

Customer Service and Customer Support
Protocol for Adoption Services



August 25, 2009

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10 Commandments of Customer Service

Adoption success begins with a stated commitment to customer service and support for adoptive families.

Governor Charlie Crist has made the adoption of Florida's children in state care a priority of his administration. In addition to the appointment of Florida's Chief Child Advocate to manage the Governor's Office of Adoption and Child Protection, the *Explore Adoption* marketing campaign was launched to raise awareness about adoption statewide, and to entice Floridians to consider the prospect of adopting one or more of Florida's children in care, especially teens, sibling groups, minorities and children with medical needs.

As a requirement to this investment of taxpayer's dollars, and to ensure our best return on investment, a reasonable customer service protocol or standard operating procedure for Florida's adoption process should be in place for all our service providers. This protocol requires an appropriate response to all inquiries from our prospective adoptive families.

Our goal is to make sure every customer (potential adoptive parent) is properly informed and feels comfortable and confident about the adoption process in Florida. We need to give our worthy customers the information they need in a simple, professional and timely manner in order for them to take the next step in adopting one of Florida's children. Studies show that our very first point of contact with our customers will determine the success of our efforts to encourage Floridians to consider public adoption.

Furthermore, our commitment to customer service must continue throughout the adoption process. Our prospective adoptive parents need guidance and encouragement to keep them engaged. They also need to be provided with realistic timeframes and expectations. The adoption process can be overwhelming and our families may become frustrated when trying to navigate the system.

Post adoption support is also a critical element of the customer service protocol. Families adopting children whose experience includes foster care placement will face significant challenges in coping with abuse and neglect, attachment and residual loss issues. Agencies need to have services in place and available to families to successfully meet the life long challenges of adoption. These services include: education and training, mental health assistance, and supportive assistance.

Definitions:

Customer – A person who buys- especially one who buys regularly; an individual with whom one must deal.

Customize – Make according to individual specifications.

Service – The act of helping, supplying or providing; Work done on behalf of persons, organizations, or institutions.

Support – To maintain by supplying things necessary for existence; to sustain under trial or affliction; to uphold or advocate; to serve as a foundation.

Customer Services – Assistance and other resources that a company provides to the people who buy its products or use its services.

Customer Satisfaction – A qualitative measure of performance as defined by customers that meets their basic requirements and standards.

Customer Satisfaction Index – Degree of satisfaction provided by the goods or services of a company as measured by repeat or sustained customers.

The goal is to boost customer satisfaction and keep current customers rather than devoting additional resources to chase potential new customers.

Customer Satisfaction Survey – Tool used to help understand customers needs and desires; provides actionable feedback; identifies factors that enhance relationships, loyalty and success.

“What you ask the customer is important. How, when, and how often you ask questions is also important. But, the most important thing about conducting a customer satisfaction survey is what you do with the answers.” F. John Reh, About.com

Protocol – A preliminary draft or record of transaction; standard operative procedures or instructions; a code of correct conduct.

Stakeholder – A person or group that has an investment, share, or common interest. Stakeholders include investors, customers, suppliers and employees.

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning reported that over the last decade, the inclusion of “consumer voice” has become a vital part of the child welfare practice. Most states have started developing internal mechanisms for inclusion in their programs. In a subsection on stakeholder involvement, it reads, “Consumer voice can provide vital perspectives on what is “working” and what is not. Further, advocacy efforts not directly affiliated with an agency have also produced policy and practice changes.”

Background:

Victor Groza, PhD, in an article appearing in the National Child Welfare Resource Center, wrote about the increase of international adoptions as a result of families being dissatisfied with the public adoption process. Groza stated, "There are several things public agencies can do to increase the number of families who adopt from the public system rather than internationally. These include:

- friendly and responsive customer service.
- predictability about the adoption process.
- support during the waiting period.

Customer service begins with the initial call from a prospective adoptive family. When a family calls, it is important to return the call in a timely fashion. When a family contacts to agency, it is critical to be welcoming and helpful. If agency staff say that they are going to do something, such as mailing an invitation or information or calling back, the agency must ensure that the action actually happens.

Families need consistent, ongoing support throughout out the process. A phone call to offer a kind words, an invitation to an event, or an e-mail lets them know that they have not bee forgotten.

Good customer service does not end with an adoption; it is essential post adoption. There are unique health issues and well as behavioral, developmental, and psychosocial issues well-known from research with children adopted from the public system and internationally.

...After all, the purpose of both domestic and international adoption is finding a family for a child.

