

KNOW THE FACTS

Adopt a Child and You Can Transform a Life

International and national events during the past year have heightened public awareness about adoption, sometimes exacerbating misconceptions or distracting the public from the fact that across the United States there are children waiting today to be adopted. In Virginia alone, 1,500



are available for adoption out of the public foster care system. These children are in foster care through no fault of their own. They are the victims of

abuse, neglect, or abandonment. They cannot be safely reunited with their biological families and greatly need -- and deserve -- a forever home of their own.

Thousands of children -- especially older youth -- still wait for families. But time is running out. Once children in foster care reach age 9, they are less likely to be adopted. Research shows that many of them will face significant obstacles in the future, including homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, depression, substance abuse, and the lack of educational attainment. These outcomes impact all of society, which bears the costs at the local, state, and national level.

While their circumstances and backgrounds vary, the demographics of foster care children awaiting adoption have been changing. As of September, 27.8 percent of the children in foster care were between the ages of 16 and 18. Another 16.8 percent were between the ages of 13 and 15. Forty percent are African-American, and more than half are male.

Every day that a waiting child remains in foster care, his or her chances of being adopted grow dimmer. We must act now to eliminate the barriers that prevent older youth and children of color from finding their permanent homes.

Virginia has been making positive strides in finding adoptive families for foster care children. The commonwealth has, for example, instituted a range of services to prevent children from entering foster care in the first place. As a result, Virginia has one of the lowest rates of children in the system.

However, great challenges remain. Children spend more time in Virginia foster care than in many other states, and Virginia still has the highest percentage of youth who are "aging out" without being adopted.

In an effort to reverse this trend, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) is emphasizing adoption of

these youth who are so greatly at risk. Through effective collaborative partnerships with private child-placing agencies like Children's Home Society of Virginia, VDSS has embraced policies that utilize child-specific recruitment techniques that are designed to identify adoptive families for older youth.

Addressing the barriers and misperceptions about the foster care adoption process is challenging -- especially when it comes to dispelling the barriers that discourage people from adopting older children. In order to fully address the need to adopt these children, federal and state policymakers must work harder to address the long-term financial, educational, emotional, medical, and mental health needs of families who adopt from foster care. And the commonwealth must put additional policies and funding in place to encourage more public-private partnerships, which are so crucial in recruiting and training adoptive families.

The private sector can also be part of the solution. Employers are encouraged to create an adoption-friendly workplace by offering adoption benefits and by supporting employees who adopt. The academic community should work in partnership with child-welfare organizations to create innovative approaches

that address the needs for more effective family recruitment strategies.

The faith community should strive to increase its constituency's awareness of the plight of waiting children and embrace adoption as a part of its mission. And we should all learn (and share with others) the facts about adoption out of foster care, which include:

- Every child is adoptable, including older children who have been waiting the longest. While many of the children in foster care have special needs, they all deserve the chance to grow up in a safe, loving, permanent home.

- Adopting from foster care is affordable. Most child welfare agencies cover the costs of home studies and court fees, and provide post-adoption support and subsidies. Thousands of employers offer paid leave for employees who adopt. In addition, federal and/or state adoption tax credits are available to most families, as well as support and other post-adoption resources.

- You do not have to be wealthy, married, or own a home to adopt. You do need a commitment to parent and a capacity to love.

- Adoption means forever. Birth parents whose rights have been terminated do not have the legal right to have their children returned to them. Adoption transforms lives, one child at a time. While the face of those in foster care has changed, the need is no less compelling. And the solution -- permanent, adoptive families -- is within reach.

- Nadine Marsh-Carter is the president and CEO of Children's Home Society of Virginia. She is also the adoptive parent of two children. To learn more about adopting from foster care, visit www.chsva.org or www.dss.virginia.gov.

