

Adoption Promotion and Support of Adoptive Families in the Faith-based Community

Vision

All of Florida's children are living in loving, safe and permanent homes with the potential of becoming productive citizens.

Mission

To engage Florida's faith-based community to promote the adoption of children in foster care to their congregations, and then enlist those same congregations to support their adoptive families as long as needed.

Goals

If one family in every faith-based establishment (church, synagogue, mosque, etc) in Florida adopted one child, regardless of that child's special needs, or a sibling group, there would be no children in state care. The adoptive family's faith-based home would then collectively provide needed post-adopt support and types of care to help each family raise the adopted children.

The Governor's office will collaborate with Volunteer Florida and the Florida Faith-based and Community-based Advisory Council (FBCBAC) to fulfill this mission. The One Church, One Child office, which has a focus on Florida's African-American churches, will also be invited to participate in this initiative.

Measurable Objectives

A set of measurable objectives, including deadline dates, need to be set in order to properly implement, track and adjust the initiative. These objectives should include the following results, but not be limited to:

- 18-month plan with achievable benchmark dates
- Number of faith-based partners recruited
- Realistic yet limited budget and fundraising goals
- Number of children adopted out of foster care
- Number of families receiving post-adopt support

Critical Supports

Collateral Materials (English and Spanish) (**Explore Adoption** materials)

- Educational brochures -Allows faith leaders the freedom to deliver their message and not have to explain details of the process.
- Posters –various sizes
- Video/DVD of adoptive families

Interactive Website with usable downloads

Faith-based Information Clearinghouse

- Engage appropriate ministry partners to volunteer to provide a clearinghouse of information that may be requested by local faith leaders and congregations related to the promotion of adoption.
- Provide sermon outlines from well-known faith leaders from around the state and country.

Adoption and Family Support Initiative Concept Proposal

Foundation

Initially, support from involved organizations and individuals around the state must be established to ensure the success of the initiative. To this end, it is suggested to:

- Convene a core group of interested individuals to begin discussions and generate initial ideas about planning the initiative.
- Enlist the support of Florida's Faith-based and Community-based Advisory Council.
- Dialogue with One Church, One Child as a partner in this initiative.
- Approach Volunteer Florida for possible minimal funding needs and volunteer assistance.
- Connect with the faith-based liaisons organized through DJJ's Office of Faith and Community-based Partnerships.
- Include CBC lead agencies and DCF staff in all aspects of planning.

Early on, a Central Office should be identified as the support to the plans and activities of the initiative. In order to successfully engage the faith community, there will have to be a level of guidance and direction from the organizing entity.

Finally, the critical supports that will move the initiative forward, provide tools to the faith community and sustain the efforts should be developed early in the process to give the effort the credibility it needs to gain momentum.

A Model Approach to Build

To start, Florida's faith leaders, from all denominations, will be identified and a schedule of their state-wide leadership meetings will be obtained for internal planning purposes.

Then, Governor Charlie Crist and the Office of Adoption and Child Protection, with help from Florida's Faith-based and Community-based Advisory Council, will convene a Summit of Florida's faith-based leaders and liaisons to discuss their roles in promoting foster care adoption and supporting adoptive families in their congregations. This Summit will display the Governor's commitment to and the importance of this project.

After the Summit, a letter from the Governor will be drafted and mailed to our faith leaders asking them to support the Governor's adoption/family support initiative and commit to engaging their local congregations around the state.

The letter will:

- Explain the vision, mission and the initiative.
- Acknowledge and explain the existing problem areas in our foster care adoption process and how they are currently being addressed.
- Ask for permission for the Office to reach out to the faith leader's local congregations in order to help get them engaged locally in the initiative.
- Mention that they will soon receive a follow-up phone call.

A personal follow-up phone call will be made to each faith leader to confirm their commitment and support for the initiative. This call can come from the Governor's Office or an identified community leader who has a relationship with the faith leader. This aggressive approach will be necessary to move the initiative to the next level.

These faith leaders will be asked to send a "commit to participate" letter (on their letterhead) to the leaders of their identified local congregations. It will be suggested that local congregations be identified by size (medium to large), prominence in the community, activity in the community,

potential willingness to participate, areas in the state where there is greatest need, etc. There is often a select group of congregations that have the leadership and initiative to become actively involved in extracurricular projects. Targeting these kinds of local congregations is a fiscally sound approach in terms of limited money and manpower.

To simplify the process and offer assistance, it will be mentioned to the faith leaders that a sample letter will be sent to them as an outline for use on their letterhead. A request will also be made for a local congregation contact list for the purpose of the office doing follow-up work.