"Good Customer Service: What Public Welfare Workers Should Know About International Adoptions", printed in *The Roundtable, Volume 23, Number 1.*, 2009 National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption, Spaulding for Children, MI, www.nrcadoption.org

Overcoming Barriers to the Adoption of Foster Children

Jeff Katz, Listening to Parents Project

Questions at the State Level

Q. The first call a prospective parent makes to learn about adopting a child from foster care can be intensely emotional. It may be the culmination of years of losses, such as failed relationships or infertility, and may embody a lifetime's hope for becoming a parent. Is the first person to answer a call from a prospective adoptive parent capable--- and appropriately trained--- to provide the necessary support and information to a prospective parent?

Q. What is the attrition rate for people interested in adopting a child from foster care? Of all the people who call about adopting a child from a state's foster care system, what percentage eventually do adopt?

Q. What methods, if any, does a state use to measure customer satisfaction among prospective adoptive parents? Do they make use of customer questionnaires? Focus groups? Operational audits? "Mystery shopping"? How does a state use feedback from adoptive parents, and prospective adoptive parents, to shape a customer friendly adoption process?

Questions at the National Level

Q. What is the federal government doing to force states to measure parent satisfaction with the adoption process and improve the way they treat prospective adoptive parents?

Q. Under the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, states have a financial incentive to increase the numbers of children adopted from foster care. What can state and federal governments do to create incentives for individual workers to create adoptions for children on their caseload?

Research at Harvard University and the Urban Institute has documented that in any given year, 240,000 Americans call social service agencies for information about adopting a child from foster care. Yet only 10,000 to 15,000 of these will actually adopt. Interviews and focus groups with prospective adoptive parents have documented a range of barriers that keep prospective adoptive parents from completing the process. These include difficulty in reaching the right person at an agency, unpleasant initial contacts with agency staff, negativity about the children designed to scare off "uncommitted" parents, and frustration with agency bureaucracy.

What ever the reason that public child welfare agencies treat prospective parents so poorly, one fact is clear: Few public child welfare agencies use traditional customer service feedback methods to assess the quality of their services.

To prevent the steep attrition of prospective adoptive parents and make the adoption process more accessible, public child welfare agencies can adopt a number of strategies. Elements of best practice include:

- Soliciting input from adoptive and prospective parents in every aspect of the adoption process. This can include surveys, focus groups, and interviews.
- Involving experienced adoptive parents in the design of the adoption process.
- Guaranteeing that prospective parents can reach the right person on the first try. Agencies should have a specialized adoption hotline where a well-trained and friendly individual can assure callers of a direct and immediate response.
- Emphasizing recruitment rather than screening in the beginning stages of the adoption process (initial calls, information meetings). Early in the process, the risks of alienating a potentially suitable parent far out weighs the risk of allowing an inappropriate parent to begin training.
- Addressing prospective parent's emotional needs during their initial contact with the agency. For most prospective adoptive parents, their first contact with a public child welfare agency is very emotionally charged. The first person to speak with prospective parents should be professional staff with a background in counseling and specialized training in adoption.
- Developing support systems for prospective parents as they go through the adoption process, such as matching programs with adoptive parents. As one prospective parent put it, "This is a very impersonal process for a very personal thing."

Customer Service

I. Friendly and Responsive Customer Service

Below is the process that will be used by the Adoption and Information Center. A similar procedure ought to be considered for implementation within each CBC lead agency in order to create continuity throughout the system. The various points of contact, interaction and cooperation between the Center and the lead agencies are crucial to the advancement of this standard operating procedure. The CBC lead agencies are asked to do a self-assessment and then put into effect any changes necessary to comply with and enhance this process.

A. Phone Etiquette

1. All calls received are answered live by one of the Center's adoption information specialists.

***NOTE:** The Center uses its professional automated system only for missed calls and after-hours calls. All missed calls are returned by the next business day. A log of all missed calls is kept with the date and time of the incoming call, and the date and time the call was returned.*

2. The customer is greeted in a warm and friendly manner. The adoption information specialist (AIS) should identify himself by name and agency.
3. The contact information of the caller is obtained and entered into database for follow-up purposes, including name, phone, address and email. The AIS should refer to the caller by name during the conversation.
4. The caller is asked what motivated them to call and how they got the number. This is for future adoption recruitment purposes.
5. The stated and implied needs of the customer are sought. Do they have an approved home study? Are they interested in a specific child? Do they want basic information about adoption? Do they have specific questions?
6. If prospective adoptive family has an email address, a receipt or "thank you for your interest in adoption" message should be forwarded. This message could contain information specific for the callers area or circuit.

At this point, based on the conversation and the answers to the questions, the particular type of prospective adoptive parent will be realized. There are 2 kinds of prospective parents who inquire about adopting from our foster care system. They are:

- A. Those who already have a current and approved Home Study, and are interested in a specific child. (73%) Go to A.
- B. Those who are interested in adopting from foster care, who have questions and possibly want to begin the process. (27%) Go to B.

