

State of New Jersey

Department of Children and Families

Division of Child Protection and Permanency

Office of Adoption Operations

Adoptive Parent Handbook



May 2013

Introduction

The Office of Adoption Operations is a licensed adoption agency within the State of New Jersey, Department of Children and Families, Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P). The Office of Adoption Operations is approved to provide adoption services to children in the public child welfare system, which includes placing children into adoptive homes as well as providing other adoption related services in New Jersey. Each year, the Office of Adoption Operations finalizes the adoptions of hundreds of children; the majority of whom are adopted out of the foster care system. Yet despite the success in ensuring permanency for many children, there are still children who are in need of an adoptive family. The decision to adopt a child and fully accept that child as your own is not often made with ease. There is a lot to consider before you make such a commitment. This handbook will provide you with important information regarding general characteristics of available children, who can adopt and a step by step guide regarding the adoption process.

Who Are New Jersey's Waiting Children?

Although we are successful in finalizing the adoptions of nearly 1000 children every year, many children do not have permanent families and are in need of an adoptive home. Some children adopted through the DCP&P have special educational, emotional or medical needs. Families are needed for sibling groups, pre- teens and teenagers from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Who Can Adopt?

The DCP&P will not preclude a person from becoming a licensed adoptive parent based solely on their culture, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, marital/civil union or domestic partnership status.

- You may be single, married, in a domestic partnership or a civil union.
- You can own your own home or rent a house or an apartment. The child does not need his/her own bedroom. The child can share a bedroom with another child of the same sex but must have his/her own bed and enough space for his/her personal belongings.
- You must be able to financially support and care for your family.
- You must reach age 18 before the adoption is finalized and you must be at least ten years older than the child you wish to adopt.
- You do not need to be a US citizen, but you must have legally entered the United States and plan to stay long enough for the child's adoption to occur.

Contact 1-877 NJ FOSTER and a representative of Foster and Adoptive Family Services (FAFS) will ask you a few questions about yourself, your family and your interest in fostering/adopting a child.

Step by Step Guide

The adoption process is a very exciting one. A general step by step guide to this process includes:

- The Adoption Licensing Process
- Waiting to hear about the availability of a child
- Selection and Pre-placement Process
- Adoption Subsidy
- Adoption Finalization

STEP ONE: The Adoption Licensing Process

In order to adopt a child in the state of New Jersey, prospective adoptive parents who reside in New Jersey must become licensed as a Resource Family Care Provider. This process, known as the Home Study and Licensing Assessment process, may take up to five months and consists of meeting with DCP&P staff to complete:

- Resource Family application
- State, federal and local criminal history checks for all adult household members and frequent adult visitors
- Child Abuse Record Information background checks for all adult household members and frequent adult visitors
- Comprehensive assessment
- Reference checks (personal, medical, employment, school/child care center) for all for members in the household
- PRIDE pre-service training for resource family applicants
- Life-safety inspection of your home

Upon the completion of the Home Study Assessment packet, the entire packet is forwarded to the Office of Licensing. The OOL will contact you to arrange for an inspection of your home. The home inspection includes:

- Interviews with household members
- Review of required documentation
- Life-safety inspection of your home

STEP TWO: Waiting to hear about the availability of a child

The anticipation of waiting for a child to be placed in your home can be a difficult time period for prospective adoptive parents. Unless a family has identified a “waiting child” it is difficult to predict how long the wait will be. The length of time that a family waits to be selected for the placement of a child in their home depends primarily on two things:

- The type of children being referred for placement.
- The flexibility of the family as to the child's special needs and family background. The more accepting a prospective adoptive family can be, the sooner they will be considered for a child's adoptive placement.

