

Adoption Assistance Advocacy Toolkit

Introduction

Children need families, and families who raise children with special needs sometimes require support to help their children heal and thrive. Adoption assistance is a key component of this post-adoption support. Unfortunately, as adoptions from foster care increase and state budget coffers decrease, far too many states consider cutting adoption assistance programs as one step in their efforts to balance the budget. Such cuts are short-sighted and can leave vulnerable children in foster care or without needed support.

NACAC has compiled an advocacy toolkit to help adoptive and foster parents, adoption professionals, and others respond to efforts to cut adoption assistance programs and seek improvements in adoption assistance policies and practices. This toolkit contains:

- *Preserving Adoption Support Programs: Parents Can Make a Difference* — This advocacy fact sheet has information about responding to proposed cuts in adoption assistance as well as ways to create long-term advocacy efforts that can bolster state support for adoption assistance.
- *Talking Points* — We have identified some key talking points about the value and importance of adoption assistance that advocates can use in their discussions with policymakers, administrators, and the media.
- *Model Adoption Assistance Policies* — NACAC recommends a number of policies that, if adopted, would best support children and youth adopted from foster care. Advocates can use these models in their efforts to create an ideal adoption assistance program in their area.
- *Quotes and Personal Stories about the Value of Subsidies* — Mixing personal quotes and stories with data and research is an effective advocacy strategy. Advocates can use these quotes and stories to enhance their advocacy materials.
- *How to Tell Personal Stories* — Even better than using the stories that NACAC has compiled is creating and writing new ones. With these tools, advocates can learn how to gather and edit their own stories that explain why adoption assistance matters so much.
- *Suggested Reading* — This list contains some of the key research into adoption assistance, and the publications are a must-read for advocates seeking to defend or improve adoption assistance programs.

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. We may have information to share about the changes, and can connect you with other parents in your area.



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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)

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.

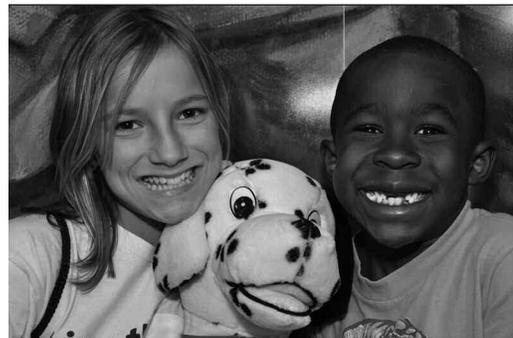
Ask if these groups would be interested in joining your coalition. Ask if they would send out a notice about your goal to

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

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.

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

- ◆ 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.



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Talking Points about Adoption Assistance

The following are key talking points that can help in adoption assistance advocacy efforts. If the point is based on research, we have included the citation below. Feel free to use these talking points or your own. We have found the most effective messages:

- explain the special needs and circumstances of children adopted from care
- underline the importance of adoption
- demonstrate what specific differences adoption assistance makes in a child's life
- show that adoption assistance saves money compared to keeping children in foster care

Families face special challenges raising adopted children with special needs

- Currently, 104,000 foster children in the United States are waiting for an adoptive family. Adoption assistance (also known as adoption subsidy) is a critically important tool to encourage the adoption of these children and youth who have special needs.
- Many foster children waiting for adoption—and the children already adopted from foster care—have special physical, mental health, and developmental needs. Studies show that these children are at heightened risk of moderate to severe health problems, learning disabilities, developmental delays, physical impairments, and mental health difficulties.¹
- In one survey, adoptive families reported that:
 - 58 percent of their children needed specialized health care,
 - 68 percent had an educational delay,
 - 69 percent exhibited misconduct, and
 - 83 percent exhibited some other kind of serious behavioral problem.²
- Children adopted from foster care face many more challenges than healthy birth children. And parenting children who have endured abuse, neglect, or other traumas—especially those who suffer from mental health problems or never learned to attach to a family—can be very difficult. It is only logical that governments would offer equitable, case-specific assistance to all families who care for children brought into government custody, yet adoptive families often receive significantly less financial aid and fewer services than foster parents.