A. Calls from those with a current and approved Home Study, interested in a specific child.

1. The prospective adoptive parent is asked by the AIS for the Exchange ID number of the child they have identified to help the Center determine which **CBC lead agency** needs to be contacted. The prospective adoptive parent is told what area of the state the child is located in.

***NOTE:** All children must be listed on Florida's Adoption Exchange no later than 30 days after the child is legally available for adoption. (§ 409.167 F.S.) See Attachment.*

2. The prospective adoptive parent is given the current and updated contact information of the person (**adoption recruiter**) at the **CBC lead agency** that has been identified to specifically receive and monitor families with a Home Study.

***NOTE:** The **adoption recruiter** should be able to, in a timely manner, accept the Home Study, process and distribute it to the appropriate match team. Attached is the list of current **CBC adoption recruiters** that the Center is presently using. Please verify the accuracy of this information and update with the Center as needed. See Attachment.*

3. The prospective adoptive parent is directed by the AIS to contact the provider who has an official copy of their Home Study and have them send a copy of it electronically to the adoption recruiter.

***NOTE:** If the Home Study is not current, the provider will work with the prospective adoptive parent to update it.*

4. A referral notice is sent from the Center to the **CBC adoption recruiter**, via email, with the contact information of the prospective adoptive parent, as well as the Exchange ID number of the specific child identified.
5. Within 72 hours, the **CBC adoption recruiter** will acknowledge that they have received the referral and have followed-up with the prospective adoptive parent.
6. After 72 hours, if the Center has not received acknowledgement from the **CBC adoption recruiter**, the Center will contact the **CBC lead agency** by telephone to determine the status of the referral.
7. The **CBC adoption recruiter** will enter all prospective adoptive parents, who were not successfully matched with a child in their jurisdiction, in the Family Section of the Adoption Exchange System (AES) for further consideration by others.

B. Calls from those interested in adopting from foster care, with questions about the process.

1. The adoption information specialist at the Center will briefly explain and answer questions about the adoption process. Use the “How the Process Works” reference page.

***NOTE:** The prospective parent is given a realistic time expectation of how long it takes to adopt one of Florida’s children (compare to a 9 month pregnancy). The possibility of actually adopting a child identified on the Exchange or on a Heart Gallery is discussed, as well as the average profile of available children. Also explained is the background check and personal nature of the process, including the costs and benefits available.*

2. The Center mails to the prospective adoptive parent a general adoption information packet. This packet will include: 1) a Cover Letter that clarifies any misconceptions about public adoptions, 2) the Contact information of their local **CBC adoption recruiter**, 3) a Copy of “How the Process Works”, 4) an Adoptive Home Application with instruction to contact the Center with any questions, and 5) Other pertinent information. See *Attachments*.
3. As directed, the prospective adoptive parent will fill out the Adoptive Home Application and send it back to the Center via mail or fax.
4. Immediately upon receipt, the Center will forward the application electronically to the **CBC adoption recruiter**.
5. Within 72 hours of receipt of application, the **CBC adoption recruiter** will respond to the prospective adoptive parent with an invitation to register and attend orientation class. The **CBC adoption recruiter** will provide a schedule and locations of orientation classes and MAPP training seminars.
6. The **CBC adoption recruiter** will contact the Center to verify the application was received and acted upon.
7. If no verification is received 72 hours after sending the application to the **CBC adoption recruiter**, the Center will follow-up with the **CBC lead agency** via telephone to determine the status of the application.

B. Web Sites

The use of technology provides the prospective adoptive parent with control to seek information on the public adoption process in the state of Florida as well as to view waiting children. Working families need the flexibility to search at home during the evening hours. Email is another way to respond to prospective families and send information electronically.

The website for the Office of Adoption and Child Protection will have a dedicated clearing house with all the necessary information needed for dissemination. This website page will be updated with the latest information on a regular basis. The CBCs will participate in keeping this information current and it can then be used as a resource when needed.

Each website will have a basic and uniform “Q and A” page to help answer any simple and anticipated questions that will most likely arise in a first-time call. This same information will also be on the Office’s website for consistency.

A webpage specific to the CBC or agency can post local information including orientation meetings, pre-service trainings, and other adoption events.

1. Websites: (insert your local CBC Web site, *Explore Adoption*, and AIC)
2. Heart Galleries: (insert local and state HG Web sites)

C. Navigator

Families experience the public adoption process as bureaucratic and impersonal. They express frustration as they try to navigate the system. CBCs should have:

1. A “manual” containing general information, requirements and expectations, and a resource guide.
2. A “Web site” to locate information, post questions, or blog.
3. **AND** a “navigator” to assist them through the adoption process (pre and post) in addition to the other tools.

