

Children and Family Research Center

Fostering Results

Nation's Child Welfare System Doubles Number of Adoptions From Foster Care

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recently announced the awarding of the final round of currently authorized adoption incentive payments (totaling \$14.9 million to 25 states and Puerto Rico) for increasing the number of children adopted from state-supervised foster care in fiscal year 2002. These incentive payments, announced every year at the close of the federal fiscal year, are part of a sweeping set of reforms outlined in the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). The enactment of ASFA was coupled with a call to double the number of adoptions from the nation's child welfare system by 2002. Our nation's child welfare system succeeded in meeting this challenge, more than doubling the number of adoptions out of foster care by 2002.

Analyzing National Performance

Using the same baselines as the federal Department of Health and Human Services used to calculate the first adoption bonuses for states' performance in 1998, *Fostering Results'* analysis found that a majority of the states (33 and the District of Columbia) doubled the number of adoptions from foster care in at least one of the five years between 1998 and 2002. And, by totaling the number of adoptions during the peak performance year of each state between 1998 and 2002 (58,573) and comparing it to the total baseline used to calculate the first adoption bonuses in 1998 (28,160), this analysis shows that the change is a 108 percent increase in adoption performance for the nation as a whole.

Data from all fifty states and the District of Columbia shows that 33 states and the District of Columbia doubled the number of adoptions from foster care during the five years since the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997. Of these states, six tripled and 2 quadrupled their adoption performance during this period.

State Highlights

- Several states, such as **Hawaii, Illinois, North Dakota and Wyoming** doubled their adoption performance over their baseline average by 1998. By 1999, **Arizona, Iowa, and Texas**, had also doubled their adoption performance, resulting in permanent adoptive families for more than 13,000 foster children in these seven states in just two years.
- Eight states (**Hawaii, Wyoming, Maine, Delaware, Illinois, Idaho, Oklahoma, and North Dakota**) more than *tripled* the number of adoptions from foster care over the baseline in at least one year during the five-year adoption challenge period. For example, between 1995 and 1997, **Oklahoma** averaged just 338 adoptions per year and in 2000, Oklahoma saw 1,067 children adopted from foster care. **Hawaii** went from an average of 85 adoptions per year to finalizing 349 adoptions in 2002.
- Other states set new records for adoptions from foster care during this period. **California** broke a record when in 2001 it placed 9,859 foster children in adoptive homes—a 199 percent improvement over its baseline average of 3,287 adoptions.
- States like **Tennessee** and **Wisconsin** met and exceeded the doubling challenge for the first time in 2002 with 758 (from a base of 328) and 939 (from a base of 467) adoptions from foster care, respectively.



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Analyzing State Performance

Understanding how the nation's child welfare systems responded to the call to double adoptions is not as straightforward as adding up the number of adoptions finalized in 2002. In many cases, when states hit the doubling (or tripling) mark early in the five-year challenge timeframe, their foster care caseloads and the number of children in care declined significantly. For example, **Illinois** more than tripled its adoptions from a baseline of 2,200 to 7,113 in 1999. The number of children in the Illinois system has since fallen from a peak of 52,000 to less than 20,000. By improving adoption performance and reducing the number of children in foster care, Illinois also reduced the number of foster children available for adoption, limiting the state's ability to reach the adoption heights it did when their substitute care numbers were larger. Meanwhile, other states hit their stride after 2000. **Missouri**, for example, more than doubled its 557 average by finalizing 1,265 adoptions in 2000 and 1,273 adoptions in 2002. **Florida** more than doubled its performance with 2,246 adoptions in 2002—a 128% improvement over its baseline of 987 adoptions.

The Adoption Incentive Program is structured to account for the fact that some states would likely reach the desired goal earlier than others. The bonuses for 2002 announced by DHHS were calculated by looking at the highest number of adoptions that a state finalized in any preceding year beginning with the baseline and awarding bonuses to those states that exceeded their peak performance. The table which follows ranks states according to the percentage change from the original baseline to the year of the highest annual number of adoptions each state finalized by 2002. It is by measuring the country's progress as a whole and by aggregating individual state performance in this way that shows the nation's foster care systems surpassed the goal of doubling adoptions by 2002.