A draft of the sample “commit to participate” letter will be sent to the faith leaders for them to send to the leaders of their local congregations. The letter will include:

- A brief explanation of the initiative and desired goals to be reached.
- A description of the different levels of participation.
- A challenge to stimulate goal setting.
- A recommendation that an impassioned lay leader be engaged to take the lead on the initiative.
- A description of the collateral support and materials available, including the website.
- A description of the clearinghouse available via outside ministries.
- A deadline for a response.

Included with this letter will be a “return reply” request that will be sent back directly to the Central Office via phone, fax or email. There will be a clear deadline for response and this return reply will indicate:

- At which level the local congregation would like to participate.
- What materials are needed and the quantities.
- Who their point of contact is going to be (other than the faith leader) and the contact information of that person.
- The dates they will be able to participate in the initiative.

Also enclosed with the sample letter will be a copy of the Governor’s original letter to the faith leaders. To enhance the effort, it will be recommended to the faith leaders that they also send a copy of the Governor’s letter with their letter. To avoid any delays and to build in redundancy, it will be mentioned that follow-up phone calls are on the way to answer any questions they might have.

In addition to answering questions, the follow-up phone calls to the faith leaders will inquire as to when the “commit to participate” letters have or will be going out. Confirmation will also be made regarding the receipt of the contact list of the local congregations.

After the faith-based leadership has sent out the “commit to participate” letter to their list of identified local congregations, the office will convey the contact information of local congregations to the various ministry partners so they can directly follow-up regarding the clearinghouse and materials available.

Promotion of Foster Care Adoption

An effort will be made to coordinate the faith community to promote foster care adoption during November which is National Adoption Month. Those who cannot do so will advance the initiative as their calendar permits. In order to raise awareness of the upcoming initiative and to engage the laity as they are about to be petitioned by their faith leader, a cost effective PR campaign, using primarily radio and print, will be cast out to the faith-based community.

As the return replies are received, requested information and collateral support materials will be sent out to the local congregations. Reference will also be made to the interactive website and

the downloads that can be utilized to promote foster care adoption. In most cases, correspondence will be with an identified point of contact from the faith community other than the local faith leader. For continuity, the local faith leader will be copied on these communications. Also, a coordinated system of follow-up calls from the Office to the church contacts can expedite the initiative and create momentum.

As foster care adoption is promoted throughout Florida's faith-based community in a somewhat coordinated manner, and potential adoptive parents are identified and recruited, there will be a corresponding increase in the number of inquiries about our children in foster care. In the interest of proper customer service and to maintain, and even increase, the people's confidence in public adoptions, we are going to have to make a concerted effort that will establish strong communications between our Community Based Care lead agencies and our faith-based partners.

This initiative will revolve around a child-specific recruitment plan and the Community Based Care lead agencies should be diligent in notifying our faith-based partners of the children in the area who are in need of permanent homes. The CBCs should meet with faith-based contacts and implement a plan to respond to information requests from their local congregations. A customer service feedback form would also be helpful in identifying deficiencies in the process. To measure the effectiveness of the initiative in promoting foster care adoption, the number of inquiries to Adoption Exchange Center and the website hits will be tracked and analyzed.

Support of Adoptive Families

In addition to promoting foster care adoption, the faith community will be encouraged to develop and implement a post-adoption family support network to assist those families who had the courage to answer the call and adopt a child from foster care. These "congregation builders" strategies will be developed locally with support and advice from the Office and other outside sources.

When a couple, or possibly multiple couples, in a congregation make the decision to adopt a child from foster care, there are many others in the same congregation who would make some commitment, especially with encouragement from their faith leader, to provide support to the adoptive family. Some of these supports can be reflective of the skills or background of the individual offering to help such as medical or counseling assistance, or providing a meal or baby-sitting to the family.

Post-adopt support plans should include provisions for potential medical, dental and mental health care needs for the adopted children and their parents. A respite care plan for adoptive parents should be in place to provide meals and time out when needed. Also, parent support groups and child support groups should be formed that consist of peers from the congregation who can relate to their unique situation. Another effort to consider would be to organize those from the faith-based community who have adopted foster children to provide support and encouragement to other partner congregations.

Other ways that a faith community can provide post-adopt support or build-up their congregation would be to:

- Conduct an adoption ceremony in front of the whole congregation.
- Recognize the key supporters within the congregation who are engaged with the initiative.
- Organize a congregational support and mentoring project to "wrap around" the adoptive couple.
- Showcase the new family on regular basis, promoting and encouraging more adoptions.
- Organize and lead a prayer support network for the adoptive families within the congregation and with other associated faith communities.