A navigator could be designated staff or a volunteer, such as a successful adoptive parent. The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) reports success in using navigators in post-adoption support as well. They stated the importance of adoptive parents to have mentors with adoption experience. Some agencies utilize adoptive parents in their orientation meetings, trainings, and as speakers for panels and meetings. Adoptive parents bring a level of credibility, practical advice, and specific recommendations on local services and providers. A navigator is not to provide case management.

II. Predictability of Process

Prospective adoptive families need to be provided with realistic expectations on the public adoption process as well as on the children in the foster care system. This includes listing all requirements for adoption approval in the State of Florida and an anticipated timeline for the process.

This information can be distributed in a brochure, posted on the website or included in a handbook or guide for the family.

A. How Process Works

Once you decide to pursue adoption, you will begin the approval process. Because the process varies slightly in different areas of the state, some of the steps may also vary.

- **Orientation:** The first step in some areas is an orientation meeting for prospective adoptive parents. At this meeting the prospective parents may meet experienced adoptive or foster parents and one or more counselors who will provide an overview of the whole process, timeframes involved and the training schedule.
- **Background Check:** The FDLE/FBI background screening should be done after orientation and before MAPP training if possible.
- **Preparation Course or MAPP:** The Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) is a ten-week training and preparation course that adoptive parents are required to successfully complete. These training sessions are usually scheduled at night or on the weekends. The purpose of the training is twofold---for parents to assess themselves and their family and to explore and learn about adoption issues.
- **Home study:** A home study includes the following parts:
 1. You will be required to provide information about your health.
 2. Background checks at the local, state and federal level will be conducted, including having your fingerprints screened at the federal level.
 3. References will be requested from your employer, school officials if you have children in school and character references from individuals who have known you and your family.
 4. The counselor will visit your home one or more times to complete the home study. If you have children, it will be important for the counselor to ask them a few questions about what they think about adoption. Some of the topics that will be discussed with you and your spouse, if you have one, are:
 - Why do you want to adopt?
 - Describe your childhood.
 - What are the strengths of your marriage?
 - How do you think a new child in your home will alter your lifestyle?
 - Describe your financial situation.
 - Describe your parenting style/philosophy.
- **Approval:** All of the information is gathered into a home study packet and sent for approval to an adoption specialist. When your application has been approved, you will be notified.
- **After Approval:** You may continue to look at the available children and attend recruitment activities, especially the picnics or events when foster children who are

available for adoption are in attendance. Notify your counselor when you are interested and need more information about a certain child or sibling group.

- **Match:** When the needs of a child or sibling group is matched with the strengths of your family, your adoption counselor will discuss with you the pre-placement activities that must occur. The official placement in your home will occur when you, the child and counselor determine that the child is ready.
- **Placement Supervision:** After a child is placed, a counselor must make monthly visits in order to assess the child's adjustment and if new or additional services are needed. The supervision period ends when the counselor provides "consents to adopt" to your attorney.
- **Finalization:** Your attorney will schedule a hearing before a judge. At this hearing the adoption will be legalized and the child will legally become part of your family.

B. Frequent Adoption Orientations

National and local media campaigns about adoption inform the public that there are thousands of foster children waiting to be adopted. When prospective adoptive families realize that adopting is a prolonged process, that some children they have seen on a web site or know about in foster care already have a potential placement resource identified, and/or that there may be a wait for a match with a child, many lose interest or feel disenfranchised. It is also discouraging to families if they are told that they will have to wait months until the next cycle of training to begin with the adoption process. Clearly it is better to minimize waiting times.

Agencies must have sufficient staff to handle the adoption orientations and pre-service trainings. Another solution would be to utilize experienced adoptive parents and foster parents. Some agencies provide compensation to their adoptive or foster parents for their roles in recruitment or training. Explore opportunities for grants through national adoption agencies such as NACAC.

C. Pre-service Training

Recruitment and Orientation meetings should be designed to help families "select in" not to screen families out. Pre-service training for adoptive families should include a self-assessment tool where they can make informed decisions about adopting or fostering.

Pre-service training is designed to educate prospective parents about specific emotional, developmental, and behavioral needs of children who enter the child welfare system. During this time, families are being prepared for their role as foster parent or adoptive parent and possibly beginning their home studies.

Additional training that is more adoption specific (such as Adoption 101) should be available while they are waiting for placement. Once a child has been identified, adoptive parents should be provided child-specific training to be able to meet the specific needs of the child (such as parenting a child who has experienced trauma, attachment deprivation, or physical/sexual abuse).