Adoption has important benefits for children and youth

- Studies show that children who are adopted from foster care have far better educational and social outcomes than those who remain in foster care.³

¹ Bramlett, M.D., Radel, L.F., & Blumberg, S.J. (2007). The health and well-being of adopted children. *Pediatrics*, 119, S54-S60.

² Sedlak, A., & Broadhurst, D. D. (1993). Study of adoption assistance impact and outcomes: Final report. Rockville, MD: Westat.

³ Triseliotis, J. (2002). "Long-term foster care or adoption? The evidence examined." *Child and Family Social Work*, 7(1), 23-33.

- Research has demonstrated that youth who are adopted, when compared to youth in foster care, are:
 - more likely to complete high school or the equivalent,
 - more likely to attend and complete college,
 - less likely to become teen parents,
 - less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol,
 - less likely to have mental health problems,
 - less likely to be arrested or incarcerated,
 - more likely to be employed, and
 - more likely to have adequate incomes (with one study showing that individuals adopted from foster care have incomes that are 75 percent higher than young adults who age out of foster care).⁴
- The outcomes for youth who age out of foster care without a family are extremely troubling. These youth are at elevated risks of homelessness, poor educational outcomes, poor health, unemployment, and incarceration.⁵
- Adoptive families provide love and emotional security for their children, the stability of a committed family who will be there for them throughout childhood and into adulthood, a place to call home, and financial support.⁶ Like other parents who provide, on average, \$38,000 in assistance to their children between ages 18 and 34,⁷ adoptive parents continue to provide support for their children as they transition into adulthood—support that is not likely to be available for youth who do not leave foster care for permanent families.

Adoption subsidies matter to families and children

- Adoption assistance is a vital support to families raising children with often-serious behavioral, emotional, or physical disabilities. With adoption assistance, families are able to access medical care, counseling or therapy, special equipment, tutoring programs, and other supports that help them raise their children who have special needs.

⁴ Hansen, M.E. (2006). The value of adoption. Washington, DC: American University. Retrieved from <http://www.american.edu/cas/econ/workingpapers/1506.pdf> (May 19, 2008).

⁵ Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G.R., Havlicek, J. Perez, A. & Keller, T. (2007). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 21. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago AND Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. K., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., White, C. R., Hiripi, E., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

⁶ Brodzinsky, D.M., Schechter, M.D. & Henig, R.M. (1992). Being adopted: The lifelong search for self. New York: Doubleday AND Cahn, K. & Johnson, P. (Eds.) (1993). Children can't wait: Reducing delays in out-of-home care. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America AND The Evan B. Donaldson Institute. (2004). What's working for children: A policy study of adoption stability and termination. New York: Author.

⁷ Schoeni, R.F. & Ross, K.E. (2005). Material assistance from families during the transition to adulthood, in R.A. Settersten, Jr., F.F. Furstenberg, Jr., & R.G. Rumbaut (Eds). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp 396–416). Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