Lessons Learned

First, the response to the nation's call to double adoptions did not occur by accident. State and local child welfare systems, juvenile courts and state legislatures took on the adoption challenge through a variety of specific strategies that fundamentally achieved results. Caseworkers, judges and foster parents redoubled efforts for those children "stuck" in the foster care system. Collaborative innovations by public and private agencies, the juvenile courts and other advocates resulted in the dramatic improvement in adoptions and other permanencies experienced throughout the country.

Second, it illustrates what can happen when government aligns financial incentives with the outcomes it hopes to achieve. Child welfare systems and communities can deliver. This is a lesson that is being widely replicated across the country through a variety of innovations. Among them are (a) performance contracting through which public dollars are linked to the achievement by

private agencies of quantifiable results for children and families; (b) federal IV-E waiver demonstrations which allow states to test creative ways to identify and scientifically prove innovative ways to use federal resources to better serve children and families while reinvesting savings and reducing costs; and, (c) results-oriented accountability through which states invest in programs and hold the service system accountable for outcomes.

Third, the variation in state performance suggests that much can potentially be learned from states sharing successful lessons as well as unsuccessful ones. State and local systems of public child welfare are experienced at testing out new ideas, and serve as natural "laboratories" for promising practices, demonstrating what works and what doesn't.

Highlighting What Works

Illinois success in boosting adoptions was primarily supported by an unprecedented partnership between the state's child welfare agency and the Cook County Juvenile Court in Chicago. Opening communication and sharing data paved the way for understanding the shared opportunities for turning around performance.

Illinois was also successful in using research to advance evidence-based innovations such as performance contracting and subsidized guardianship as a way to enhance performance in securing permanency for children. Taken together, these reforms reduced the length of time a typical child spent in foster care from four years to two years and played a major role in cutting the foster care system in half in just four short years. At the same time Illinois began improving its permanency record, work was being done to prevent the unnecessary placement of children into the foster care system by working to intervene earlier with at-risk families. This dual emphasis on working both the "front end" and the "back end" ensured the work remained focused on securing permanency for children in the state's overburdened foster care system.

Other strategies employed by states successful in doubling their adoptions have been highlighted by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (www.nacac.org). Specifically, they include states dedicating staff to focus on adoption work (**Texas**), expanding recruitment activities to attract families looking to adopt (**Iowa**), and promoting collaborations between child welfare and the legal system to facilitate timely court hearings for child welfare cases (**Wyoming**).

A review of state Children and Family Services Review reports (which are the product of the federal Department of Health and Human Services' ongoing reviews of states' child welfare systems), shows that successful states also recognized the importance of building partnerships with the courts. In **Idaho**, a partnership with the state's Supreme Court led to increased adoptions once the child

welfare agency and the court system worked together to facilitate timely action on child welfare cases. **Arizona** used a model court practice emphasizing one judge for each family so that there was consistency and continuity for families involved with the child welfare system. Both **Arkansas** and **Georgia** worked to build collaborations with the court, Court Appointed Special Advocates and the non-for-profit service sector to facilitate more timely action on child welfare cases.

National Leadership and State Action

While evidence suggests that improvements in adoption were already underway before Congress authorized bonuses, there is consensus that the adoption incentive program helped to reinforce state initiatives. Aligning incentives with desired outcomes is a formula that powerfully communicates public priorities. The bulk of federal financing of child welfare is out of line with this simple principle. The federal funding structure continues to invest more heavily in long-term foster care over services for children and families that prevent unnecessary removal of children when possible.

Rising to the national challenge of doubling the number of children adopted out of foster care is an important achievement for our nation's child welfare system. However, with more than 540,000 children in foster care today, tough work remains in securing safe, permanent

homes for those children. And, having succeeded in placing over two hundred thousand children in adoptive homes since 1997, child welfare systems are seeing new challenges in supporting families after adoption. The conversion of many foster families into adoptive families has left child welfare jurisdictions in a number of states scrambling to recruit new foster homes. Added to these is the ever-present charge to continually improve on the safety, permanency and well-being for all children who come into contact with child and family serving agencies. What the adoption experience has demonstrated, however, is that improvements are possible when incentives are aligned with desired policy outcomes and when child welfare agencies and court systems work together to deliver results for children in need.

