

Strengthening Adoption Services for Alabama's Children



Celebrating Alabama's Progress
Certified Public Manager[®] Program
CPM Solutions Alabama 2025



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Project Team Members



Charles “Clay” James

Alabama Department of Environmental Management



**Alabama Dept
of Corrections**

Victoria Mitchell

Alabama Department of Corrections



John Corbitt

Hunter Harris

Lance Underwood

Alabama Department of Revenue



**OFFICE OF
INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY
STATE OF ALABAMA**

Becca Estes

Office of Information Technology



Thomas Dix

Teah Griggs

Mary Mulcahy

Retirement Systems of Alabama

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Karen Smith

Project Sponsor and Deputy Commissioner
Child and Family Services
Alabama Department of Human Resources

Holly Christian

Child and Family Services
Alabama Department of Human Resources

Laura Garvin

Director, Wendy's Wonderful Kids
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

Deanna Jewell

Senior Adoption Program Manager
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

Sonya McGowan

Wendy's Wonderful Kids Recruiter
Alabama Department of Human Resources

Andrea Glass

Vice President, Programs
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

Jennifer Justice

Sr. Vice President, Program & Business Dev.
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

Introduction

Every child deserves the chance to grow and flourish with a safe, loving, and permanent family. Yet for thousands of children in foster care across the United States, this chance depends on the strength and responsiveness of our Child Welfare systems. In Alabama, hundreds of children in the Child Welfare system find permanency through adoption each year. A number of those children do not have an identified adoptive resource, and the Department utilizes all tools available in an effort to achieve permanency through adoption for this population of children in permanent custody of the State. Children in custody with the permanency plan of Adoption with No Identified Resource typically belong to a large sibling group, have significant medical needs, significant mental health issues, are older youth, etc. This white paper explores how strategic partnerships, particularly those between state-level agencies and partnerships with programs like the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption Wendy's Wonderful Kids® (WWK) program, can significantly improve permanency outcomes, especially for children often overlooked due to age, disability, or sibling status.

Our key objectives are to highlight the urgent need for strong adoption services, assess the current landscape of adoption in Alabama, and champion for scalable, evidence-based models for reform. Central to this discussion is the WWK program, a nationally recognized program that achieves lasting placements through child-focused recruitment and strong collaboration with state partners.

By illuminating the challenges and opportunities in Alabama's adoption process, this paper offers practical, actionable strategies for policymakers, social service professionals, and community advocates. Together, we can build a more effective and compassionate adoption framework, one where every child finds their forever home.

The Role of State Agencies in Supporting Adoption Services

It is the Alabama Department of Human Resources' (ADHR) goal to ensure that children in Alabama's foster care find safe, stable, and loving homes. The first path to this is to have the biological family address the reasons why foster care is needed for their children. ADHR's primary goal, when safely possible, is to return all children in foster care to their biological family. (Adoption Services Project Team, 2025)

Key Functions and Responsibilities of State Adoption Agencies

Once the parental rights of a child have been terminated (voluntarily relinquished or legally removed) the child is eligible for adoption. Children age 14 and older must consent to adoption. Adoption Services within ADHR recruits adoptive families for children within state foster care who can no longer be reunited with their biological families and who have no other identified resource. The department works to recruit and prepare families willing to adopt children in foster care. (Adoption Services Project Team, 2025)

ADHR recruits and prepares families for adoption through structured programs and outreach efforts designed to increase the chance that children in foster care will find stable, loving homes. These efforts include targeted recruitment of families, thorough training of targeted families, and ongoing support for prospective adoptive families. ADHR actively seeks and recruit families through different strategies. (Alabama Department of Human Resources Foster Care, n.d.)

ADHR oversees much of the adoption process, striving to ensure children receive permanent, nurturing homes. Their responsibilities include matching children with adoptive families based on their needs, as well as working collaboratively with the juvenile and probate courts across the state as related to termination of parental rights when appropriate and adoption

finalization. Some of the adoptions are for children with “Special Needs.” ADHR defines “Special Need” as any child aged five or older, children with a background of parental substance abuse, mental illness or mental retardation that places them at risk, children with various degrees of mental, physical or emotional problems, sibling group of two or more placed at the same time with the same family. ADHR helps families with determining if the child or children qualify for financial assistance like an adoption subsidy and Medicaid. (Alabama Department of Human Resources Foster Care, n.d.)