- Just as foster care maintenance payments do not cover the true costs involved in the basic care of a child,⁸ adoption subsidies are modest financial supports that provide adoptive families with additional resources to meet their children’s needs.
- Recent statistical analyses have found a strong relationship between the percentage of children who receive adoption subsidies and the rate of adoptions among children in foster care.⁹ These analyses made clear that the higher the percentage of children who received adoption assistance in a state, the higher the rate of adoption of foster children in that state.
- Economic analysis also shows that the rate of adoption from foster care is strongly correlated with the *level* of adoption assistance support.¹⁰
- For the average state, an increase of just \$36 in the adoption assistance rate was associated with an increase of 1.785 adoptions per 100,000 persons in the state. With this small increase in adoption assistance levels, the average state saw nearly 10 more children in foster care being adopted.¹¹
- Studies have consistently found that the availability of adoption subsidies is essential to many families’ ability to adopt children from foster care.¹²
- In a recent survey, 81 percent of pre-adoptive and adoptive parents said that adoption assistance was important to their decision to adopt, and 58 percent said they could not adopt a foster child without this support that helps them meet the child’s special needs. The same study cited inadequate adoption assistance support as one of the two most critical barriers to adopting from foster care.¹³
- A lack of adoption assistance seriously affects children’s ability to find a permanent family and might resign them to a childhood spent in foster care. Research shows that post-placement support—including adoption assistance—is a key factor in many families’ decision to adopt children who have special needs.¹⁴ Authors who analyzed state data noted that “[a]doption subsidies are perhaps the most important tool by which the child welfare system can encourage adoption and support adoptive families.”¹⁵

⁸ Barbell, K. (1999). *The Impact of financial compensation, benefits, and supports on foster parent retention and recruitment*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America. AND Children’s Rights, National Foster Parent Association & University of Maryland School of Social Work. (2007). *Hitting the M.A.R.C.: Establishing foster care minimum adequate rates for children*. New York: Children’s Rights.

⁹ Dalberth, B., Gibbs, D. & Berkman, N. (2005). *Understanding adoption subsidies: An analysis of AFCARS data*. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/05/adoption-subsidies/report.pdf> (May 19, 2008).

¹⁰ Hansen, M.E. & Hansen, B. (2005). *The economics of adoption of children from foster care*. Washington, DC: American University. Retrieved from <http://www.american.edu/academic.depts/cas/econ/workingpapers/2005-10.pdf> (May 19, 2008).

¹¹ Hansen, M.E. & Hansen, B. (2005).

¹² Hansen, B. & Hansen, M.E. (2006). An economic analysis of the adoption of children from foster care. *Child Welfare*, 85(3), 559–583.

¹³ Children’s Rights (2006), *Ending the Foster Care Life Sentence: The Critical Need for Adoption Subsidies*

¹⁴ Hansen, B. & Hansen, M.E. (2006). (cited in Hansen, The value of adoption)

¹⁵ Dalberth, B., Gibbs, D. & Berkman, N. (2005). *Understanding adoption subsidies: An analysis of AFCARS data*.

Adoption—and adoption assistance—save money

- Adoption assistance is cost-effective. An analysis demonstrated that the 50,000 adoptions from foster care each year save from \$1 billion to \$6 billion in government funds.¹⁶ The same report estimates that supported adoptions cost less than half than foster care. The savings result from reduced administrative costs and court oversight.
- Another study found that each dollar spent on an adoption from foster care saves about three dollars in public and private costs. This analysis showed that each adoption saved from \$90,000 to \$235,000 in public costs, and even more in private costs.¹⁷
- Researchers have calculated that each adoption nets between \$88,000 and \$150,000 in private benefits due to the differences in incomes between young adults who were in long-term foster care and those who were adopted.¹⁸ Thus, even small increases in adoption assistance payments reap long-term rewards for the adopted children and society.

¹⁶ Barth et al. (March 2006), “A comparison of the governmental costs of long-term foster care and adoption,” *Social Service Review*.

¹⁷ Hansen, M.E. (2006). The value of adoption.

¹⁸ Hansen, M.E. (2006). The value of adoption.

Model Adoption Assistance Policies

Below we outline some ideal adoption assistance policies that will best support children and families. Advocates can use these suggestions as a goal when working toward the best adoption assistance program in their community. Of course, while it is not always possible to achieve the ideal, advocates can certainly make significant improvements that improve children’s lives.

