

Increasing Knowledge About Foster Care Adoption:

Barriers and Potential Solutions

Adoption Attitude Survey

In 2004, there were approximately 2,743 children in Massachusetts' foster care system with a goal of adoption. Of these, 897 did not have a family identified for them. In an effort to identify adults in Massachusetts who are likely to consider adoption from foster care, and to better understand what information increases an adult's propensity to consider adoption from foster care, the Center for Adoption Research at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange developed a statewide survey entitled Adoption from Foster Care: Knowledge and Attitudes Survey. One thousand adult residents of Massachusetts were surveyed regarding their knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions about adoption. The results are presented in three policy briefs; this one focuses on knowledge about foster care adoptions and concludes with recommendations for more targeted recruitment efforts.

Increasing the propensity of adoption from foster care

Service/Knowledge Factors Approximately 30 percent (n=293) of the survey participants had considered adopting. Of these participants, 64 percent (n=190) had considered adoption from foster care (19 percent had seriously considered it, and 45 percent had thought about it). In an attempt to determine factors that would positively influence the decision to adopt from foster care in the future, participants were presented a series of adoption-related services and supports and asked to rate how the availability of these services/supports would impact their decision to adopt from foster care. Responses included "No Difference," "Minor Difference" and "Major Difference." Survey results identified six services/supports likely to positively influence future adoption decisions. The services/supports identified by 60-74 percent of respondents as likely to make a "Major Difference," range from increased access to adoption professionals to increased knowledge/information about aspects of adoption from foster care (see Table 1).

Table 1: Factors Influencing Adoption Decisions

<i>Adoption-Related Service/Support</i>	<i>Major Difference (%)</i>
1. Access to professionals who could talk to you about the adoption process.	74%
2. Opportunities to meet children in foster care who need adoptive families.	71%
3. Being knowledgeable of adoption process.	68%
4. Having supportive services (i.e. a social worker, mental health services, parenting classes).	64%
5. Being knowledgeable of children in foster care.	62%
6. Having access to post-adoption services.	60%

Survey participants with no children placed greater importance on issues of access (i.e. *access to professionals* and *access to post-adoption services*) when compared to respondents with children. Survey respondents from single-adult households (compared with married/partnered households), appeared more concerned with issues of knowledge as they were overrepresented in the categories *being knowledgeable of the adoption process* and *being knowledgeable of children in foster care*. Finally, male respondents (compared with female respondents) appeared to place greater emphasis on direct interaction with potential adoptive children as they were more likely to indicate that *opportunities to meet children in foster care who need adoptive families* would make a “Major Difference” in future adoption-related decisions.

Information Sources In addition to gathering data about factors likely to influence a future decision to adopt, researchers asked participants to identify preferable sources of adoption-related information. Participants were presented 10 possible information sources (television, newspapers, flyers in the community, places of worship, radio, friends, family, Internet, books/magazines, other) and asked to indicate their preference for seeking/obtaining information from these sources. The two sources most commonly preferred by respondents were family (70 percent) and friends (69 percent). Respondents from the middle and higher income categories were more likely to prefer these two sources than were respondents from the lowest income category.

Just over half of survey respondents indicated a preference for obtaining adoption information at places of worship (57 percent) and on the Internet (56 percent). African American respondents were overrepresented in the group of participants preferring to receive information at places of worship, while male respondents and those from the highest income category were overrepresented in the group preferring to obtain information from the Internet.

The two sources least preferred by respondents were radio (24 percent) and television (28 percent). However, among respondents who did prefer to receive information from the radio and television, African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents were overrepresented.

Recommendations

In order to find homes for Massachusetts' waiting children, the Department of Social Services (DSS) and its partnering agencies strive to maximize the pool of potential adoptive families. To aid in this work, agencies should consider the adoption-related service and knowledge needs of families as identified by this survey. It is important that families interested in adoption from foster care are provided with an accurate understanding of the adoption process and the characteristics of the children waiting in foster care. As documented in an extensive 2005 study of adoption applicants, potential adopters want “a clear roadmap” of the adoption process (Katz, 2005).

To provide families with information that may influence adoption decisions, programs should create opportunities in which prospective adoptive families can interact with social workers. Increased interaction will help families obtain information about the adoption process, pre- and post- adoption services, and the children available for adoption. Information should be presented by qualified personnel and address both the challenges and rewards of adoption (Katz, 2005).

As identified in this survey, informal word of mouth sources are the primary avenue from which prospective adoptive families prefer to obtain information. Agencies should continue and expand programs (i.e. the DSS Ambassador Program and the Jordan's Plus One Program), which encourage formal and informal knowledge sharing among family, friends and community members. In addition, by engaging experienced adoptive families in recruitment events and programs, agencies will further promote the sharing of information and knowledge.

To maximize recruitment success, efforts should be made to reach prospective families in situations where they are most open to receiving information. Places of worship were identified in this survey as one such venue. Initiatives that not only share information about adoption, but engage communities of faith in the design of outreach campaigns, appear to be successful. Initiatives such as the One Church One Child and the Answering the Call Conference provide an opportunity to bring professionals and communities of faith together, open lines of communication and to foster new partnerships, and promote programs such as the Answering the Call Conference. While this is a good start, further efforts are needed to fully involve and utilize this potential recruitment avenue.

Finally, consideration should be given to expanding Internet resources available to information-seeking families. Agencies should strive to improve their utilization of technology to maximize the amount and nature of information available in electronic form so that families are able to take advantage of this quick and convenient information source.

For more information about the *Massachusetts Adoption from Foster Care: Knowledge and Attitudes Survey*, please visit www.centerforadoptionresearch.org or call 508-856-8512.

For more information about adoption through foster care, please visit www.mareinc.org or call 617-54-ADOPT (617-542-3678).

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