

**Testimony of  
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**U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources  
Hearing on Increasing Adoptions from Foster Care and the Adoption Incentives Program  
February 27, 2013**

Good afternoon Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Doggett and the Members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to be here and grateful for the invitation to join the hearing today.

I am Rita Soronen, president and CEO of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. For just over 20 years, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has shared the Subcommittee's quest to elevate and dramatically improve the services we provide to abused, neglected, dependent and abandoned children for whom the government has assumed temporary, but, too frequently, long-term responsibility. Created in 1992 by Dave Thomas, who was adopted, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption works to dramatically increase the number of adoptions of waiting children from the United States foster care system, while providing information, resources, media awareness tools and educational materials to potential adoptive parents, individuals and organizations, at no cost to the user. Additionally, as a national nonprofit public charity, we provide grants to public and private organizations in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to results-based agencies that aggressively and measurably move children out of foster care and into adoptive homes.

Each day, we work under the core beliefs that 1) every child deserves a safe, nurturing and permanent home, 2) no child should linger in foster care or turn 18 and leave care without the family promised when they were permanently severed from their family of origin and 3) every child, no matter the age, placement or circumstance is adoptable.

Thank you to the members of the Subcommittee for their commitment to review and assess existing policies and emerging best practices for vulnerable children and youth, with a vigilant eye on providing the most effective evidence-based services on their behalf. The Adoption Incentives program has provided critical Federal funding to help states focus on increasing older youth adoptions and making important family connections.

Although we are encouraged by an increasing national awareness about the needs of foster care youth<sup>1</sup> (and in particular about children waiting to be adopted), a decline in children entering

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<sup>1</sup> Harris Interactive, *National Adoption Attitudes Survey*, commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2007.

care and greater numbers of children being adopted from foster care<sup>2</sup>, we are gravely concerned about older youth waiting to be adopted.

The number of children waiting to be adopted from U.S. foster care has consistently exceeded the number of finalized adoptions in each year for which national data are available. While the overall numbers of adoptions increased in the years following the 1998 implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), the growth in adoptions of younger children has outpaced those of older children. At the same time, the numbers of older youth aging out of foster care continue to rise. In 1998, approximately 17,300 youth were emancipated from care, compared with more than 26,000 in 2011. Additionally, most recent data shows a current placement of more than 22,000 children in long-term foster care (or Planned Permanent Living Arrangement); these youth most likely will leave the system without defined permanency.<sup>3</sup>

Since these youth have typically spent the longest periods of time in care, the core issues of the abuse or neglect which they have experienced, combined frequently with exposure to family violence, substance abuse or lack of appropriate basic care, are exacerbated by frequent moves while in care, potential separation from siblings, multiple school or educational placements, and frequent turnover of social workers or other system contacts in their lives. The children most at risk of aging out and moving into society without the safety net of a family and a home, the youth who suffer the consequences of the government's broken promise of a family<sup>4</sup>, are the children for whom the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has dedicated its energy, expertise and resources.

Strategies for recruiting and matching adoptive families for these children have a history of anecdotal rather than evidence-based development. Cataloging children online or through the media is common practice and supported by Federal funding, but there is scant evidence to suggest it is an effective method for effectively recruiting appropriate families for America's longest-waiting children who have individualized and often therapeutic or clinical needs. General recruitment practices through media campaigns help to make citizens more aware of the numbers of children in foster care, but cannot focus on the intense and urgent needs of children currently waiting for families.

Additionally, we know that the current ages of children in foster care waiting to be adopted, as well as their ages at the time of entry into foster care, are correlates of their likelihood of adoption. Based on analyses of national data from the Adoption and Foster Care Reporting

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2011 Estimates as of July 2012 (19).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> For a review, see: Wertheimer, Richard. (2002). Youth who age out of foster care: Troubled lives, troubling prospects. Child Trends Research Brief #2002-59. Retrieved from [http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends2002\\_12\\_01\\_RB\\_FosterCare.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends2002_12_01_RB_FosterCare.pdf) September 15, 2011.

System (AFCARS), Dr. Maza (2002) found that a waiting child's age is the most crucial characteristic affecting his or her likelihood of being adopted, and that the tipping point occurs between ages 8 and 9, after when a child is more likely to continue to wait and subsequently age out of foster care than to be adopted.<sup>5</sup> Her more recent analyses have shown that, despite the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act's intention to promote the adoption of children waiting in foster care – particularly those who are older – the share of waiting children who are over age 8 has grown in the past decade. Further, while the time children spend waiting has declined markedly, this decline occurred solely for children who entered care prior to age 8.<sup>6</sup> The inference that ASFA has not affected the adoption of older children highlights the critical need for innovative adoption recruitment programs.