STEP THREE: Selection and Pre-placement Process

Licensed home studies are kept on file in a statewide "match system." This system allows for the preliminary matching of adoptive children and their prospective parents. When a family is selected for a child, DCP&P staff will meet with prospective adoptive parents, usually in their home, to present comprehensive information about the child. This includes the child's family background, developmental history, personality, hobbies, special interests, interpretation of medical and psychological findings and any special circumstances that may impact on their adoptive placement. DCP&P has an obligation to provide full disclosure to all prospective adoptive parents. The family also is advised of the child's legal status and eligibility for adoption subsidy.

After the pre-placement interview, if both the family and DCP&P are comfortable with the match, the child, if old enough, is told of the prospective family and given an opportunity to express feelings and anxieties about living in the proposed home. Once the caseworker and the child feel ready to proceed, arrangements are made for the family to meet and to begin visiting regularly with the child. These visits are scheduled according to the individual needs of the child and of the adoptive family, so that the experience is made as comfortable as possible for everyone involved.

Most adoptive children require a series of visits in familiar surroundings, to minimize any separation trauma that they may experience. Prior to and during the visits, the child's caseworker is responsible for helping the child understand the adoption plan. As soon as the agency, the family and the child feel comfortable about the placement, arrangements are made for the child to officially join the adoptive family in their home.

STEP FOUR: Placement and Supervision Process

Once the child is placed in the home, he or she becomes part of the adoptive family. Regardless of the age of the child, this new family member will have an impact on the adoptive family's system. It is important for the family to understand that there may be some early apprehension and discomfort on both of their parts. A caseworker will visit the home within five days of the placement, and at least monthly, thereafter. The worker will discuss what adoptive parents can expect during the period of time preceding the adoption finalization, and will make every effort to offer support and to link the family with community resources that will help to facilitate the child's acceptance into his or her new family and community.

It is quite normal for adopted children to require special emotional support at any given time in their lives. There will be an expectation that a school aged child and their family attend counseling with a professional therapist during the adoption supervision period. More specifically, this counseling will occur with trained adoption clinicians who focus on assisting with adoption transition issues. The worker will make arrangements for that therapy. The worker also will be available to assist with issues that may arise for the child and the family at this

transitional time.

DCP&P is legally required to supervise the placement of a child in an adoptive home for at least six months before the legal consent for adoption can be issued and the adoption finalized.

STEP FIVE: Adoption Subsidy

If a child is subsidy eligible, adoptive parents will receive a monthly subsidy payment upon placement until the child turns 18 or until the child completes high school (or its equivalent) whichever is later. Such payments may not exceed the cost of providing comparable assistance in foster care.

Adoption subsidy benefits are available to help the adoptive parents care for the adoptive child by providing:

- A regular monthly payment including clothing allowance to help parents meet everyday need.
- A one-time payment that covers the legal fees related to adoption.
- Medicaid coverage for the child to assist with any physical or psychological condition that is not covered by the family's own insurance.
- Children with handicaps may be able to receive special services for a specific medical, health or equipment need, which may be approved on a case-by-case basis.
- Out-of-state medical coverage (for most states).
- A Federal Tax Credit the year the adoption takes place (conditional).

Preschool child care services may be available for subsidy eligible children under six years of age, whose adoptions were finalized after January 1, 2005. Child care services are funded by the Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development (while funds are available), for adoptive parents who work or attend school full-time and meet the eligibility requirements.

STEP FIVE: Adoption Finalization

Unless there are specific issues which must be addressed prior to the finalization, the consent to adoption is usually issued by DCP&P, six months after placement. The consent is forwarded to the adoptive parent's attorney, who files a legal petition to adopt and secures a date for the final hearing. The Division caseworker completes the court report and, in most cases, attends the final hearing, during which the judge makes the adoptive parents the legal parents of the child. Subsequent to this, the attorney obtains an amended birth certificate for the child, with the name as given by the adoptive parents. The original birth certificate is placed under seal by the Bureau of Vital Statistics.

Although DCP&P does not directly provide post adoption services, there are a number of contracted agencies in the State of New Jersey that provide these services.