III. Support During the Waiting Period

A. Engagement

When families do have to wait, another good customer service practice is keeping them engaged. Strategies of engagement might include keeping prospective adoptive parents informed about:

1. How long it will take for a child to be placed in their home.
2. What to expect and what the next steps will be.
3. Defining concurrent planning and options to foster and/or open up their acceptance criteria.
4. Adoption events and local, state, and national web sites where they can view available children, including the AdoptUsKids web site at www.adoptuskids.org.
5. Arranging times to touch base or sponsoring support or “while you wait” groups.
6. Connecting them with mentors who are experienced adoptive parents.
7. Or, in some other way, conveying that your agency values them, understands their anxiety during the process, and that staff are there to support them before during and after placement, all of which will collectively result in higher retention rates. Families can be referred to other opportunities such as mentoring or serving as Guardian ad Litem to become more familiar with the children as well as the child welfare system.

B. Best Practice

“Treat your employees with respect and chances are they will have a higher regard for customers”

1. Professional Development

Working with the public can be challenging. Adoption professionals working in the child welfare system need consistent supervision and sincere appreciation. This will not only affect best practice but also retention of employees.

CBCs should ensure that adoption staff have;

- Current forms and updated policies
- Knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform all tasks assigned
- Access to consultation with mental health providers or legal counsel in making important decisions
- Certification in adoption competency
- A philosophy of “You Gotta Believe” as it relates to adoption practice

2. Inter-jurisdictional Issues

Adoption is a state-wide program. To find homes for waiting children, recruitment efforts must extend across adoption agencies, CBCs, and Circuits. It is the adoption providers responsibility to build relationships and networks so that adoptive families will not find closed doors and children do not experience closed opportunities.

The Department of Children and Families is implementing the following procedures to remove barriers and facilitate interagency cooperation:

- Data system to link agencies across the state of Florida
- Unified Family Home Study that will be accepted by all agencies and expedite the process for foster parents or relatives who adopt
- Working Agreements that include placement and supervision
- Monitoring for Compliance

C. Survey

It is important to solicit feedback from your adoptive parents throughout the adoption process. Some agencies are required to complete client satisfaction surveys as a part of their Council on Accreditation procedures.

Adoptive parents need to be able to express their concerns in an appropriate format, and one that lends to response. Adoption support groups provide another venue for feedback, training and support.

A sample Customer Satisfaction Survey is included in their protocol for modification by your agency.

Project Adoption Success: “...Survey Says!”

Project Adoption Success was a two-day workshop addressing customer service in public adoption. Forty-five participants were invited from across the state of Florida, representing all roles and responsibilities in the public adoption system. The outcome was successful as it provided an opportunity to engage and participate in a solution-based workshop with adoption agencies, adoption-related staff, and adoptive parents.

The project began with a pre-workshop survey of those individuals to identify specific areas of concern. There were six major systemic challenges identified within the state of Florida’s public adoption process. They included:

1. Call-backs on Inquiries
2. Families Being Prepared to Adopt
3. Professional Knowledge, Skills and Abilities
4. Legal, Paperwork, and Casework Issues
5. Inter-jurisdictional issues
6. Transitional and Post-Adoption Services

In the workshop, a facilitator engaged the participants in activities to identify essential solution criteria and to develop goals for each challenge. Goals:

1. Effective engagement and retention of prospective adoptive parents who are appropriate for adopting children in the foster care system from inquiry through post-adoption
2. Families will have the knowledge, skills and capacity necessary to provide for an adopted child’s welfare.
3. Florida will have adoption-competent professionals providing services and involved in the decision-making process.
4. Establish/implement a state-wide, uniform best practice for all professionals engaged in the decision-making for permanency options for children.
5. Children with the goal of adoption will achieve permanency in a timely manner through increased cooperation between all entities involved in adoption throughout the state of Florida.
6. All adoptive families will have early and ongoing access to quality transitional and post-adoption services statewide.

Customer Service Survey:

Customer Satisfaction Rating					
	Excellent	Good	Average	Fair	Poor
Staff was available in timely manner.					
Staff greeted you, was courteous, and offered to help					
Staff answered your questions					
Staff provided information, realistic expectations and time frame					
Staff showed knowledge of the services and system.					
Staff offered pertinent advice.					
Staff offered resources and referrals					
Staff was positive and committed to process					
Overall, how would you rate our customer service?					
Open-Ended Questions					
What did you like best about our customer service?					
How could we improve our customer service?					
Is there a staff person you would like to commend?					
Name:			Reason:		
Thank you for taking time to complete our customer service survey.					

Source: <http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/customerservice/a/customersurvey1.htm>
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Recommendations

We are asking you as a Community Based Care agency to implement the following procedures (if not already implemented) to make the process of adopting a child in foster care more efficient and effective.