Eligibility and Benefits

Definition of special needs	<p>Define special needs qualifications as broadly as possible to provide assistance to the highest number of children who are having difficulties being adopted</p> <p>Sample language to cover all children is: “All children in the custody of the Department of Social Services are considered to have special needs.” If achieving coverage for all children is not possible, the following specific additions to special needs definitions will ensure that more children are covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “is a child being adopted by adoptive parents who have previously adopted, another child born of the same mother and/or father” • “is a child who has lived for at least a year with a foster parent who is going to adopt and cannot adopt without support” • “has had a previous adoption disruption or multiple placements” • “is a child with a demonstrated need for intensive adult supervision beyond ordinary age needs”
Rates	<p>Set basic and specialized adoption assistance rates equal to family foster care rates and ensure that all rates are adequate to remove financial disincentives to special needs adoption and to meet the child’s needs.</p> <p>Provide children who received specialized rates in family foster care with similar adoption assistance rates since the needs of the child do not change with adoption.</p>
Health insurance coverage	<p>Provide Medicaid (or similar state health coverage) equally to federally and state-eligible children. Currently in several states, children who are not Title IV-E eligible do not necessarily receive Medicaid or other health coverage. All adopted children who meet their state’s definition of special needs should receive health insurance coverage, regardless of the funding stream for their adoption assistance payments.</p> <p>Ensure that health care coverage is transferrable when a child is adopted in another state or the adoptive family moves from one state to another. States should provide the same coverage to children adopted from the state to adopted children living in the state.</p>
Other supportive services	<p>Make the following special services available, as needed, to adopted children with special needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respite care programs, with a certain number of days of care covered per year • child care • residential treatment services when needed; when children or youth receiving adoption assistance payments need out-of-home care, the cost of care to the family should not exceed the adoption assistance payment

Deferred agreements	<p>Use deferred adoption assistance agreements combined with a “high-risk” special needs definition to ensure future access to necessary adoption assistance benefits for foster children at risk of developing or manifesting special needs as they age (such as those at high risk for mental illness or exposed to drugs or alcohol in utero, for example).</p> <p>Include Medicaid and an adoption assistance payment of zero in a deferred agreement. If the child develops special needs in the future, the family can document the needs and the agency can easily modify the agreement to meet the child’s needs.</p>
Eliminate means testing	<p>Eliminate a financial means test (use of parents’ income to limit eligibility or benefits) to determine a child’s or youth’s eligibility for adoption assistance benefits or the level of those benefits. Means tests cannot be used for federally funded adoption assistance, but states can—and some do—use a means test for state-funded children.</p>
Extend assistance beyond age 18	<p>State clearly that adoption assistance agreements will remain in force at least until a youth is 18. For youth with mental, physical, or behavioral special needs or other special circumstances (including continued support by the adoptive parents), adoption assistance should be extended until the youth is 21.</p>

Administration

Promote the program	<p>Promote the adoption assistance program as required by federal law and get the word out to foster parents, relatives, prospective adoptive parents, and the general public</p>
Allow for changes	<p>Provide different adoption assistance benefits when a child’s needs change. Make the fair hearing (appeal) process more user-friendly.</p>
Publicize rates	<p>Publish the complete foster care rate structure, including all family foster care rates and group care and institutional payments; also publicize adoption assistance rates</p>
Negotiation	<p>Notify all prospective adoptive families of the benefits for which their child would be eligible. Be diligent and effective at providing parents with full information and equal status to ensure fairness in the negotiating process, thereby maximizing the opportunity for placement success. Negotiations should not be seen as a process to either minimize or maximize benefits, but rather a process by which the parties determine what the child or youth needs to function successfully in the adoptive family.</p>
Train staff	<p>Routinely offer training on adoption assistance policies for all public agency adoption workers and supervisors, and invite private agency personnel to attend.</p>

Adoptive Parent Quotes and Stories

Below you will number of quotes and stories that are designed to demonstrate the importance of adoption support, including adoption assistance. Use these and your own quotes and stories to bolster your advocacy message.

