

# Recruitment of Families to Adopt Children from Foster Care:

## *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 Research 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 implications for recruitment of prospective adoptive families and concludes with recommendations for more targeted recruitment efforts.

### **Adoption Consideration**

Results of this survey indicate that 30 percent of Massachusetts residents have considered adopting a child. This number is slightly lower than the findings of the 2002 nation-wide survey, which concluded that 39 percent of Americans had considered adopting a child (Harris Interactive, 2002). In the Massachusetts survey, respondents who were younger (18-54 years old) and had more education (more than a high school degree) were more likely to have considered adopting a child than older, less educated respondents. Female respondents and respondents with children were more likely to have considered adoption than male respondents or respondents with no children. In addition, respondents identifying their ethnicity as African American and/or Hispanic/Latino were more likely to have considered adoption than Caucasian, non-Hispanic respondents.

Of the 30 percent of residents indicated who had considered adoption, 21 percent had seriously considered adopting through general adoption (this category was not further defined and therefore could include all forms of adoption including private, foster care and international), 19 percent had seriously considered adopting from foster care, and 16 percent had seriously considered adopting from international sources. While these stated considerations might indicate an inclination to adopt through general or foster care sources, data on the adoption rates in Massachusetts do not always support such a trend.

In 2004, the number of international adoptions (n=1,352) in Massachusetts outnumbered both the number of domestic adoptions through private agencies (n=224) and through foster care (n=816) (Center for Adoption Research, 2006). The majority of adoptions in Massachusetts were international

(57 percent), and involved children from countries including China, Russia, South Korea and Guatemala. From a purely financial standpoint, the choice to adopt internationally has costs—the average fee for adoption of international children through private agencies in 2004 was approximately \$15,000 (Center for Adoption Research, 2006), while adoption through foster care is virtually cost-free and often includes on-going post adoption subsidies and services. Therefore, considerations beyond finances must be influencing which path to adoption the majority of Massachusetts families decide to pursue.

## **Adoption Knowledge and Perceptions**

In an attempt to better understand the non-financial factors that may influence a person's/family's adoption preferences, participants' knowledge and perceptions were probed during the survey and the results are reported below.

### ***Knowledge***

While the vast majority (over 80 percent) of survey respondents appeared to be knowledgeable about foster care adoption-related policies as they pertain to home ownership, living conditions, parenting experience and family finances; respondents appeared to be less knowledgeable about adoption policies regarding marital status, age and sexual orientation. Forty-four percent (44 %) of respondents incorrectly believed that a person must be 50 years old or younger to adopt from foster care. In addition, a larger than expected number of respondents erroneously believed that only married couples could adopt from foster care. Finally, despite the recent media attention focused on adoption by gay and lesbian couples, 25 percent of the Massachusetts residents surveyed still believed that only heterosexual people could adopt children from foster care.

### ***Perceptions***

This survey also asked residents about their perceptions of children adopted from foster care and the propensity of these children to have certain problems (i.e. problems in the areas of learning, behavior, drug and alcohol use, adjustment, emotions and physical health). In every child-problem scenario, the majority of respondents indicated a belief that children adopted from foster care were more likely to encounter these problems than their non-adopted counterparts. When asked the identical questions regarding children adopted internationally or through private domestic adoption, the response was different. The majority of respondents indicated a belief that children adopted internationally or privately were only equally as likely as non-adopted children to have the problems. The only area in which the three categories of adoption were viewed similarly was the state of the child's physical health; the majority of respondents viewing each group to be equally as likely as their non-adopted counterparts to enjoy good physical health. These perceptions may help explain why Massachusetts residents choose to adopt internationally at a higher rate than they choose to adopt from foster care.

## **Recommendations**

Ongoing myths about children in foster care and guidelines for adopting through foster care may reduce the pool of individuals and couples who seek to adopt through foster care. While the results of this survey do not explain the complete story of why a majority of families in Massachusetts choose to adopt internationally rather than through the foster care system, they do highlight areas in which state and private adoption agencies may focus resources. Additional informational campaigns need to be launched to promote a greater understanding of the policies surrounding adoption through foster care and the accurate characteristics of children adopted from the child welfare system. Additionally, efforts should be

made to promote awareness of post-adoption supports available to families in order to address concerns regarding the characteristics of the children adopted through foster care and outcomes for these children. Adoption agencies focusing on recruitment of prospective adoptive families should make a concerted effort to disseminate accurate information regarding the adoption process and research-based child outcomes in order to avoid having prospective adoptive parents prematurely rule out adoption from foster care.

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

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

#### References:

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