

# Preserving Adoption Support Programs: Parents Can Make A Difference



In recent years, many states have been facing serious financial difficulties, and things may get worse before they get better. To address shortfalls, a number of states have tried to or have successfully cut adoption assistance programs.

When cuts are threatened, parents often need to organize quickly and respond. Part I of this fact sheet describes how to respond to proposed reductions in services. Part II outlines how parents can seek to improve adoption assistance supports in the long term. If your state or province has significant budget troubles but has not yet proposed cuts to adoption assistance, you might want to undertake the strategies under Part II to shore up support in case of future attempts to reduce adoption support.

## Part I—Respond to a Proposed Cut

### LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROPOSAL

If your state or province is proposing cuts to programs that serve children with special needs, you can:

- ◆ Obtain a copy of the proposed changes. If the change is legislative, find out if your legislature has a web site that posts copies of bills, or contact your local representative and ask for information. If the change is administrative, ask the state department or provincial ministry that oversees adoption for information in writing. Ask questions about what the proposal means and how it will affect children in your community.
- ◆ Contact other parent leaders such as officers in local parent groups or your state or provincial foster and adoptive parent association. Find out what they know and if other groups are also concerned. Ask foster and adoptive parents to read about the proposed changes and talk about how it will affect children.
- ◆ Gather data on adoption assistance and adoption support programs from the state, provincial, or county agency. How many children receive assistance? What are the differences between adoption assistance rates and group or institutional care payments? What administrative costs are saved when children are adopted?
- ◆ Get on your legislature's e-mail list serv or weekly publication that highlights pending legislation or upcoming committee meetings.
- ◆ Call your elected officials or administrators and ask questions about the bill or proposed change. Set up a meeting to discuss it. If the proposal is legislative, ask which committees will oversee the bill, who chairs those committees, and the timeline for the bill. Find out who is sponsoring the legislation and try to learn why those members of the legislature are supporting the bill. Is it a single bill or part of a larger budget bill?
- ◆ Contact NACAC at 800-470-6665 or [adoption.assistance@nacac.org](mailto:adoption.assistance@nacac.org). We may have information to share about the changes, and can connect you with other parents in your area.



**North American  
Council on  
Adoptable  
Children**

Adoption Subsidy  
Resource Center

[adoption.assistance@nacac.org](mailto:adoption.assistance@nacac.org)

800-470-6665 ◆ 651-644-3036

[www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org)

970 Raymond Avenue, Ste 106

St. Paul, MN 55114-1149

---

## TAKE ACTION

When you learn of a proposed change, contact local adoption or foster care agencies or support groups as well as the foster, adoptive, and kinship families you know. Ask those you contact to spread the news to others. Provide accurate information about the proposal and timelines for action.

Work with your allies to develop a clear message about the change you seek (do not pass Bill Number XX, restore the cuts to adoption assistance rates, etc. ). Provide anyone who will be taking action with you with tips and resources about the message—make sure every message is focused on children and details how the change will harm vulnerable youth.

If the change is legislative, contact members of your legislature immediately. Have all of your allies contact their own representatives. Leaders of the movement can seek meetings with chairs of key committees, but should bring along a constituent (someone who lives in the area the member represents) whenever possible. Communication from a constituent will always be more powerful than a message from another advocate alone.

When you contact legislators, the following can help you choose your strategies:

1. Meetings in the legislator's district are the most powerful way of connecting with your elected officials.
2. Visits with your legislators at their capitol offices are important.
3. Telephone calls are a good way to discuss issues.
4. Personalized letters show that you took the time to share your concerns.
5. E-mails are less effective since legislators receive hundreds each week.

If you have enough time, think about organizing an event at the capitol. If you can coordinate a family rally on the day a bill is being heard in a particular committee and invite radio, television, and print media, you may be able to create public interest in your issue. See if you can have parents provide testimony at a hearing on the bill.

If the proposed change is an administrative one (coming from a state department or ministry rather than the legislature), you may choose different strategies:

- ◆ Ask the department about the rationale behind the change

- ◆ Contact your legislator and those friendly to adoption and foster care and ask them to find out more about the proposal (and to express your concerns about the proposal)
- ◆ Ask NACAC, your legislator, or a local attorney if the change follows federal, state/provincial, and local law. If it doesn't, consider filing a lawsuit and requesting an injunction to stop the change from going forward.
- ◆ Have parents contact administrators and explain why the change is a mistake; have youth who benefited from adoption and adoption assistance tell their stories.

The media can be very helpful whether the change is legislative or administrative. Contact reporters who have covered adoption or foster care issues and explain the fallout from such a proposal. Write letters to the editor or commentaries to the local newspaper that explain how the proposal will harm children.