Quotes

When looking for quotes, seek those that are focused on the child's needs and demonstrate an outcome (adoption or improvement of behavior as a result of support). If you are an adoptive parent, make your own quote based on the circumstances of your family. For example, "I wouldn't have been able to adopt three teenagers from foster care without the health care and ongoing support." "The adoption assistance covers the cost of therapy that Jack needs to recover from his early abuse. Since he started with the therapist, he's doing better in school and feels more secure in our family."

The following are quotes from adoptive parents that NACAC has used in its advocacy efforts:

- "The assistance enables us to continue mental health treatment, pay for trips to out-of-town doctors, get respite when we need it, and obtain specialized childcare. The services are what keeps us together."
- "If we didn't have the assistance, we couldn't adopt. We would not have the resources! [Our] adopted child is a special needs child and I have to have assistance."
- "[Adoption assistance] took the weight off and moved us from thinking, 'Can we financially make this work?' and put the focus back where it should be—'Can we love and care for this child? Do we have the love and commitment to parent this child?'"
- "We couldn't have adopted a sibling group without assistance and the medical card."
- "Frankly because we have handicapped children, we wouldn't be able to care for them without [adoption assistance]. It enables us to get them the best medical care, therapy, equipment, etc. We want them to have the best care possible, and the assistance makes that happen."
- "Post-adoption services saved our family. I don't know if we all would have survived as a family without the counseling and support we received."
- "[Adoption assistance is] imperative, because my child has special needs—so respite and personal care attendant services make it so much easier to care for him."
- "If I didn't have the assistance, then I could not have as many children as I have. Four of my children are total care. So, I need the help especially the Medical Assistance. It's a god-send."

Adoptive Family Stories

Depending on how you are communicating with decision makers, you can also use stories like the ones below in your advocacy efforts. See the next section, “Telling Personal Stories,” for more about how to find and develop your own stories.

Ryan and Kristina

In March 2002, Patrick and Kelly began fostering 22-month-old Kristina and her newborn brother Ryan, who were placed in care by their young, homeless, and drug-addicted parents. Kristina came from another foster placement while Ryan, who was born prematurely, remained in the hospital. “To establish early bonding with Ryan, Kelly visited him daily in the hospital until he came home with us in May,” explains Patrick.

After a few years, the birth parents’ rights were terminated and Patrick and Kelly adopted Kristina and Ryan. Kristina, now six, and Ryan, four, both have special needs. Patrick and Kelly have worked hard to find services to help improve their children’s lives. Because she had moved between families several times while in care, Kristina needed therapy to help her form a close attachment with Kelly and learn how to manage her oppositional behavior. She receives additional counseling to help her deal with anger and fear from witnessing domestic violence between her birth parents.

During his first year, Ryan received physical therapy to help him with muscle tone problems. More recently, he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism. “At first we didn’t know what was wrong,” explains Patrick. “We thought his behaviors were possibly a response to the trauma. . . . After we had him tested, we learned he had autism.” Ryan now has a behavioral therapist, who will teach Patrick and Kelly how to better meet Ryan’s needs, as well as how to understand his behaviors.

Without adoption assistance, Patrick and Kelly know they would never have been able to afford the services that have been a vital part of their children’s physical, social, and emotional growth. They are happy their children are doing well and getting the support they need. Patrick explains, “As far as being able to understand the issues and know how to work with the children in a therapeutic way to resolve those issues—without some kind of special guidance and support, we would have been lost on our own.”

Joseph and Patrick

When she first saw the one-and-a-half-year-old twins Patrick and Joseph, Tina recalls, “My heart went out to them. I thought they were the cutest little boys I had ever seen. I thought I was blessed to have them come to live with me and to be able to adopt them.”

Tina recalls, “They were sick babies. They were born drug-exposed and there were complications. They were small for their age and they were slow in developing their motor skills and had speech problems.” Tina helped Patrick and Joseph develop their motor skills and speech, and they have made tremendous strides in their physical development. “My favorite thing to do with the boys is to take them to the park. I like to see them run and play,” says Tina. “It was so long before their motor skills were good. They were nine before they could really run. They

knew how to walk, but their coordination wasn't very good. Now the boys love to play baseball and shoot hoops.”