The Adoption Information Center has developed a phone etiquette/protocol that you should find helpful and worthy of replicating, for your Community Based Care agencies. Some of you already use similar procedures; others may need to make small adjustments in the way you respond to families.

1. Use a live person to answer adoption inquiry calls (if possible), if not, return calls within one business day.
2. Keep a log of calls missed and after hour's calls, with date and time of incoming call and time call was returned.
3. Greet the family in a warm and friendly manner. The adoption recruiter should identify his or herself by name and agency and should refer to the caller by name during the conversation.
4. Obtain contact information from the caller to be able to follow-up on the call. Name, phone, address and email.
5. Ask the caller what motivated them to call and how they obtained your number. This is especially helpful as you plan adoption recruitment campaigns.

The two most frequent inquiries the Center receives from prospective parents are:

1. Families that have a current and approved Home Study and are interested in a specific child or children (73%).
2. People who are interested in adopting from foster care, who have questions and possibly want to begin the process (27%).

The current protocol that the Adoption Information Center uses for currently approved families interested in a specific child is to refer that family to the child's case manager. In many cases the Center will receive over 20 and as many as 100 inquiries on a particular child. It is not realistic for most case managers to respond to numerous family inquires.

Proposed Procedure

1. It is our recommendation that each Community Based Care agency use a central point of contact (designated person) to receive and distribute Homes Studies to the appropriate match teams. This would also be the liaison between the agency and the family and takes the burden from the case manager.
2. The Center will provide contact information to the inquiring family. A referral with family contact information and child Adoption Exchange information will be forwarded to the local CBC contact person.

3. The family will then be directed back to the agency that completed their Home Study and ask that agency to submit their home study to the CBC that conducting the match staffing.
4. The CBC contact person should acknowledge within 72 hours that they have received the prospective family contact information and have followed-up with the family.
5. If the Center has not received acknowledgement from the CBC contact person and a receipt of the referral, the Adoption Information Center will contact the CBC agency by telephone to ascertain the status of the referral.
6. Families need to know the outcome of the match staffing and why the decision was made. This information can be shared with the prospective adoptive family by phone or by email. The message should be delivered in a strengths/needs format such as *“Based on the child’s needs the team decided to place with a two parent family...”*.
7. Thank the family for their interest and ask if you can retain home study for other children you are recruiting for.
8. The CBC contact person will enter families not selected on the Family section of the Adoption Exchange System (AES) to be considered for other children.

Process for families making an initial inquiry about adopting children in foster care:

1. The Adoption Information Center will explain the adoption process to the inquiring family. The Specialist will explain time frame of the process, approx 6-8 months from beginning of Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) class to Home Study approval.
2. Cost (usually none or very little)
3. Average profile of children available (mostly older children and sibling groups).
4. The Adoption Exchange website and search strategies i.e.: age, sex and level of handicap. www.adoptflorida.org

The Center will refer the family to their local CBC adoption recruiter. The Center will collect contact information from the family, name, phone, email and mailing address.

The Center will mail the family a packet of general adoption information including a “standard” Department of Children & Families Adoptive Home Application (attached). The family will be informed that they may return the application to the Adoption Information Center. All applications returned to the Center will be forwarded to the local CBC Adoption Recruiter electronically. The Adoption Recruiter will in turn contact the family to schedule orientation or MAPP training. The Adoption Information Center will not screen families; this is better left to the CBC Adoption Staff. If the Center has not received a response in 72 hours, the Center will follow-up with the CBC Adoption Recruiter and the prospective family to determine status of inquiry.

Agency Assessment for Customer Service

We are going to ask you to take a look at the adoption process you use locally and make adjustments as needed to ensure every prospective family or “customer” feels comfortable and confident about the adoption process in Florida.

1. Ensure that all adoption eligible children are listed on the Adoption Exchange System with accurate and current information.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

2. When possible, the Adoption Recruiter and inquiry phones are answered directly by live Adoption Recruiter.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

3. Assign a specific point of contact to accept and process adoption Home Studies.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

4. List all families that have submitted a Home Study, but not selected on the Family Section of the Adoption Exchange.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

5. Adoption Recruiter and identified Home Study contact person acknowledges receipt and follow-up with families referred by the Adoption Information Center.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

6. Have regular orientation meetings (at least monthly) for prospective families and post dates, times and places on the agency website.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

7. Include the Adoption Exchange ID# on all child specific promotional material, including Heart Galleries.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

8. Have a system in place to survey or gather feedback from adoptive families.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

9. Have a website with local information including “Q and A’s” and adoption events and trainings.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

10. Provide families with realistic information about the adoption process that includes an anticipated time line.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

11. Utilize recruitment activities that help prospective families select in rather than screen out.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