About Fostering Results

Fostering Results is a public education and outreach campaign of The Children and Family Research Center at the School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. *Fostering Results* is working at the national level and in selected states to build awareness of the need to improve outcomes for the children and families served by the nation's child welfare system by highlighting the need to improve the way child welfare is financed and the role the courts play in overseeing child welfare cases.

About the Authors:

Jess M. McDonald, Co-Director of *Fostering Results*, is a nationally recognized child welfare expert and the former director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, where he was widely praised for leading a set of reforms that made Illinois a national model for child welfare service delivery. As Director of IDCFS, McDonald is best known for running a child welfare system which led the nation in adoptions for three consecutive years. McDonald's public service has been recognized by the White House, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators and Motorola.

The Honorable Nancy Sidote Salyers, Co-Director of *Fostering Results*, has spent a 25-year legal career working on behalf of children and families, including serving as presiding judge of the Cook County Juvenile Court's Child Protection Division, which was widely regarded as a model court for collaborations forged with agencies, academics, child advocates and the community. Through reforms launched during Salyers' tenure, for the first time in the one hundred year history of the court, more child cases were closed than opened, significantly decreasing previous backlogs. Judge Salyers has been recognized nationally for her work, including awards from the White House, the National Child Support Enforcement Association and the National Court Appointed Special Advocates Association.

Mark Testa, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and Director of the Children and Family Research Center, formerly served as Research Director for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS), where his research was instrumental in policy innovations leading to better services for children and families. Professor Testa has been recognized nationally for his work in child welfare, including the Adoption 2002 Excellence Award for Applied Scholarship and Research on kinship care and permanence. Recent publications include: "The Social Ecology of Child Endangerment (with Frank Furstenberg) in *A Century of Juvenile Justice*, "The Gift of Kinship Foster Care" in *Children and Youth Services Review*, and "Subsidized Guardianship: Testing an Idea Whose Time Has Finally Come" in *Social Work Research*.

Adoptions of Children With Public Child Welfare Agency Involvement by State, Federal Fiscal Years 1998-2002, Ranked by Percentage Increase Over State Average 1995-1997 Baseline Through 2002

