

Recommendations, Conclusions and Limitations Excerpted from:

Mapping the Path to Post-Adoption Service Utilization:

Examining the Facilitators and Barriers

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the needs and ideas expressed by those who were participants in this project. They include:

Adoption Professional Recommendations

- **Exploration of Micro/Mezzo/Macro Systems**
As was noted in the discussion, adoption professionals described an on-going struggle between the micro/mezzo/macro systems. It appears that working in the micro level is comfortable for most workers as related to screening, placement, and rapport building with the adoptive family. However, it is at the mezzo and macro levels of practice that workers indicate difficulties. These issues can be alleviated, in part, through systemic support of the adoption professionals. Furthermore, although professionals do not seem aware of available systemic supports, it may be accessible at these levels. However, if mezzo and macro supports are not available to professionals in the adoption community, then this area justifies exploration. Additionally, adoption professionals have indicated that they experience a disconnect between the larger child welfare system and how it pertains to their clients. This inevitably trickles down to the client level (which was somewhat apparent in the parents' cluster groups). Workers need to be equipped with the skills to navigate child welfare and other related systems. Moreover, adoption professionals need to be provided with the support necessary to understand and access these larger systems when necessary.
- **Enhance educational curriculum**
From an educational perspective, most helping professions are populated with people who want to work with an individual client or at the family level. In fact, very few graduates seek careers in the mezzo and macro areas of practice. This is an area that needs to be addressed systemically, through universities/colleges, agencies and accreditation entities, to discuss the necessary steps to augment current educational curricula.
- **Support**
It is not enough to say that support systems are in place. Unless people are trained on how to access these or that they are actually in place and provide *appropriate* support, then the support efforts become futile. Workers need to feel like they can get the type of support that they need, when they or their clients require it.
- **Post-adoption units**
Several workers noted that it would be beneficial for DCF to create post-adoption units (such as the one currently in use in District 11) that would assist families in the on-going issues that may arise after the child has been placed in their home. Statewide development of post-adoption units is one possible solution. Professionals in the post-adoption unit would be specifically trained in post-adoption issues. Additionally, resources could be more appropriately targeted to the needs of the population.
- **Performance based incentives**
In the current age of accountability, it is important to reward those who achieve the benchmarks that are determined by the system or the agency. Performance based incentives would be helpful in retaining seasoned workers and also encouraging new professionals to work in child welfare.
- **Evaluation**
Not enough can be said about evaluation. Evaluations are the key to successful programs and the continued success of adoptions. Without evaluations, it is impossible to know what ideas/policies work and what needs to be continued. An evaluation on any aspect of the process can help inform workers and administrators on best practices, current developments in the field, and can provide a feedback loop on what they are doing. It is well known in the helping professions that burnout is an issue, as workers deal with difficult clients in difficult situations. And without a sense of accomplishment and making a difference (that is shown through empirical means) the issue of burnout becomes a reality.