12. Have a resource guide or handbook for adoptive families.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

13. Signed agency agreements that remove barriers to interjurisdictional placements.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

14. According to Florida Statue, provide the most current Reunion Registry Brochure to adoptive parents and others as indicated.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

15. According to Florida Statue, distribute the Adoption Benefit Brochure to all adoptive families.
 - Current practice Can implement Cannot implement; explain: _____

Customer Support

Successful adoption programs require the recognition that adoption is a life long process, the understanding that there will be life long challenges associated with adoption, and the commitment to all adoptive families that supportive assistance will be available when needed. Agencies should have in place:

- An intake process for families to return for needed services,
- A designated case manager to respond to adopted children and families post-legal finalization,
- A system to notify families of continued training, adoption workshops, and support group meetings, and
- A resource guide that includes adoption information and adoption competent service providers.

Education and Training

Adoptive Parents greatly benefit from education and training related to adoption issues, with an emphasis on strategies for handling loss, grief, relationship building, and acting out behaviors. Continued parent training must be included in post-adoption support to equip adoptive parents with the skills needed to meet the developing needs of children. Various types of parent training options include providing adoption resource centers, lending libraries, newsletters, annual adoption conferences, and on-going training and workshops for parents.

Mental Health Services

Adopted children and their parents continue to need mental health services beyond the adoption finalization. Mental health services help children (and their adoptive families) cope with their childhood, foster care and adoption experiences, and the behavioral aftermath of these experiences. Services include individual counseling, family counseling, medication management, educational supports, and temporary residential treatment. Intervention should be tailored to the specific emotional and behavioral needs of children in the child welfare system (such as reactive attachment disorder). Research studies have provided data suggesting that adoptive parents and adoptive practitioners have a significant need for mental health providers to be knowledgeable about adoption issues. Mental health providers who are adoption competent will provide the most successful treatment. Research also indicates a higher success rate for adoptive families when the therapeutic focus shifts from child-centered to family-centered.

Adoptive parents have identified the need for a coordinated effort between child welfare, mental health, and education professionals regarding the provision of post-adoption services for our children and their adoptive families. School issues (including academic performance, behavior management, educational supports, social skills, etc.) are a significant concern for adopted children.

Adoption competency is necessary for all who make decisions that impact the adopted child and the adoptive family. CBCs should require that contracted mental health providers have certification in adoption competency. The adoptive families must be able to access their services through Medicaid, Magellan, or therapeutic funds.

Supportive Assistance

Post-adoption support refers to services and assistance offered to families after the legal finalization of their adoption. Although there is not an open case in dependency court or within the adoption agency, the ongoing needs of the child continue. The fundamental goal is to ensure that children remain stable in their adoptive families and that with supportive assistance and services there will be no adoption disruptions. Post-adoption services are provided by lead agencies, sub-contractors, and/or fee-for-service staff members. Services identified to support the adoptive placement include: case management, financial assistance, medical coverage, education and counseling, support groups, and respite care.

Every circuit and community based care agency providing adoption services should also provide for adoption support groups for their adoptive families.

These support groups could be:

- Offered to waiting families, available during the transition or placement process, and after finalization
- Held in conjunction with a foster parent association or support group
- Led by an adoptive parent or by an agency liaison
- Supported by a faith-based community
- Operated through a contract with another program (but still connected to adoption)
- Supplemented by a newsletter or Web site

A secondary benefit of an adoption support group is that participation provides the venue for building relationships that could lead into opportunities for respite care

Recommendations

In 2008, the Department of Children and Families convened a Task Force on Child Protection. The Task Force accepted the following recommendations of its Permanency and Placement Stabilization Workgroup. These recommendations include:

Minimum Standards for Provision of Post Adoption Services:

1. A sufficient number of accessible adoptive parent support groups that meet at least once a month with a CBC liaison assigned to each group to assist, when needed, in maintaining the groups over time. An adoptive parent support group for Spanish-speaking adoptive parents is necessary in some areas. In rural areas where there are insufficient numbers of adoptive families for a support group, a monthly or quarterly newsletter may be established and maintained.
2. At the time of finalization, the adoptive parents must be provided a letter or document that explains the process for accessing post-adoption services, including specific contact information when a family has a questions or concerns about subsidy, Medicaid, or services.
3. One or more post-adoption case managers are needed to temporarily assist adoptive parents. At a minimum, temporary case management is needed for emotional support, assisting in accessing services, including medical subsidy funds, changes to subsidy or Medicaid and information and referral services. *Beginning in September*, cases providing post-adoption services will be documented in FSFN (the state data system) by the assigned case manager and reports of this workload will be available.
4. A process is in place to inform adoptive parents of training/ educational opportunities occurring locally, in the state of Florida and nationally related to adoption or specific behavioral, mental health, or educational needs.
5. A process is established that allows a post-adoption case manager to assist a child protective investigator with an investigation that involves an adopted child. The assistance may include an assessment for services related to the needs of the child, other children in the family or the adoptive parents.
6. With the assistance of an adoption competent facilitator, adopted teen support groups may be established to assist adopted teens and teens waiting for adoption to discuss and handle adolescent issues related to the adoption process.