Patrick and Joseph's mental health, emotional, and educational development has been more of a challenge. After they turned eight, they began to have serious outbursts of anger and destructive behavior, both at home and in school. The twins both have individualized education plans and are in special education classes. Tina recently learned that mental health issues and violence have been ongoing concerns on both sides of the boys' birth family.

Although they can be sweet and loving, the boys need vigilant supervision. They are fascinated by fire, so Tina is always on guard. The boys also sleep poorly. “They usually can't fall asleep until after 2:00 in the morning. They say, ‘Good night, Mommy,’ and give me a hug, but they don't go to sleep,” says Tina. Tina receives 40 hours a month of respite care, which she carefully uses when she needs to get a good night's sleep.

One of the biggest hurdles Tina has experienced caring for Patrick and Joseph is securing mental health services for them. The adoption assistance the family receives makes it possible for Tina to get some of the support that Joseph and Patrick need so desperately. With the adoption assistance, she is able to partially cover the cost of childcare and offset some of the expenses for the boys' therapy. She knows that the boys are likely to need more intensive services, and worries about what will be available to them and what she can afford.

Despite their special needs, Tina is proud of her sons and the progress they are making. The boys are an integral, affectionate part of her extended family—they love their grandmother and often play with Tina's grandsons. “The boys can really be sweet,” says Tina, “Anytime we are out shopping, they remember their grandmother. They adore my mother, and love to buy her favorite peppermint candy.”

Semaj, Patricia, and Shakoya

An experienced foster parent, Sonya had three girls placed with her in foster care. Semaj was born drug-addicted due to her mother's chemical dependency. At four months old, she still suffered from withdrawal. Sonya was told Semaj probably wouldn't walk or talk until she was two. Two-year-old Patricia was very reserved and withdrawn. “She was a melancholy child. When we had family visits she would go to the corner and wouldn't talk or engage,” Sonya remembers. Three-year-old Shakoya, says Sonya, “talked about being molested, and we knew her experience was real because she used adult language to describe what happened.”

The girls' birth parents' rights were terminated and Sonya began the adoption process, but she worried about whether she was financially equipped to meet the girls' special needs. Her agency assured Sonya that she would receive adoption assistance to cover most of their extra expenses. She has received assistance paying for child care, therapy, medical expenses, tutoring, and an academic summer camp that gives the girls a jump-start on the school year. Without the years of counseling, tutoring, special classes, and services made possible through adoption subsidies and other post-adoption support program, Sonya is sure her daughters wouldn't be where they are today. She knows she couldn't have done it without these services.

Semaj, whom doctors predicted might not walk or talk until she was two, “walked at 7 months, talked at 10 months. And right now she is number two in her school,” says Sonya proudly. Withdrawn Patricia “is a social butterfly. She wants to be a schoolteacher and she advocates for herself,” explains Sonya. “Shakoya was in therapy for about four years, and now she is doing well. [The agency] has left the door open, just in case I need to put any of the girls back in therapy,” adds Sonya.

Sonya says, “I look at [my children] all the time and I get tears in my eyes. Some people thought I was crazy to take them on. And I thought, no, they just need to be loved. And they reciprocated.”

Madilyn and Tyler

Alissa and Sean are the parents of four children: Breanna, Noah, Madilyn, and Tyler. When they first made the decision to adopt, they knew they wanted a child younger than Breanna and Noah. “Madilyn was the answer to our prayers,” says Alissa. Yet “the doctors told us that she would never walk, talk, eat, or take in stimulus. We didn’t care what they said. In our minds, she deserves a loving family and permanence like any other child.”

Alissa and Sean worried about being able to pay her significant medical bills. Madilyn is hydrocephalic with a shunt, has mild cerebral palsy, chronic evolving lung disease, retinopathy, and behavior problems. When they learned there were adoption assistance funds to help pay for needed treatments and therapy. Sean said, “It took the weight off and moved us from thinking, ‘Can we financially make it work?’ and put the focus back where it should be—‘Can we love and care for this child? Do we have the love and commitment to parent this child?’ That was never in question!”