## CONCLUSION

When a change is introduced, you typically must act quickly and find as many concerned, like-minded individuals who can band together for advocacy. Together you have the best chance of protecting a threatened program.

---

## *Advocacy Tools*

When you begin your advocacy journey, the following resources should be helpful:

- ◆ A copy of the proposed bill, the draft of the new administrative rule, or anything else in writing about the proposal
- ◆ State/provincial laws, policy manuals, and rules pertaining to post adoption assistance or adoption support; in the U.S., your Title IV-E State Plan
- ◆ Federal statute 42 U.S.C. § 673 (Adoption Assistance Program)
- ◆ HHS's Child Welfare Policy Manual (<http://cb1.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/cwpm>).
- ◆ NACAC's *The Value of Adoption Subsidies: Helping Children Find Permanent Families*, 2008
- ◆ NACAC's state or provincial adoption assistance profiles ([www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org))

---

# Part II—Plan for the Future

Successful advocacy efforts are thoughtfully planned and coordinated, and involve the collaborative efforts of numerous foster and adoptive parents. Sometimes it can take years to make important changes on behalf of children with special needs. Below are ideas for planning a successful long-term campaign.

## WHAT'S YOUR GOAL?

Before doing anything, you and any allies you already have must decide what you want to see changed and craft your message. Ask the following questions: Are we going to focus on preserving post-adoption support in our state? Are we focused on maintaining monthly payments or concentrating on services to children, or both? Do we want to broadly educate policy makers about the special needs of children in foster care and adoption?

Be sure to frame your problem or your goals from a child's point of view. For example, if the goal to increase mental health services for adoptive families, your message might be:

All children deserve a permanent family. Children who are adopted from the foster care system sometimes have severe mental health problems as a result of their family history or the trauma they experienced in their early lives. Access to mental services will help keep adopted children with their families and allow parents to nurture their children as they seek to heal from their history of abuse and neglect.

## BUILD A COALITION

Once you decide what you want to do, you need to bring others into your team. An essential part of your success will depend on how well you can organize others, and whether your goals align.

Start by contacting other interested stakeholders. Look for organizations that support children, such as adoption agencies, state/provincial, or local foster/adoptive parent associations, child advocacy organizations, adoptive or foster parent support groups, school or community groups, faith-based organizations, state/provincial or local kinship or grandparent groups, children's mental health advocacy groups, and associations supporting children with special needs. Try to think broadly when brainstorming possible partners.

Ask if these groups would be interested in joining your coalition. Ask if they would send out a notice about your goal to

parents and colleagues. Often, people will share information with other parents and professionals, even if they are not able to actively support an advocacy effort.

Combining forces increases your power—many organizations listed on a project-specific letterhead are considerably more powerful than one. You may not agree on all aspects of child welfare, but if you focus on certain shared goals, you may achieve them.

Remember to keep your efforts nonpartisan—include in your coalition individuals with different political beliefs and reach out to legislators from all political parties. Adoption from foster care is typically a nonpartisan issue, and you are likely to accomplish more if you represent diverse opinions and have different connections.

Don't forget to work with the state department or provincial ministry that oversees adoption—the benefits of tapping the resources of the agency can be immeasurable. Even if staff cannot actively advocate, they can provide data and notify you of upcoming proposed legislation. If the agency is actively involved in these or future advocacy efforts, you can help staff by providing parents to tell their stories in support of reform.



Once you bring your partners on board, take time to discuss your goals, redefine them if necessary, or identify new priorities. Be prepared to compromise or expand your goals as long as the outcomes for children will be enhanced.

Coalition members must share in the advocacy workload, so you should form committees or seek volunteers to take on different tasks. Rather than making a general announcement at meeting, talk to people individually and ask how they can best help the cause. Relying on each person's experience or talents will advance the goals of your group. Don't forget to honor and acknowledge the work of all team members—this builds your team and helps keep people engaged for the long haul.

## GATHER YOUR DATA

Once you know your specific goal, you should collect data to document the scope of the problem. There are four types of information that you may need to gather to complete the picture:

- ◆ relevant laws (state/provincial or federal)
- ◆ relevant rules and regulations
- ◆ demographic information on the children affected by the problem
- ◆ testimonials illustrating exactly how the problem affects specific children, youth, and families

Work with your allies to identify the data you need and where you can find it. In the box below are some of the general questions you might want to answer.

