



Washington State Auditor's Office

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The Experiences and Perspectives of Washington Families who Adopted Children from Foster Care

Providing help to families who adopted foster care children

More than 9,000 Washington families care for children they have adopted from the foster care system. Many of these children previously suffered abuse and neglect, and need more assistance than other children. The Department of Social and Health Services' Children's Administration manages the Adoption Support program to provide financial and other assistance to help these children and their families. The state and federal government split the cost of this program, mostly in payments that help families cover expenses. The state's program also provides pre-authorized payments for counseling for children and limited training opportunities for parents.

Research shows that although most families do well, some families need more help. Researchers have suggested that states provide an array of additional post-adoption services that go beyond the financial support the federal government requires states to provide. While Washington previously attempted to expand its services for these families, it abandoned the effort due to budget constraints.

To learn more about families' service needs and their experiences negotiating their adoption support benefits, we surveyed a sample of parents in Washington. We focused on six services: individual counseling for children, family counseling, support groups, specialized child supervision, crisis intervention, and residential care.

Most needs met, while some families need more services

More than two-thirds of all of the families we surveyed did not need services beyond program benefits, or they could access the services they needed. However, about one-third of all families said that they could not access at least one service they needed or that the service they received was not beneficial.

Needs and access varied by the service. For example, the program helps families access the most-needed service – individual counseling for children. But the second most-needed service – family counseling – had the greatest unmet need compared to the other services.

Children with the greatest needs face the biggest gaps in service

The families most likely to need help had the most difficulty getting all the services they needed. Sixteen percent of the families we surveyed are raising children with diagnosed disabilities that severely affect their lives. Of these families, 57 percent reported unmet service needs. These families were more likely to need, but less likely to get, the services we asked about in the survey.

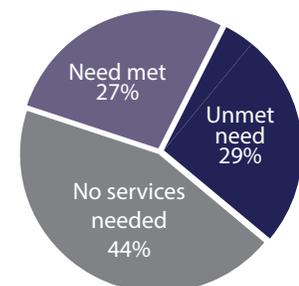
Post Adoption Services Survey



The Experiences & Perspectives of Washington Families

Most needs met, but some families can't get needed services

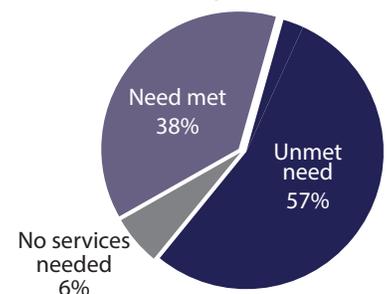
All survey respondents for all services



Source: State Auditor's Office analysis of survey results.

Biggest gaps exist for families with the greatest needs

Represents survey responses from the 16% of the families with the greatest need



Source: State Auditor's Office analysis of survey results.

Families need information about services

Accessing information about services is another significant challenge. Almost half of all the parents surveyed said they had difficulty finding information about how best to care for their child. Parents also lacked information on how to access crisis intervention and residential care services. Again, the families with the greatest needs were more likely to say they could not find information. One parent said, “It would be really great if information on all services available for adopted children was on a website and readily available.”

Some parents reported challenges negotiating their adoption support benefits

Twelve percent of the parents we surveyed negotiated their support benefits in the past year. Of these parents, more than half gave poor or fair ratings when asked whether program staff gave adequate consideration of their children’s needs or the families’ circumstances. These payments are not “one rate fits all.” Federal law mandates that the state give adequate consideration of the child’s special needs and the family’s circumstances when determining adoption support benefits.

Their frustration is due in part to the lack of guidelines for the program that resulted in different regional practices for negotiating benefits. In order to improve the program, the Legislature acted in 2012 to centralize the program and create consistent practices statewide. The program centralized adoption support staff in July 2013 and is developing guidelines to improve consistency.

One parent said, “Thank you for adoption support, without it we could not have done this!”

One parent said, “The process is very nebulous, there were no clear guidelines.”

Other states provide resources and services that Washington families seek

Washington families are not alone in needing services to help their children adopted from foster care. We wanted to know what other states are doing to help families who have adopted from foster care.

We spoke to national experts to identify states with leading practices, and we identified states with populations similar to Washington. Using these two criteria, we selected eight states to examine in more detail. We identified some common practices:

- All eight provide services designed for the small number of families caring for children with significant needs.
- All eight provide information and referral services.
- All eight contract with nonprofit organizations to provide some of their services.
- Seven use federal money to help pay for the programs.

The eight states we contacted are Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oregon and Tennessee.

Recommendations

We recommend the Department of Social and Health Services’ Children’s Administration:

1. Develop a plan for enhancing post-adoption services for families adopting foster children using the parent survey results and information from other states. The plan should include strategies for addressing the largest service gaps identified in our report, including:
 - Services for children whose disabilities significantly affect their lives
 - Information on available servicesSubmit the plan and associated resource needs to the Governor and the Legislature for consideration by January 1, 2015.
2. Reach out to parents one year after DSHS finishes centralizing the program to determine whether their satisfaction with the unit’s performance and its consistency has improved and report the results of its analysis to the Governor and the Legislature after the outreach is completed.