### **WENDY'S WONDERFUL KIDS CHILD-FOCUSED RECRUITMENT MODEL AND MANAGEMENT**

In response, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has dedicated significant private, and recently public, resources to develop, implement and grow a national model of child-focused recruitment (Wendy's Wonderful Kids) combined with long-term rigorous experimental evaluation of the model. The primary target populations for this model include older youth, sibling groups, children with mental or physical challenges, and children in placements that have typically been considered difficult adoption platforms (group homes, therapeutic placements and institutions). The program has grown from seven pilot implementation sites in 2004 to now 161 fully-funded grants at public and private adoption agencies in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Additionally, the Foundation manages the activities of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption-Canada in which there are eight fully-funded sites in four provinces.

The Foundation named the grant program Wendy's Wonderful Kids to honor the significant fundraising that occurs through Wendy's restaurants across the nation, encouraging customers, employees and partners to donate to the Foundation. In turn, we dedicate funds back to the communities in which the funds are raised to support a recruiter(s) who works for children waiting to be adopted, and in particular, those children nearly everyone else has forgotten.

**To date, we have served 8,789 children and found potential adoptive matches for 5,790 of these children. While 503 of the children served are currently in pre-adoptive placements, 3,406 adoptions have been finalized.** Significantly, more than half of the children for whom the recruiters provided active engagement had *no* prior recruitment activities.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly compelling given that the average age of a child served through this program is almost 12, more than 30 percent of the children had already been in six or more placements (nine percent had experienced 10 or more placements), 50 percent had been in the system for more than four years

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<sup>5</sup> Maza, P. (2002). The age factor in adoption. *The Roundtable*, 16(1).

<sup>6</sup> Maza, P. (2009). A new look at the role of ASFA and children's ages in adoption, *The Roundtable*, 23 (1).

<sup>7</sup> Malm, K., Vandivere, S., Allen, T., DeVooght, K., Ellis, R., McKlinton, A., Smollar, J., Williams, E., & Zinn, A. (2011.) *Evaluation Report Summary: The Wendy's Wonderful Kids Initiative*. Child Trends, Washington: DC.

at the point of referral into the program, 48 percent have at least one identified disability, 43 percent are referred as part of sibling groups, 20 percent reside in group homes or institutions at the time of referral, and 21 percent had already experienced failed or disrupted adoptions.

Since 2004, the Foundation has invested \$53.8 million of private funding in the development and growth of Wendy's Wonderful Kids in the United States, and another \$3.4 million in Wendy's Wonderful Kids in Canada. Simple math shows that given the number of adoptions finalized and dollars invested to date, each adoption has "cost" just over \$16,000. Although untangling the actual costs of maintaining a child in care is a challenge, national averages point to maintenance and administrative costs of nearly \$26,000 per child per year.<sup>8</sup>

The Wendy's Wonderful Kids child-focused recruitment concept is simple. With grant funds from the Foundation, agencies hire full-time, experienced adoption professionals who dedicate 100 percent of their days to find families for the longest-waiting children in their communities. These professionals, known as Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters, employ the Foundation's child-focused recruitment model and work on caseloads of children the system has forgotten, ensuring they have the time and resources to give each the attention he or she needs.

The recruiters employ aggressive practices and proven tactics focused on finding the best home for a child through the starting points of familiar circles of family, friends and neighbors, and then reaching out to the communities in which they live. The Foundation commits to one-year, renewable grants that support the salary, benefits and a portion of time of a supervisor, and ask in return that the agency commit to implementing the child-focused recruitment model, provide employment support for the recruiter hired, manage a smaller but intensive caseload of 15-20 children, and participate in monthly data reporting to the Foundation, as well as ongoing evaluation of process and results.

Critical to this relationship is the transition from passive recruitment for older and more difficult to place youth, to an aggressive and accountable method of finding families for children. The child-focused recruitment strategy is based on a specific dynamic recruitment plan tailored for the individual child and based on his or her unique circumstances, challenges, desires and needs and includes, but is not limited to, the following key components:

**Relationship with Child:** Recruiters must meet and communicate with the child regularly to develop trust and openness. This relationship is essential to building an effective recruitment plan. Prior to the implementation of this model, adoption professionals frequently told us they never met with the children for whom they were recruiting families.

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<sup>8</sup> Zill, N., Roseman, E. (2011). Better Prospects, Lower Cost: The Case for Increasing Foster Care Adoption, *Adoption Advocate* No. 3, National Council for Adoption.

**Case Record Review:** Recruiters must have access to, and conduct an in-depth review of, the existing case file, as well as ongoing review of relevant documents, reports and materials. An exhaustive case record review includes identification of all significant people in the child’s life – past and present, including potential adoptive parents – while creating an understanding of the chronology of events, services, placements, educational and medical circumstances, and child welfare entry circumstances that the youth has experienced.

