

Recommendation 4. Disincentivize inappropriate reunification efforts. One motivation for the Adoption and Safe Families Act was a concern that agencies were making unreasonable efforts to reunify families that were families “in name only” and thereby endangering children;⁵⁹ yet, nearly three decades later, these problems persist. Federal funding should not be used to maintain or reunify children with adults who have sexually abused them, inflicted egregious injury on them, or caused the death or permanent impairment of other children.

Recommendation 5. Prevent the misuse of kin guardianship

Well-intentioned efforts to expand kinship care and kin guardianship have produced ever-expanding definitions of “relative”, lower bars for licensure, and quick discharges to permanent legal guardianship with individuals who have received no training and little scrutiny. When the federal government treats adoption and guardianship as equal (though they are not), many states will use guardianship as a first resort – because it is easier for them, not because it is better for children. Federal policy should recognize and address this perverse incentive.

⁵⁸ Kim et al., “Lifetime Prevalence of Child Maltreatment Reports and Child Protective Services Involvement in Illinois.”

⁵⁹ *Improving the well-being of abused and neglected children: Hearing before the Labor and Human Resources, United States Senate 104th Congress Second Session (1996).*