States	Baseline ^a (1995-97 Average)	1998 ^b	1999 ^b	2000 ^b	2001 ^b	2002	Highest # Adoptions Completed	Increase Over Baseline ^c
Hawaii	85	301	281	280	260	349 ^f	349	310.59%
Wyoming	15	32	45	61	46	50 ^g	61	306.67%
Maine	108	125	202	379	364	306 ^g	379	250.93%
Delaware	39	62	33	103	117	133 ^f	133	241.03%
Illinois	2,200	4,656	7,113	5,664	4,107	3,585 ^g	7,113	223.32%
Idaho	44	57 ^e	107	140	132	92 ^g	140	218.18%
Oklahoma	338	505	825	1,067	956	969 ^g	1,067	215.68%
North Dakota	47	111	139	105	145	138 ^g	145	208.51%
California	3,287	4,418	6,372	8,764	9,859	7,940 ^g	9,859	199.94%
Dist. of Columbia	110	139	166	319	230	313 ^g	319	190.00%
North Carolina	467	882	949	1,337	1,327	1,324 ^f	1,337	186.30%
Kentucky	211	209	360	398	573	551 ^f	573	171.56%
Connecticut	207	314 ^e	403	499	444	562 ^f	562	171.50%
Maryland	342	478	592	548	815	922 ^f	922	169.59%
Texas	880	1,602	2,063	2,040	2,318	2,295 ^f	2,318	163.41%
Arizona	357	^d	761	853	938	810 ^g	938	162.75%
Arkansas	138	258	318	325	362	298 ^g	362	162.32%
Alaska	108	95	137	202	278	222 ^g	278	157.41%
South Dakota	56	55	84	94	97	142 ^f	142	153.57%
New Hampshire	45	51	62	97	95	114 ^f	114	153.33%
Mississippi	114	170	237	288	266	215 ^g	288	152.63%
Iowa	350	525	764	729	661	882 ^f	882	152.00%
New Mexico	147	197	258	347	369	271 ^g	369	151.02%
Oregon	445	665	765	831	1,071	1,115 ^f	1,115	150.56%
Minnesota	258	429	633	614	567	627 ^f	633	145.35%
Montana	115	149	188	238	275	243 ^f	275	139.13%
Georgia	493	724	1,150	1,080	899	1,081 ^f	1,150	133.27%
Indiana	495	795	759	1,147	878	^d	1,147	131.72%
Tennessee	328	337	382	431	646	758 ^f	758	131.10%
Missouri	557	640	849	1,265	1,102	1,273 ^f	1,273	128.55%
Florida	987	1,549	1,358	1,629	1,761	2,246 ^f	2,246	127.56%
New Jersey	621	815	732	832	1,028	1,370 ^f	1,370	120.61%
Wisconsin	467	643	642	736	754	939 ^f	939	101.07%
Colorado	417	576	714	691	610	835 ^f	835	100.24%
West Virginia	182	211	312	352	362	361 ^g	362	98.90%
Washington	607	878	1,047	1,141	1,204	1,069 ^g	1,204	98.35%
Vermont	75	118	139	122	116	^d	139	85.33%
South Carolina	256	465	456	378	384	385 ^g	465	81.64%
Alabama	139	115	153	202	238	249 ^f	249	79.14%
Ohio	1,287	1,015	1,868	2,044	2,230	2,185 ^f	2,230	73.27%
Nevada	149	^d	123	231	243	251 ^f	251	68.46%
Virginia	298	235	326	448	495	422 ^g	495	66.11%
Utah	225	334	369	303	349	352 ^g	369	64.00%
Pennsylvania	1,224	1,516	1,454	1,712	1,564	1,993 ^f	1,993	62.83%
Kansas	349	419	566	468	428	433 ^g	566	62.18%
Nebraska	185	^d	279	293	292	294 ^f	294	58.92%
Louisiana	308	311 ^e	356	476	470	474 ^g	476	54.55%
Michigan	1,905	2,257	2,446	2,804	2,979	2,833 ^g	2,833	48.71%
Rhode Island	261	222	292	260	267	250 ^g	292	11.88%
New York	4,716	4,819	4,864	4,234	3,934	3,160 ^g	4,864	3.14%
Massachusetts	1,116	1,100	922	861	778	807 ^g	1,100	-1.43%
TOTAL	28,160	35,897	46,415	50,462	50,683	48,488	58,573	107.99%

Source: Except where otherwise noted, most data is from the U.S. Children's Bureau. Adoptions of children with public child welfare agency involvement by state, FY 1995 - FY 2000. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, rev. October 3, 2002. Available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dts/adoptchild.htm>.

Table Notes: **a** The data for FY 1995-FY 1997 were reported by states to set baselines for the Adoption Incentive Program. They came from a variety of sources including the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), court records, file reviews and legacy information systems.
b Unless otherwise noted, the data came from the AFCARS adoption database. All AFCARS adoption data are being continuously updated and may differ from data reported for the Adoption Incentive Program because adoptions reported for that program are identified through a different AFCARS data element and must qualify in other ways to be counted toward the award of incentive funds. Counts include all adoptions reported as of May 2003. Where appropriate, AFCARS data have been adjusted for duplication. Puerto Rico was not eligible to participate in the first year of the Adoption Incentive Program for which the FY 1995-FY 1997 data were collected.
c Percentage increase over average 1995-1997 baseline to year of highest number of adoptions.
d Data useable for this purpose are not available.
e Reported by states as an aggregate number for the Child Welfare Outcomes Annual Report.
f Numbers reflected total adoptions as reported from the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, United States Department of Health and Human Services, September 2003.
g Reported by the North American Council on Adoptable Children based on state-by-state surveys conducted between May and July 2003.