**Network Building:** Recruiters must meet with significant adults identified in the case record review (foster parents, CASA/GALs, counselors, teachers, extended family, etc.) and maintain regular and ongoing contact. Regular contact with individuals close to and knowledgeable about the child facilitates effective recruitment and matching.

**Child Assessment and Adoption Preparation:** Recruiters 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. They must also assure that the child is prepared for adoption and during the matching process that the family is adequately prepared to meet the needs of the child.

**Diligent Search:** Recruiters conduct a diligent search of potential adoptive families, including family members, and identified connections to additional resources and pursue aggressive follow-up with contacts, with the knowledge and approval of the child’s caseworker.

**Recruitment Plan:** Based on the file review, interviews with significant adults, assessment of and input from the child, recruiters develop and implement a comprehensive recruitment plan. The plan for each child is customized and defined by the child’s needs, reviewed regularly, and updated quarterly.

The Foundation grants management and program teams provide orientation to and training of the child-focused model; communicate monthly, at a minimum, with the recruiters to discuss casework, challenges and to provide support; and make annual on-site visits with the grantees to assess fidelity to the model, review activities and meet with system representatives. Additionally, the grantee organizations provide regular financial, goal accountability and narrative reporting to the Foundation. Monthly, they must also input comprehensive data about their casework and the children on their caseloads into a database that is owned by the Foundation and managed by Washington, D.C.-based Child Trends.

## **CHILD-FOCUSED RECRUITMENT EVALUATION**

The Wendy’s Wonderful Kids strategy is to focus exhaustively on an individual child’s history, experiences and needs and then make an aggressive and unrelenting effort on behalf of the child in order to find an appropriate adoptive family. At one level, the powerful individual success stories early into the program showed that the model appeared to be working; however, the

Foundation was keenly aware that no long-term evaluation of any recruitment model existed. It was critical to ensure that evidence-based activities and not an anecdotal approach drove these successful adoptions.

In 2005, the Foundation commissioned Child Trends for an unprecedented five-year evaluation of the child-focused model. *It is the most comprehensive, rigorous empirical evaluation of adoption recruitment practices completed to date in this country.* The research included both impact and process evaluations, and assessed the outcomes of randomly selected children served in 21 grantee agencies, representing 18 states, against a control group of children receiving traditional adoption recruitment methods in the same localities.

Significantly, the impact evaluation showed that children served by the child-focused Wendy's Wonderful Kids model are **1.7 times more likely to be adopted** than those not served by the program.<sup>9</sup> 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 – those groups are up to **three times more likely to be adopted**. Additionally, the process evaluation highlighted tactics of the model that worked to encourage successful adoptions. For example, in interviews with children served, those youth who were previously opposed to adoption (and therefore those most likely to be placed on the emancipation track for aging out of care, or moved to a court-ordered Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) were significantly more likely to feel open to adoption after working with a recruiter.

One sample of a narrative sent by a recruiter in Florida exemplifies the daily success of this program:

*At age 16, Dana had been in foster care for eight years, and had lived in 22 different foster care placements. He seemed resigned to figuring out how to live on his own. Dana's future changed when he was added to the caseload. I found the name of an aunt who had expressed interest in adopting Dana in the past and discovered the initial barrier to adoption had simply been inadequate housing and the agency stopped using her as a potential adoptive resource. We worked with the housing authority, helped her to complete training, finalized a second home study, and helped her to navigate the interstate child welfare rules. I am excited to report Dana was adopted yesterday, just weeks before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

## SCALING THE MODEL AND COST IMPLICATIONS

With the release of the national evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids, the Foundation put in place a strategic blueprint to scale the program within states, while partnering with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to develop a formal child-focused recruitment curriculum, as a companion to scaling activities. Additionally, we hosted a convening of cross-discipline experts and leaders

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

(pediatric, policy, funding, higher education, child welfare, media and public relations) to advise the Foundation on scaling, funding and policy implications of the research.<sup>10</sup>

In approaching our home state of Ohio, we made the case that if we were to be successful across the nation we, like our colleagues in adoption, needed to focus first in our own community. After sharing the national and local results and the evaluation findings with the leadership of the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services (ODJFS), the state committed to the resources necessary to scale Wendy's Wonderful Kids from seven existing Ohio sites to 41, serving a majority of Ohio's 88 counties and focusing on children age 9 or older and in care for two or more years. The Foundation committed to managing the increased grant sites in the way that had already proved successful in Ohio and across the nation.