Sean and Alissa say that Madilyn is their miracle baby. While she does have some persistent problems, she has proven all the doctors wrong: she walks, talks, and eats.

Madilyn’s successful adoption opened the door for Sean and Alissa to adopt Tyler. Tyler also has significant medical needs. He was exposed to meth, moved several times, and suffered neglect. He has complex eating issues and is fed through a G tube. Since Tyler joined the family, he has turned into an expressive, enthusiastic child with a great vocabulary.

Alex

When Alex was three years old, he was adopted by single dad Vernard. “I knew Alex had endured some extremely traumatic events because he had been in 10 placements before I got him,” recalls Vernard. Due to his early trauma, Alex suffered from reactive attachment disorder.

Vernard recalls, “I made absolutely sure I received adoption subsidy prior to the adoption, because I knew accepting even a minimum amount of subsidy would be in Alex’s best interest. I knew that if Alex required residential treatment or out-of-home placement—due to his multiple placements, and the neglect and physical and sexual abuse he experienced—there was no way I could afford \$300 to \$400 a day or even trained respite support.”

Alex is eligible for a small monthly adoption assistance payment, but it is not enough to meet his

serious emotional disabilities. During their first years together, Vernard spent more than \$850 per month, including four different therapies to help Alex. Today, Vernard can no longer afford therapy for Alex, but continues to attend conferences, read, and implement multiple strategies to help Alex work through his abandonment, grief, and loss.

In spite of the challenges and Alex's ongoing need for treatment and services, Vernard knows that his loving support has already made a tremendous difference to Alex!

Matthew, Katherine, and Michael

Andrea and Bill happily adopted three children—five-year-old Matthew, four-year-old Katherine, and two-year-old Michael—in 1987. “Matt had been in seven foster homes and the younger two had lived with several families,” Andrea remembers. “We would have the monitor on and we would hear Matthew say to Michael, who was two, ‘We have to be quiet so they don’t send us away.’ It would break my heart.”

School was difficult for all three children, but more so for Katherine and Michael. Matt has intermittent explosive disorder and ADD, Katherine and Michael have ADHD. All three children received special services at school, but often wouldn’t take advantage of the accommodations—such as being given a longer time to complete tests—because they hated feeling different in front of their peers.

The children had Medicaid cards but Andrea says, “In Bucks County, few therapists accept Medicaid. Fortunately we were able to use my husband’s medical insurance to cover the kids’ therapy. We used their adoption subsidy money to pay for the unpaid portion of their therapy costs from my husband’s insurance,” explains Andrea.

Looking back, Andrea believes all three children have suffered from undiagnosed depression and varying levels of reactive attachment disorder. “They all were oppositional and there were periods of rage. They would make holes in the walls. We would say, ‘It’s time to make the bed’ and they would say ‘No’ and kick a hole in the wall. I can’t tell you how many times we have spackled our walls,” recalls Andrea.

Matt, Michael, and Kathy are now young adults who are doing well. “I called the police and sent Matt to jail a week before his 18th birthday when he started swearing at me, threatened to knock my head off, and started punching holes in the wall when I said he couldn’t use the backyard trampoline at 11:30 one night,” says Andrea. “Matt now tells me that was the best thing I could have done for him. He has since graduated from college and is preparing to take the LSAT for law school.”

“Although parenting has been extremely difficult and challenging at times, my husband and I know that adopting our three beautiful children was worth it. The sadness we so vividly saw in their eyes the day they moved into our family is rarely, if ever, seen as they continue to grow emotionally,” explains Andrea.