Adoptive Parental Recommendations

- Provide continued support for the family and child
Parents across the three districts noted that tangible support of their family should not end when the child turns 18. Specifically, it was stated that the child should not lose his or her benefits (Medicaid and subsidies) when he/she becomes 18 years old, as some of these children, because of their past, may not be at the same developmental or educational stage as their peers. Parent's believed that continued support would be instrumental in helping adopted children succeed as adults.
- Parental involvement in the process
Parents want to be treated as partners in the adoption process. Other child welfare initiatives in which parents are intrinsically involved in the process should be modeled and tested with this population. Parents are known to be experts on their own family situation and should be treated as another professional in the helping system. Continual involvement in the process can assist in making changes that are needed and working towards the success of the adoption.
- Assist with social networking (both formal and informal)
One method for promoting the establishment of social networks is to develop a web site for adoptive parents and adoptive children. Technology provides considerable flexibility and creativity for connecting similar groups of people. The web site could have a message board among parents as well as one that links parents with adoption professionals.
- Spirituality as support
Adoptive parent utilization of religion/spirituality as a means of support was identified as a valuable and important source. In fact, it was second only to the family system. Conversely, it was ranked as being the least well developed resource utilized by adoption professionals. As such, it is important to work holistically with families. To that end, adoption professionals must move beyond the traditional bio-psychosocial model and incorporate the spiritual needs of the family. Further, adoption professionals can partner with local churches, and conduct workshops with the congregations to educate them on adoption issues. Spirituality is often neglected in the helping professions, yet is clearly important to the adoptive families.
- Centralized information/referral
Parents discussed the lack of a system that provided them with information and referrals. Overcoming this challenge can be accomplished by establishing a post-adoption hotline that is staffed by adoptive parents and workers. This hotline could be used to provide generic information or possible referral sources to the family when needed.
- Mentoring Programs
A mentoring program could be beneficial in helping families' transition through changes that are associated with adopting. The mentoring program would use volunteers that could assist and provide support for families in an effort to maintain the family and ensure child well-being.
- Minimize red tape and duplicate forms
This recommendation explores ways in which the system can work better for the parents. In particular, by minimizing the number of forms that need to be completed; while also ensuring that the adopted child is safe and is thriving in the environment.
- Reality based training
Some parents expressed the need to provide up-dated training on becoming and staying an adoptive parent. This new training would go beyond a didactic approach to teaching people how to become adoptive parents. The training could include topics on:
 - the longitudinal nature of adoptions,
 - what is success in adoptions,
 - what are setbacks and what causes disruptions,
 - attachments and relationship building,
 - developmentally appropriate and empirically-based interventions,
 - how adoptions differ from biological family interactions,
 - discussing your adoption with your social support network (friends, family, coworkers), and
 - available resourcesFurthermore, it should be stressed to newly adoptive parents (or parents in the process) that it is safe to ask questions and to struggle with the range of the dynamics associated with adoption.

Adoptive Children Recommendations

- **Publicize available support groups for children**
Children that participated in the project suggested that available support groups should be more widely publicized. Based on the data collected, it appears that adopted children would utilize support groups. This avenue would provide adopted children with information, support, and an atmosphere of acceptance from individuals outside of the family unit.
- **Utilize family support system**
As demonstrated through statements generated from the children, it is evident that the family system is viewed as the most important form of support for these children. Therefore, a partnership between the adoption professional and the parent would provide the child with needed techniques, information, and guidance regarding adoption related issues. Utilizing the parent as a conduit for information from the adoption community would afford the adoptive family another opportunity to strengthen their relationships.
- **Spirituality as support**
The adopted children included in this study identified talking to the Lord through prayer as the leading method employed to cope with the challenges they face. As such, this valuable support source must be recognized and encouraged by adoptive professionals and parents.
- **Organize activities**
Through statement generation, children indicated the desire to spend more time with their families. Organized activities would provide scheduled time for families to spend together. Additionally, this could promote positive association with other adoptive families and children, hence broadening their social network.
- **Nurturing relationships**
It is evident from the data that there is a need for professionals and parents to implement methods for assisting children with grieving the loss of their previous connections, as well as building relationships with their new family, new friends, new school and countless others.
- **Working through the fear**
Based on the statements generated from the children, there appears to be an underlying fear associated with issues of adoption. It is the responsibility of parents and professionals in the adoption community to work together to assure the children of their importance and safety within the family.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the concept mapping process produced a significant amount of data that reflects the adoption communities' efforts to work with its various constituencies. The participants found similar concepts and ideas to be important. Yet, conversely, when asked how adoption professionals assisted individuals in meeting these challenges, the scores were somewhat low and reflected room for improvement. However, it is important to note that as a theoretical measure, these data are the opinions of the respondents. Thus, actual 'real life' may indeed be significantly different. It may therefore be as important to educate the respondent populations on the actual situation as it is to address the situation itself. For example, by pointing out the discrepancy between potential faulty thinking and reality, a dialogue may be initiated to identify areas for improvement. Thus, a two-pronged effort must be made – education and communication regarding the issues identified, as well as actual attention to the issue identified. Finally, it is clear from the data collected that professionals in the adoption community and parents are extremely invested in the success of adoptions. This dedication can act as a building block for future collaboration to improve existing policies and practices resulting in the permanency for these vulnerable children.