STEP SIX: Resources

Post Adoption Services

Families created by adoption are [unique] from families created by birth (1) in that adoption families may experience issues related to:

- Separation and loss
- Attachment
- Unmatched expectations
- Family Integration
- Identity formation

Post Adoption Services can be essential to maintaining family functioning. It is important that family members understand stressors and respond accordingly as emotions are interconnected and have a reciprocal effect on family functioning. DCP&P has contracted with several agencies to ensure families are supported after finalization. For more information on these services, contact New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearinghouse at 1.877.4ARCHNJ (1.877.427.2465) or <http://www.njarch.org/>.

Adoption Registry

The DCP&P Adoption Registry facilitates contact between birth family members and adoptees whose adoptions were processed by DCP&P or by its predecessor agencies: the Division of Youth and Family Services, the Bureau of Children's Services, the State Board of Child Welfare or the State Board of Children's Guardians. Registry services are not available to members of the adoption community whose adoptions were processed independently (through attorneys) or through private adoption agencies.

The Registry provides the following services:

1. Registration
2. Non-identifying Background Information
3. Limited Search Services
4. Information and Referral

1) Adult adoptees, adoptive parents of minor adoptees and birth parents who wish to register must complete an application form that includes identifying information about themselves and the person(s) they wish to contact. Once an application is processed, the information is entered into the Registry. The Registry will not release this information but will notify the registered persons if the family member they are seeking applies to the Registry.

Registrants may also send cards or letters to be attached to their Registry application forms. This material remains in the Registry and can be forwarded when the intended family members contact the Registry.

Applications can be obtained from the Registry and should be updated when last names, current address or phone numbers change. Registrants may withdraw their application at any time.

2) The Registry can provide non-identifying information to adult adoptees and adoptive parents of minor adoptees. Non-identifying information obtained from case records includes adoptees' birth statistics and placement history.

It may also include:

- Medical and social characteristics of birth family members
- Family health histories
- Certain facts and circumstances related to adoptive placement
- Summaries of case record material. Actual copies of case records cannot be released.

The Registry can provide birth family members with information about events leading to the adoptee's adoptive placement. Identifying or current information about the adoptee or the adoptive family cannot be released.

3) Upon request of adult adoptees and of minor adoptees who have the written permission of their adoptive parents, Registry staff will conduct limited searches to locate birth relatives, based on information in the case record. In-depth private investigative services are not available.

Searches are not conducted on behalf of birth family members. Any birth family member located by a search must provide identification and written permission before Registry staff can honor requests to release identifying information or arrange contact with the adoptee.

4) Adoption Registry staff members are available to discuss various aspects of the adoption and search experiences. Information and referrals on support groups, agencies, reading materials and search techniques is also provided upon request.

How Long Will Adoption Registry Services Take and How Much Does It Cost?

The time needed to process requests for Registry application forms and non-identifying background reports varies based on the demand for services and the ability to access case records. On average, it takes two to three weeks to verify whether or not the applicant is eligible to register or to receive non-identifying information. It takes approximately 90 days to obtain non-identifying information. Searching usually takes several months, depending on material available in the case record and the cooperation of agencies, individuals and other contacts. There is no charge for services provided by the DCP&P Adoption Registry.

Contact Information:

Adoption:

For information regarding the adoption process and the children who are waiting to be placed in an adoptive home, please contact 1-800-99-ADOPT or <http://www.state.nj.us/njfosteradopt/foster/requirements>

Foster and Adoptive Family Services:

1-877 NJ FOSTER

Post Adoption Services:

New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearinghouse at 1.877.4ARCHNJ (1.877.427.2465) or <http://www.njarch.org/>.

Registry:

NJ Department of Children and Families
Division of Child Protection and Permanency
Adoption Registry Coordinator
PO Box 717
Trenton, NJ 08625-0717
dcfadoptionregistry@dcf.state.nj.us
609-888-7474
Fax: 609-984-5449

References

1. National Resource Center for Adoption (2012). Retrieved from www.nrcadoption.org/.