Telling Personal Stories

A key component of any advocacy strategy is finding personal stories that demonstrate the importance of the change you seek. Personal stories:

- lend credibility to a problem or solution
- put a human face on a problem or solution
- help others identify with a problem or solution
- engage a reader's heart, stir compassion
- move people to action to solve the problem or contribute to a solution

In adoption assistance advocacy, the stories should demonstrate how the monthly benefit or medical insurance made a difference to the child or youth. For example, if the family couldn't have adopted without adoption assistance, the story might explore how adoption has changed the youth's behaviors and is leading toward a brighter future. Or, the story might discuss how the family used the adoption assistance to help the child function better in school, at home, or in the community. Be careful not to focus on the money itself or to talk about things that might be considered luxuries.

Below we describe how to gather personal stories that can help make the strongest advocacy points. Although this is written primarily to help you gather and write others' stories, you can also use it guide you to write up your own story.

Before you start interviewing people or gathering personal stories to help you with your advocacy efforts, you should be able to answer these questions and explain your mission to prospective speakers:

- What is your specific goal? What do you hope to accomplish by delivering your message?
- What type of story will best illustrate the importance of your goal?
- Who are the best people to tell their personal stories?

Gathering Information

While you are conducting the interview:

- Build trust—explain your goals; find common ground; reassure the person that they will have the opportunity review the story before you do anything with it
- Ask permission to record the interview, but also take notes
- Listen and allow speakers to talk; ask questions but give plenty of time for the person to answer before moving on to the next question
- Plan questions in advance, but be prepared to think of new ones as the story unfolds
- Don't push if a person hesitates to reveal a part of the story or becomes emotional; take the time to build the relationship and you may learn more later
- Do follow-up interviews after you have written up a draft to get more information or answer questions

- Explain to the person what you know you don't want them to publicly share and why. Sometimes there are parts of a person's story that are too personal or too complicated; you want to both protect the parent or youth and keep your audience focused on your prime advocacy message.

Writing the Story

- Discuss with individual how you will need to shape her story to fit your advocacy goals
- Keep the story as brief as possible, definitely under one page
- Quote the person as much as possible; if necessary go back and ask very specific questions that can elicit a quote that is true and powerful
- Include details that will help the audience form pictures in their minds
- Have team members review and edit the story to ensure that it achieves your goals

Be Cautious and Respectful

- Never use a story or parts of a story without permission
- Only tell the parts of the story that you need the reader to know; be very protective of the individual and don't share anything they might later regret (even if they are willing to share it now)
- Never change a person's story; if the story doesn't fit then seek another one

Suggested Reading

The following articles and research briefs can be very valuable in your advocacy efforts. Read them carefully and look for quotes and other information that can support your cause. For some of the best information NACAC has found, read “Talking Points on Adoption Assistance.”

- “A Comparison of the Governmental Costs of Long-Term Foster Care and Adoption,” in *Social Service Review*, by Richard P. Barth, Chung Kwon Lee, Judith Wildfire, & Shenyang Guo, March 2006.
- “The Economics of Adoption of Children from Foster Care,” American University Department of Economics Working Paper, by Mary Eschelbach Hansen and Bradley A. Hansen, September 2005.
- “The Economics of Adoption of Children from Foster Care,” *Child Welfare* Vol. LXXXV, #3, by Mary Eschelbach Hansen and Bradley A. Hansen, May/June 2006.
- *Ending the Foster Care Life Sentence: The Critical Need for Adoption Subsidies—A Survey of Adoptive and Pre-Adoptive Parents*, by Children’s Rights, July 2006.
- “Title IV-E Claims and Adoption Assistance Payments,” AFCARS Adoption Data Research Brief Number 5, by Mary Eschelbach Hansen, June 2006.
- “Understanding Adoption Subsidies: An Analysis of AFCARS Data,” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 2005
- “The Value of Adoption,” American University Department of Economics Working Paper, by Mary Eschelbach Hansen, December 2006.
- *The Value of Adoption Subsidies: Helping Children Find Permanent Families*, by the North American Council on Adoptable Children, May 2008.