## KNOW THE KEY PLAYERS

Once your group has developed its goals, you will need to determine what person, agency, or group can make the changes you need. First ask yourself if you need legislative change or administrative change. In many cases, the answer is

administrative change. If you need administrative change, find out which agency actually makes the decisions that affect your problem—is it the department of human services, the children’s mental health agency, the local school district, etc.



It is important to understand how the system works in your area. In the U.S., some states have county-administered systems so the critical decisions are made by the head of the country agency or by the board of commissioners. In other states, decisions come from the state agency in charge of child welfare. Before you begin your advocacy effort, be sure you have done your research to identify the right decision makers for your particular problem.

If you are working on a state or provincial law change, familiarize yourself with the key committees to which a child welfare bill may likely be assigned (Health and Human Services Policy or Budget Committees). Do you have allies on the committees? Scan the committee list for legislators you know support child and family issues.

Keep lists or databases of the legislators you need to reach (including name, committee assignments, district, and contact information), particularly those on key committees, those in leadership positions, or those with a personal adoption connection. Reach out to parents, youth, and other advocates to find constituents who live in these legislators’ districts. Make sure that your communication comes directly from a constituent whenever possible.

## CHOOSE A STRATEGY

Educating policy makers and the public about foster and adoptive children and their needs is a key part of advocacy. Your first priority should be activities that help you develop and strengthen relationships with key legislators. Second is raising awareness with the public so you can build allies and sway public opinion.

When you select a strategy, make sure it is:

- ◆ appropriate for solving your problem
- ◆ adequate to sufficiently address the problem
- ◆ effective in helping you achieve your objectives in a reasonable time

### *Questions to Answer*

1. Who are the children you plan to help? What are their needs?
2. What is the average age of a foster child or average age at which children get adopted?
3. How many children are in foster care, adoption, and kinship care? How many children are waiting for adoption?
4. What is the basic and difficulty of care rates for foster children and for children receiving adoption assistance? What are the rates paid for foster children in group care or institutions?
5. What is the average cost per child in foster care in your state/province? (If your state is county run, attempt to get county breakdowns for costs and number of children.)
6. What are the administrative savings when children leave foster care?
7. Who pays for foster care and adoption assistance? (state-only dollars or is there a county share)

Ask your state/provincial or county agency for this data. It should be public information, and much of it may be accessible online.

- ◆ targeted to the right decision makers
- ◆ a wise use of time, money and energy
- ◆ sensitive to side effects that could generate resistance by special interest groups or cause negative responses or consequences

Below are a number of ideas to raise awareness, primarily with legislators. Consider using National Foster Care Month (May) or National Adoption Month (November) to launch any of the strategies below. Regardless of what strategy you choose, pay attention to the legislative schedule and avoid any crunch times during which attention will be hard to get.

### 1. Hold Meetings with Legislators

A fairly simple strategy involves scheduling a series of meetings with numerous legislators and their constituents. Simply gather your advocates, identify which advocates are represented by which legislators, and have constituents set up a visit. During the meetings, the advocates can tell their personal stories to explain the importance of adoption for children, the needs for post-adoption support. Perhaps a second person can attend each meeting to explain how the personal story ties to the bigger picture—presenting data on the number of waiting children, the disabilities and challenges facing children who have been abused and neglected, etc.

### 2. Legislative Open Houses

During a legislative session, it can be difficult to get the attention of a legislator. Consider hosting an open house when your legislators are not in session. Invite 6 to 12 foster, adoptive, or kinship parents from your district to your home for refreshments and have parents share their family stories with legislators. This setting offers more time to talk about issues, and allows policy makers to see constituents in their district. It gives you an opportunity to really get to know your officials, and when a bill comes up in the future, you already have an established relationship. Work with other allies to coordinate similar open houses state or province wide.

### 3. Parent Day at the Legislature or Legislative Assembly

Consider organizing a day at the capitol for foster and adoptive parents. You can start with a rally where parents and youth tell their stories, followed by individual parents and youth visiting their representatives. Be sure to have parents schedule meetings with members of the legislature in advance.

### 4. Creative Visual Displays

Consider visually appealing displays at the legislature or at the state/provincial department that handles adoption to draw attention to the needs of foster and adopted children. Parent groups have collected shoes and teddy bears to represent the number of children in state or provincial care. Others have tied ribbons on trees—one for each waiting child. In Australia, parents at a conference luncheon were asked to write the names of each child who had lived in their homes on separate five-inch cut outs, similar in size to ginger bread cookies. Different paper colors were used to represent foster, adoptive, kinship, and biological children. The paper cut outs were then taped together hand-to-hand and hung throughout the ballroom for an evening event with politicians. Others have used hundreds of life-sized photos of children to draw attention.

