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Executive Summary

On any given day in the United States, more than 100,000 foster children are waiting to be adopted by someone who can provide a permanent, loving home. While they wait, these children often live with foster parents, with relatives, or in group homes or institutions. Extensive recruitment efforts have been undertaken at the state and federal levels to identify homes for these children. Yet many children still wait a very long time for a new family.

The National Adoption Day Coalition works to draw attention to these children and celebrate loving parents that choose to adopt. The Coalition, comprised of eight partners—The Alliance for Children's Rights, Casey Family Services, Children's Action Network, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption®, Freddie Mac Foundation, and Target Corporation—commissioned the Urban Institute to conduct a study to look more closely at how states find adoptive families for children in foster care.

Last year, the research report commissioned by the National Adoption Day Coalition identified primary barriers and promising approaches to move foster children into adoptive homes. Leading the list of barriers was the difficulty in finding enough interested and able families to adopt waiting children. This year's report looks more closely at this problem. It provides a first-time national look at the state of adoption recruitment by describing: levels of interest in adoption, who takes steps toward adopting, and how interest might be channeled toward foster care adoption. In doing so, it provides needed direction to states and federal policymakers in crafting future recruitment strategies.

Key Findings

- **Women's Interest in Adopting Increased by 38 Percent between 1995 and 2002**

Based on estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth, 18 million women reported being interested in adopting in 2002. This represents a 38 percent increase since 1995 when 13 million women reported interest. The 18 million women interested in 2002 represents a third (33 percent) of the population of women ages 18 to 44, up from about a quarter (24 percent) of women (13 million) in 1995.

- **Women's Interest in Adopting Increased across Demographic Groups**

More women reported an interest in adopting in 2002 than in 1995 in nearly all age, race and ethnic, income, education, and religious groups. Some groups of interest to recruiters seeking homes for foster children saw notable percent increases: black women (35 percent), Hispanic women (29 percent), lower-income women (50 percent) (women with family incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level), Protestant women (41 percent), and 18- to 24-year-olds (73 percent).

- **Many Women Interested in Adopting Special Needs Children**

Of the women currently seeking to adopt in 2002, many reported a willingness to adopt children with characteristics similar to those waiting to be adopted. For example, the vast majority (97 percent) of women currently seeking to adopt would be willing to accept a minority child. Nearly a third of women (31 percent) said they would be willing to adopt a child that is 13 years old or older. Ninety percent of women reported a willingness to adopt a child with a mild disability, and 31 percent said they would accept a child with a severe disability. Seventy-five percent of women said they would be willing to accept a sibling group.

- **Women Interested In Adoption Were Less Likely to Take Steps to Adopt in 2002 than in 1995**

In 2002, 10 percent (1.9 million) of the women who reported an interest in adopting took steps toward this end. This portion represents a decline since 1995, when 16 percent (2.1 million) of the women who reported interest took steps. Declines in the portion of interested women taking steps occurred for many demographic groups. For some groups of interested women, the percentage that took steps remained fairly steady: 30- to 34-year-olds, black women, Hispanic women, unmarried women, and lower-income women.

- **States Use Multiple Types of Recruitment Strategies**

All states and the District of Columbia use child-specific recruitment as part of their recruitment strategy, and most states also incorporate general and targeted recruitment as part of their strategies. The majority of states (40) use all three types of recruitment in their strategies to recruit adoptive homes. In fact, only two states reported using just one recruitment type as part of their overall recruiting strategy.



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- **States Employ Innovative Recruitment Strategies to Translate Interest Into Action**

States conduct general, child-specific, and targeted recruitment through a variety of activities. A majority of states (42) use the media to feature children. All states offer photo listings depicting their children in foster care. Over half of states (32) use faith-based recruitment. And some states use foster-adopt strategies (10), language-based initiatives (10), or word-of-mouth efforts (11). The examples of each of these strategies provided in the report reflect a greater need not to just make families aware of the need for adoptive families, but to personally engage and retain families in the recruitment process.

Recommendations

The National Adoption Day Coalition is encouraged by the dramatic increase in interest in adoption and the extensive recruitment activity occurring across the nation. However, given that interest often does not translate into action, there still is much work to be done to ensure that all children find the permanent, loving families they need and deserve. Based on this research report, the National Adoption Day Coalition recommends the following:

- **Shift in Messaging from Awareness to Taking Action**

These findings suggest significant progress has been made in generating interest and awareness around adoption. While this is an important first step, the findings also reveal that future campaigns are needed to encourage those interested and able to adopt a foster child to actually take steps toward that end. Future campaigns might shift from telling prospective parents that anyone can adopt to telling interested adopters *how* they can adopt.

- **Channel Interest toward Foster Care Adoption**

The findings in this report also suggest an opportunity to encourage the option of foster adoption in comparison to other types of adoption. Foster care adoption may be less costly than other types of adoption and often offers financial supports and post-adoption services to families that other types of adoption may not provide. Moreover, it is a means by which to help children in one's own community who need homes.

- **Use Targeted Recruitment to Focus on High-Propensity Groups**

The report identifies key groups of women for whom interest is up and levels of taking action have not declined: 30- to 34-year-olds, black and Hispanic women, unmarried women, and lower-income women. States might consider more expansive targeted efforts toward these women.

- **Encourage Individuals Not Taking Steps to Participate in Other Ways**

There are many ways to support the foster care adoption process other than by adopting. With so many individuals interested in adopting but not taking steps, the field might consider strategies to encourage these individuals to support foster care adoption in other ways.

- **Develop a Consumer-Friendly Foster Care Adoption Process**

In order to sell the foster care adoption process as a viable option to potential adopters, the process itself must be efficient and consumer-friendly. For interested families, the first call they make or the first web site they see may leave lasting impressions. Three stages of the process should be considered as part of efforts to make the process more consumer-friendly: the circumstances of the first contact interested adopters have with agencies, the navigation strategies for guiding families through the process, and the supports and services available to the adoptive family and child.

- **Use Available Resources to Develop New Recruitment Strategies**

The Federal Adoption Opportunities Program (AOP) grants might be targeted to enhance recruitment activities. Grants could be used for improving adoption web sites and responses to inquiries, developing adoption support services for families seeking to adopt, or funding positions for parent advocates.

- **Test the Effectiveness of Recruitment Strategies with Rigorous Research**

All states are conducting recruitment activities, yet there is little research indicating what works. Rigorous evaluations and better data are needed to understand the strategies that result in successful adoptions.



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