In just six months and with the determined support of the administrative, program, and fiscal teams of the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services, 32 new recruiters have been hired, trained, and have growing caseloads, now at nearly 200 children. Sixteen children have already been matched with families, two are in pre-adoptive placements and a sibling group of three was just adopted last week. The director of the public agency that finalized those adoptions said:

*Through the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program, Allen County Children Services has been able to hire two highly qualified and experienced children services social workers as our specialized adoption recruiters. They work with a reduced, yet intensive caseload to achieve the goal of securing forever families for our harder-to-adopt children and sibling groups. We would not have this ability without the support of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services.*

Keenly aware, though, that cost implications can frequently trump best practice, we worked with the fiscal team at ODJFS to quantify the return on its investment in this program and to use the partnership as a template for other states.

For example, prior to the state's investment in scaling, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, from 2005 – 2012, invested just over \$3 million in private funding in seven Ohio sites. During that time, we saw the finalization of 197 adoptions of children with an average age of 12.1 years. Given what we know about the likelihood of this population of children who are at risk for aging out of care, and calculating an annual savings of \$27,480 per child (Ohio-specific figures) by getting them adopted, and while factoring in the average monthly subsidy provided to families, Wendy's Wonderful Kids saved the state of Ohio nearly \$32 million.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gallagher & Associates (2012), *20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Distinguished Panel of Experts: Recommendations to Scale the Wendy's Wonderful Kids Model*.

<sup>11</sup> ODJFS, Dan Shook, Bureau of Fiscal Accountability, 12/12.

Expanding those calculations to include a current \$2 million investment from the state for the scaled counties in 2013, ODJFS calculates that over three years (with additional annual commitments), and with the finalization of 650 adoptions based on historical success, the state of **Ohio will save in excess of \$105 million by the end of 2015.**

Of course, these numbers represent actual hard cost savings. When we combine that with the frequently researched costs to society of not getting these children adopted, there can be no argument that both the human and the fiscal realities can no longer to be ignored.<sup>12</sup>

### **CONTINUING CHALLENGES AND HOPE**

There is no more important work in this country than assuring the safety and well-being of our most vulnerable citizens – children who, through no fault of their own, are in the child welfare system waiting for permanent families. There is equally no more important promise to be kept than the one we make to our children when they have been permanently removed from their families of origin – that we will cherish their childhood, keep them safe, and find each one a family with whom they can grow and thrive. **Last year we broke that promise to 26,286 children who we negligently allowed to age out of care.**

Even with the clear human, partnership, and financial success of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids, there remain challenges to address. Too many of the very adults charged with finding adoptive families for youth still believe that some children are simply too old, too damaged or too set in their ways to be adopted. Indeed, even the general population is skeptical of these children. In a Harris Interactive national survey of attitudes toward foster care adoption that the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption will be releasing this spring, only half of Americans believe that every child is adoptable.

At the Foundation, we continue to work to train professionals, potential adoptive parents, policymakers and the general public that no child is “unadoptable” and that we have an evidence-based model to support that belief. We have also created an award-winning national “I Am” print and broadcast media awareness campaign (“*I am not too old, I am not unlovable, I am not a troublemaker, We are not twice the burden*”) that works to eradicate the “unadoptable” notion. This month, we will release a follow-up campaign that focuses on families who have adopted older youth (“*Having a son has been an amazing life-changing experience: we met ours when he was 16*”) that works to normalize the adoptions of older youth and elevate our attitudes toward their potential.

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<sup>12</sup> The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative estimated that “the outcome differences between youth aging out of the foster and the general population is nearly \$5,700,000,000 for each annual cohort of youth leaving care”. Cutler Consulting (2009). *Cost Avoidance: Bolstering the Economic Case for investing in Youth Aging Out of Care*. Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.



As we continue to work and scale this program across the nation, our recruiters are too often challenged by a lack of access to critical records, too few competent post-adoption services and professionals for their families, confusion and conflicting information about available health and educational resources, burdensome interstate regulations, and an incomprehensible willingness of the custodial agencies and courts to place children in permanent uncertainty, rather than moving them toward adoption.

We fervently believe that the evidence-based model of child-focused recruitment, our success at forming national public/private partnerships for children, and the promising example the state of Ohio has offered to the nation generates hope for our children and the systems that surround them. It also supports shifting resources to save scarce dollars to provide well-trained and managed workers to make life-changing efforts for youth, and refutes the practice of placing tens of thousands of children in the intolerable limbo of independence without family, Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement without accountable review, or the purgatory of unadoptability.

Dave Thomas reminded us daily that “these children are not someone else’s responsibility, they are our responsibility.” And we would simply add *unadoptable is no longer acceptable*. We stand ready to continue to work with policymakers, practitioners, funders and families to assure a safe, nurturing and permanent family for every child waiting to be adopted. Not for just some of the children, but for all of the children.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today and for your careful review of the Adoption Incentives program and its continuing positive impact on the very children who need our best and most generous efforts.

Respectfully submitted,



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