Before a child is placed by ADHR to a foster or adoptive family, that family is given training on different topics like trauma informed care or ways to recognize the impact of trauma on an individual and emphasizes understanding of their experiences. The prospective family home must be inspected to ensure that it is suitable for the needs of the child. There is no fee charged for the adoption home study and 30 hours of training for the child placement. After adoption ADHR offers access to support services like counseling, educational resources, and parenting workshops to help families with the unique challenges that come with adoption and help parents with peer support groups. (Adoption Services Project Team, 2025; AdoptUSKids, n.d.)

Through these efforts, Alabama DHR seeks to ensure that adoptive families are well-prepared, supported, and equipped to provide stable homes for children in foster care.

The Importance of State Level Support in Overcoming Barriers to Adoption

State level support is the keystone to a strong effective adoption system. Each state is responsible for the governance of their child welfare system, which includes foster care and adoption. Their policies will determine how quickly children will move from temporary care to permanent homes.

State legislation and regulations can either hinder or streamline the adoption timelines, increase or reduce the government red tape and ensure whether each county has consistent adoption practices or not.

The state has the ability to fund critical services like caseworker staffing, family training and post adoption support for families. An underfunded system faces different types of delays such as worker burnout and, worst of all, poor adoption outcomes. Also, states can fund subsidies and incentives for adoptive families, especially those that are adopting children with special needs.

Collaboration Models Between State Agencies and Non-Profit Organizations

ADHR uses programs like “Open Your Heart, Open Your Home”, “AdoptUSKids”, and “Heart Gallery Alabama” as recruitment and retention initiatives to help identify children for families that are wanting to become foster and/or adoptive families. ADHR also partners with local organizations, advocacy groups and churches to raise awareness of the need for additional foster and adoptive families. ADHR has also added online inquiry forms that allow potential families the ability to start the adoption process digitally. (Adoption Services Project Team, 2025)

The “Open Your Heart, Open Your Home” program managed by ADHR is one of the program’s designed to encourage individuals and families to become foster and adoptive parents. The program focuses on finding loving, nurturing homes for the children in foster care. The program collaborates with the nationwide AdoptUSKids program to find families for the adoptable children in foster care by giving the children a platform to be seen by potential adoptive families. (Alabama Department of Human Resources Foster Care, n.d.)

Another platform for helping Alabama’s children currently in foster care to find families looking to adopt is Heart Gallery Alabama (HGA). Children featured within the HGA entered care through no fault of their own and have experienced some form of trauma or loss. While this should not define who they are, unfortunately it often does. They deserve connections with adults who can provide them with unconditional love and commitment to help them grow throughout their lifetime. HGA also has two programs that provide support for children in the system, the Supporting Opportunities to Achieve & Rise (S.O.A.R.) mentor program and the Heart Squad. The S.O.A.R. mentor program, in partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Alabama, is designed to create lasting connections for Alabama’s youth in foster care who are at risk of entering adulthood without a lifelong relationship with a stable adult. Young people who leave foster care—with little support and few skills—are at risk for a host of negative outcomes. In this program children ages 12 and up are matched with mentors in a one-on-one relationship. The HGA’s Heart Squad is made up of a group of dedicated volunteers who want to make a positive impact on our youth. The Heart Squad ensures that children featured on the Heart Gallery feel special on their birthday by providing personalized gifts and hosting individual birthday parties that support a child’s sense of self-worth. (Heart Gallery Alabama, n.d.)

For 16 years AdoptUSKids has partnered with the Ad Council to produce a public service campaign to raise awareness of adoption of teens in foster care. The campaign highlights the many reasons to adopt a teen. AdoptUSKids not only provides a nation-wide platform for adoptive children to be seen, but it is a source of information for foster families, adoptive families, and state caseworkers. They are the only federally funded “photo listing” service for connecting children waiting for adoption with families. Their mission is to “raise public awareness about the need for foster and adoptive families for children in the public child welfare

system,” and to assist state agencies like ADHR to recruit, develop, and support foster and adoptive families. (AdoptUSKids, n.d.)

