



Adopting Through the District's Public Child Welfare Agency

Background

As the public child welfare agency for the District of Columbia, the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) must sometimes remove children from home to keep them safe. Our policy and practice is to keep families together safely whenever possible and to remove children only as the last resort. This has led to a continuing decline in the number of District children in foster care—today only about a third of all children CFSA is serving.

The first goal for children in foster care is to return to their birth parents, and over 80 percent do go home safely. For those who cannot go home, their goals become legal guardianship or adoption. In considering permanent family options for these children, CFSA's priorities are:

- The child's extended family members.
- The child's current foster parent(s).
- Others who know the child and have played a role in his/her life.
- People who do not know the child but are seeking to adopt and whose preferences and capabilities are a good match with the child's needs.

Who Are the District's Waiting Children?

At any given time over the last few years, CFSA has had between 50 and 60 children and youth in need of an adoptive home. Most are African American. Typically, 80 percent are older, ages 12 to 20. About 15 percent are ages 6 to 11. Only about five percent are age five or younger. CFSA rarely has infants, toddlers, and young children with a goal of adoption. When we do, we easily place them with current foster parents seeking to adopt a young child.

CFSA is generally in need of adoptive homes for:

- Sibling groups who need to stay together.
- Youth age 14 and older.
- Teen mothers and their children.
- Children who are medically fragile.
- Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

With appropriate training, services, and support, we have completed successful adoptions of children and youth from all these groups.

Pathways to Adopt from CFSA

CFSA offers two pathways to adoption.

Foster to Adopt: You fill out an application, complete pre-service training and a home study, provide required documentation, and become licensed as a foster parent in the District of Columbia. This process takes about five months from the time you start pre-service training. You serve as a foster parent and then have priority when the goal of a child/youth in your home changes from reunification to adoption. This pathway accounts for the majority of all adoptions of children from District foster care.

It's important to understand two points about fostering to adopt.

- Although you hope to adopt, you must function as a foster parent in good faith. You cannot routinely decline to foster children or youth just because they do not fit your adoptive preferences. This approach can be a win-win in both the short and long term. Here's why . . .

Most adoptions from CFSA are by foster parents because they come to know and care deeply for a child or youth in their home. Then, when circumstances lead to that child/youth becoming available for adoption, the foster parents take the opportunity to keep him/her as a permanent member of their family. They bond with and adopt a child they would never have met without first opening their home as foster parents.

- When CFSA has adoptable children/youth who match your preferences and who are in need of a pre-adoptive placement, and provided that you have open foster care space in your home, CFSA will consider you as a pre-adoptive placement option.

Child-Specific Adoption: You see District children available for adoption through one of the channels CFSA uses to advertise them (see box). You become interested in a specific child and contact CFSA to discuss the possibilities. You fill out an application, complete pre-service training and a home study, provide required documentation, and become licensed as a foster parent in the District of Columbia. This process takes about five months from the time you start pre-service training. Once CFSA licenses you, we can make a pre-adoptive placement of the child in your home. The waiting period for legal finalization of an adoption is six to 12 months.

To see children available for adoption from CFSA, visit these sites on the internet:

- www.adoptuskids.org
- www.adoptionstogether.org/adopting/adopt-an-older-child/heart-gallery

Options for Adoption

People seeking to adopt typically have three options. Exploring all the options can help you decide which process is right for you.

Public Child Welfare Agency (CFSA): CFSA has a foster-to-adopt policy, so you must become licensed and serve as a foster parent. Considerations:

- There is no immediate match with a child, unless you are pursuing a child-specific adoption.

- There is a difference between a child having a goal of adoption and being legally free for adoption. Legally freeing a child for adoption through the public system can be subject to a lengthy court process.
- Children and youth available are older. Infants and toddlers are generally not available.
- Because we encourage shared parenting, you are likely to meet and work with the birth family while their goal is reunification.
- Adopting from a public system is low in cost.
- CFSA provides comprehensive pre-adoption training and post-adoption services, including a monthly financial stipend.

Private Adoption Agency: These agencies represent expectant mothers who want to relinquish their babies for adoption. Some also serve as liaisons with foreign countries that have children available for adoption. Considerations:

- Reputable agencies are clear about how long your adoption process may take.
- If the agency works nationally or worldwide, you are likely to have access to infants, toddlers, and younger children.
- When the birth parents relinquish their rights, consent to adoption, and pass a waiting period during which the law allows them to change their mind, the child is legally free for adoption.
- Depending on the circumstances of the adoption, you may or may not meet the birth parents.
- Fees may vary but can be significant, especially for a foreign adoption.
- The agency may or may not provide pre-service counseling and training or post-adoption services.

Adoption Attorney: Attorneys represent expectant mothers who want to relinquish their babies. Considerations:

- It may be necessary to contact several attorneys in order to find one who has clients looking for parents with your qualifications.
- Getting an infant is dependent upon an expectant mother selecting you. You may meet her as she interviews prospective parents for her child. You may have regular contact with her until she gives birth.
- When the birth parents relinquish their rights, consent to adoption, and pass a waiting period during which the law allows them to change their mind, the child is legally free for adoption.
- Fees can be significant. A birth mother may need your financial support until she gives birth.
- Attorneys generally do not provide pre-adoptive counseling or training. They may or may not provide referrals to post-adoption services.

For More Information

Contact CFSA Foster Parent Recruitment, 202-671-LOVE (5683). This is the first step in your journey of fostering to adopt.