If you pair an event such as this with a series of legislative visits (described under 1 above), you create even more attention and have the chance to tell legislators more about the purpose of the display.

### 5. Harness the Power of the Media

An effective way to increase public awareness of the needs of our children is by tapping into local media outlets. Consider television, radio, or print media depending on your specific goals. If you are coordinating an event with colorful balloons

### *Sample Letter to the Media*

The proposed cuts to adoption assistance and post-adoption services will harm children and cost the state more over time. Adoption assistance and post-adoption support ensure that foster children with special needs—who are harder to adopt and often harder to parent—have the best opportunity to find a permanent, loving family. Research suggests that most families cannot adopt a child who has special needs without support, and that increases in adoption assistance correlate with increases in adoptions from foster care. In addition, eliminating supportive services may force some children who have already been adopted to return to foster care to have their needs met.

Adoptions from foster care have been shown to save billions of government dollars every year, even when adoptive parents receive support to meet their children's often-serious special needs. One analysis showed that each adoption saved \$90,000 to \$235,000 in public costs. Without adoption, many foster children who cannot return home will spend their entire childhoods in foster care. Then, research has shown, these youth will leave care at 18 more likely to face homelessness, teen pregnancy, unemployment, and jail—outcomes that are expensive to society and deeply painful for youth.

The [number] waiting children in [state/province] foster care deserve every opportunity to have a forever family of their own. Investing in adoption support will save the government money and greatly improve the lives of very vulnerable children.

---

and groups of people, ask for coverage from the local television station that runs Wednesday's Child (or otherwise covers children's issues). Try to determine if any of your local news anchors or reporters have a connection to foster care or adoption. Pay attention to which reporters cover foster care or adoption issues. If a proposed rule is being debated, think about scheduling a radio interview with someone from your group.

When you consider print media, think beyond the traditional mainstream newspapers. Many community newspapers are willing to give you space and (given limited resources) are eager to receive pre-written articles. Search for those serving communities of color, the elderly, or disabled individuals. Ask about submitting an article to e-newsletters as they are becoming more popular.

Send letters to the editors or commentaries in response to articles about foster care or adoption, especially those that get the facts wrong.

## 6. Use Social Networking to Raise Awareness

To get more individuals engaged in your efforts—and perhaps to interest the media—use new technology to spread your message. For example you can use groups, fan pages, or causes on Facebook to mobilize, organize, inform, and attract supporters to your cause. Be sure to take advantage of Facebook's key strength—the connections between individuals. Have your members and allies share their message on their walls and ask them to communicate with others by updating their status, posting pictures and stories about your cause, and so on. If you use discussion boards, make sure they are active. If others don't ask question or post comments, do so yourself.

Another way to share your message and encourage action is to start a blog, especially if you get links from existing blogs in the adoption and foster care communities.

## 7. Letter Writing Campaigns

Legislators need to hear from their constituents. They have more time and attention outside of a legislative session, so consider sending a personalized letter when it's not so busy. Follow up with a phone call, and you can establish a relationship with your elected official when she has time to listen to your concerns. Ask others in your group or across your state or province to do the same—share ideas about messaging but keep each letter unique.

If you are in the midst of a legislative session and a bill comes up, you could organize foster and adoptive parents to write letters and make phone calls. The more responses legislators receive, the more likely they will be to respond. On a non-controversial subject, as few as 10 calls can really make a difference.

## 8. Foster Doll Project

This project is based on the simple idea of putting a used doll in the hands of each legislator. Nevada was the first state to try it, but others have taken on the campaign (Alabama, Kansas, and Minnesota). Legislators become the doll's de facto foster parent for a specified period of time. You can give each doll a name, life story, and placement folder, and drop the dolls off in baby strollers and wagons. Then, volunteers can make regular visits to the legislators to check up on the dolls. During the legislative session you can send letters or cards (on holidays, for example); data on foster care and adoption statistics and rates, number of children in the counties represented by the legislators; and more.

Alabama experienced multi-year payoffs after delivering dolls to legislators—rate increases, positive media coverage, and the respect of some key policy makers.

## CONCLUSION

By banding together and developing in-depth relationships with administrators and policy makers, you greatly increase your chance of achieving positive outcomes for children. Your efforts may stave off cuts in the near term, while also providing you the chance to strengthen and enhance programs down the road.



---

NACAC's Adoption Subsidy Resource Center is funded by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. Feel free to share this fact sheet with others.



North American Council on Adoptable Children  
970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106  
St. Paul, Minnesota 55114-1149  
adoption.assistance@nacac.org • www.nacac.org  
800-470-6665