The Governor's Office of Adoption and Child Protection recommends that every CBC implement the Minimum Standards for Provision of Post Adoption Services. The Department of Children and Families could provide incentives and support to the CBCs as well as monitoring for compliance. The implementation of these recommendations would better prepare parents to adopt the children waiting for forever families as well as better support those families after adoptions are finalized.

Agency Assessment for Customer Support (Post-Adoption Services)

We are going to ask you to take a look at the services you have in place to support adoptive families (education/training, mental health assistance, supportive assistance).

1. A designated case manager to respond to adopted children and families
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

2. An intake process for families to return for needed services.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

3. A system to notify families of continued training, adoption workshops, and support group meetings- such as a Web site
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

4. A resource guide that includes adoption information and service providers.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

5. A support group for adoptive parents (and/or foster parents) that meets on a regular basis.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

6. Provisions for other supports such as mentors and respite care.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

7. Assess to mental health services and providers who are certified adoption competent.
 Current practice Can implement Cannot implement;
explain: _____

It is the Governor's hope that you have incorporated or are willing to incorporate the above listed procedures. After completing your agency assessment for both Customer Service and Customer Support, please sign below.

Printed Name

Title

Signed

Agency

Phone

mail

If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact:

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Additional copies of this Customer Service and Customer Support Protocol for Adoption Services can be found at:

www.flgov.com/adoption_abuse_prevention

Acknowledgements:

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The Ten Commandments of Great Customer Service- Susan A. Friedman

1. **Know who is boss.** You are in business to service customer needs, and you can only do that if you know what it is your customers want. When you truly listen to your customers, they let you know what they want and how you can provide good service. Never forget that the customer pays our salary and makes your job possible.
2. **Be a good listener.** Take the time to identify customer needs by asking questions and concentrating on what the customer is really saying. Listen to their words, tone of voice, body language and most importantly, how they feel. Beware of making assumptions- thinking you intuitively know what the customer wants. Do you know what three things are most important to your customers?
3. **Identify and anticipate needs.** Customers don't buy products or services. They buy good feelings and solutions to problems. Most customer needs are emotional rather than logical. The more you know your customers, the better you become at anticipating their needs. Communicate regularly so that you are aware of problems or upcoming needs.
4. **Make customers feel important and appreciated.** Treat them as individuals. Always use their name and find ways to compliment them, but be sincere. People value sincerity. It creates good feelings and trust. Think about ways to generate good feelings about doing business with you. Customers are very sensitive and know whether or not you really care about them. Thank them every time you get a chance.
5. **Help customers understand your systems.** Your organization may have the world's best systems for getting things done, but if customers don't understand them, they can get confused, impatient, and angry. Take time to explain how your systems work and how they simplify transactions. Be careful that your systems don't reduce the human element of your organization.
6. **Appreciate the power of "Yes".** Always look for ways to help your customers. When they have a request (as long as it is reasonable) tell them that you can do it. Figure out how afterwards. Look for ways to make doing business with you easy. Always do what you say you are going to do.
7. **Know how to apologize.** When something goes wrong, apologize. It's easy and customers like it. The customer may not always be right, but the customer must always win. Deal with problems immediately and let customers know what you have done. Make it simple for customers to complain. Value their complaints. As much as we dislike it, it gives us an opportunity to improve. Even if customers are having a bad day, go out of your way to make them feel comfortable.
8. **Give more than expected.** Since the future of all companies lies in keeping customers happy, think of ways to elevate yourself above the competition. Consider the following:
 - What can you give customers that they cannot get elsewhere?
 - What can you do to follow-up and thank people even when they don't buy?
 - What can you give customers that is totally unexpected
9. **Get regular feedback.** Encourage and welcome suggestions about how you could improve. There are several ways in which you can find out what customers think and feel about your service.
Listen carefully to what they say.
Check back regularly to see how things are going.
Provide a method that invites constructive criticism, comments and suggestions.
10. **Treat employees well.** Employees are your internal customers and need a regular dose of appreciation. Thank them and find ways to let them know how important they are. Treat your employees with respect and chances are they will have a higher regard for customers. Appreciation stems from the top. Treating customers and employees well is equally important.

Source: <http://marketing.about.com/od/relationshipmarketing/a/crmtopten.htm>

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