LIMITATIONS

Although the results of this study highlight many important findings, as with all research, this study possessed several limitations. It is important to note that the findings presented in this report represent the opinions, thoughts, and feelings of those participants who participated in the interviews and the sorting and rating sessions. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to the overall populations from which these participants were obtained. Indeed, the findings are also cross-sectional and present a 'snap-shot' of the situation as it was at the time of data collection, and data collected at other points in time may produce different statements, clusters, and/or ratings. Therefore, the rating of these items pertains to only the ratings for the group and cannot necessarily be generalized to all adoption professionals, adoptive parents, and adoptive children. These ratings give just one picture of the subject groups and the challenges they face, their sources of support, the barriers they identify to accessing post-adoption services, and the facilitators that they use (or need) to overcome the barriers. As such, the theoretical measures used ask individuals to provide their

subjective estimates of what has occurred in the past and what should occur, as opposed to what actually is or has happened. Thus, additional evaluation methods can and should be employed to gain a triangulated view of the importance and the needs that are being addressed. It is also important to note that this study examines patterns of post-adoption service utilization within the three named districts. As such, it is not possible to compare the results to other districts.

Additionally, it is necessary to note that the potential participants in the adoptive parent and child groups were almost exclusively drawn directly from the district lists of families that receive adoption subsidies through the state of Florida. Typically, adoption subsidies are given to parents of adoptive children who are classified as special-needs adoptive children. As such, this criterion may have resulted in a sample in which adopted children with special needs are vastly over represented.

Within these limitations, it must also be noted that any household without a telephone would not have been represented in this study. Households whose address or telephone number were incorrect or not provided were also excluded. Further, adoptive families living in poverty without an active telephone, who may arguably be in the greatest need of post-adoption treatment and support services, were not able to be accessed.

This study was also impacted by self-selection bias, which refers to characteristics that potential subjects may have that lead to their inclusion or exclusion from the study. For example, one adoptive parent briefly responded to research staff by e-mail and expressed her regret that she did not have time to complete the sorting and rating task. For this parent, full-time employment and the difficulties of having a special-needs adoptive child simply did not allow her the time to provide her input. Specifically in the case of this study, concept mapping can be a difficult process both in content and in the actual task. Because adoption can be a very sensitive and often private subject, some individuals may not have wanted to talk about it with researchers either in interviews or through participation in the sorting and rating process. Additionally, concept mapping is a difficult and arduous process that requires specific cognitive abilities such as English literacy, sufficient reading comprehension, and the capacity for abstract thought. Some individuals who received packets may not have been able to understand the process fully, which would preclude their participation. Another difficulty is volunteer bias. It is generally accepted in research that the individuals who volunteer to participate may be different from those who do not. The data are not available to determine if the sample obtained are significantly different from their respective adoption cohorts.

There were a number of specific barriers that were encountered in this study as well. A particular barrier that was encountered with the adoptive child sample was that few parents would provide parental consent to speak with their children. Among those that did, two of the three families had more than one adoptive child. This resulted in a very limited sample of adoptive children, both by the number of participants and the fact that several of the children came from the same family. It is important to note that the professional literature regarding adoption does not reflect any attempts to include the views of children, but rather focuses on parents (both birth and adoptive) and professionals in child welfare and mental health. As such, despite this limitation, this contribution is nevertheless significant.

Lastly, the contact information provided by the District adoption representatives was generally complete. However, there were a number of incorrect addresses, and incorrect or missing phone numbers. Around 30% (981 of 3309) of the individuals on the lists did not have complete contact information (mailing address and phone number). Additionally, among all the samples approximately 7% of the initial invitation letters (74 of 1091) that were mailed were returned due to incorrect addresses. This rate of return was most problematic among the adoptive parents in District 11 - where over 10% of the 300 letters mailed were returned. Among the adoptive parents, approximately 7% of those that the research team attempted to reach by phone had numbers that were either disconnected or incorrect numbers. A particular problem affecting the District 7 professional sample was that a number of the state adoption professionals were relocating during the initial data collection period. It could not be confirmed how many received their letters; however, a number of those that were directly contacted by phone stated that they did not receive the letter.