ADHR case workers are provided with the use of the AdoptUSKids’ website to assist in finding families ready to adopt or foster children. The website provides professional resources such as helping a caseworker to create effective support services for current and potential foster and adoptive families, and parent support groups. The website also aids with customer service strategies, developing an effective response system, techniques on how to use and support interjurisdictional child placement, and the use of social media to recruit and support families. Caseworkers can be connected to caseworkers from other states’ adoption services, or private services for “peer to peer” training and information sharing. Assistance is also provided for strategies and steps to address barriers and provide coaching calls. AdoptUSKids also provides professional events for case workers on a variety of topics, as well as other information like archived webinars, tip sheets, guides and manuals located in the professionals’ section of their website. (AdoptUSKids, n.d.)

In addition to Alabama’s recruitment and retention initiatives, the state also provides free comprehensive support to the adoption constellation and foster families through two organizations, the Children’s Aid Society of Alabama, Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections (APAC) program and the Alabama Foster & Adoptive Parent Association (AFAPA).

The APAC provides services that are available to all members of an adoptive family. The three major services areas APAC provides information for are Preparing/Seeking to adopt, Family Services, and Training and Resources. Information in these support service areas ranges from expert guidance pre-adoption to community networking events, family counseling, and the largest adoption and foster care library in Alabama. (Children’s Aid Society of Alabama, n.d.)

In addition to APAC, the AFAPA works to promote the partnership that exists between the ADHR and parents by acting as a unified voice in serving, advocating, promoting, and encouraging foster parents and children. Both ADHR and AFAPA realize this partnership is critical to the well-being of Alabama's at-risk children. The mission of the AFAPA is to empower foster and adoptive parents by offering training and information that will enable them to advocate for, and meet, the needs of children in their care. (Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parents, 2024)

ADHR also collaborates with a nonprofit organization, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, through their Wendy's Wonderful Kids program, to enhance adoption efforts. This partnership uses a child focused recruitment for adoptive families for children who face challenges in adoption placement. (Adoption Services Project Team, 2025)

Current State of Adoption Services for Alabama

While committed to securing permanent homes for children in foster care, ADHR faces state-level challenges that impact their overall effectiveness. Here are some of the issues and most common barriers in the adoption process.

Challenges Facing Adoption Services at the State Level

According to the North American Council on Adoptable Children, many children in Alabama's foster care remain for extended periods. Children and families wait an average of two- and one-half years before the adoption is finalized. This delay can have a negative impact on the child, and their family's emotional well-being. In addition to waiting for extended periods, there is a disproportionate adoption outcome for older children (9+ years old), children with special needs, and minority children compared to younger (0-2 years old) children. While

African American children make up a sizable portion of those awaiting adoption, there are notably fewer among finalized adoptions. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2025)

Adoption disruption is another barrier in adoption services. Some adoptions fail post-finalization due to families changing their minds about adoption due to unforeseen life challenges or broken expectations for adoption. This can lead to heavy emotional strain on the family, and in some cases, the reentry of the child back into the foster system. Process disruptions, such as unexpected or non-disclosed needs of the child, are situations that families cannot or are unprepared to accommodate. Some examples are added legal complications, conflicts of interest, adoption law amendments, inaccurate or incomplete paperwork, objections from either the birth family or former foster family, the courts receiving evidence that the prospective adoptive parents are abusive or neglectful parents, or there is involvement in illegal activity. (Alabama Free Will Baptist Children's Home, 2025)

Other common barriers in the adoption process can include emotional readiness and expectations, where families underestimate the emotional and behavioral needs of adoptive children, especially those with traumatic histories. Many adoptive parents have voiced a desire for more local support groups made up exclusively from other adoptive families. They believe that new adoptive parents could greatly benefit from the wisdom and experiences of those further along in their journey. These seasoned parents could offer guidance on what signs to watch for, how to listen for deeper emotional cues, and how to navigate the tough questions that inevitably surface with time. Importantly, they emphasized the value of being in a space where everyone understands the unique challenges of bringing a child, often carrying unseen emotional wounds, into a family of unfamiliar faces. Even though some of the partnerships programs have these types of groups, they expressed the need for ADHR to develop and help support local Alabama

groups. (Adoption Services Project Team, 2025; Children's Aid Society of Alabama, 2024; Families Rising, 2009)

Cultural competency can be a barrier for families that have not properly prepared for transracial adoptions and identity-related issues. One of the major barriers of the adoption process is the potential financial burdens that come with the adoption process. While public adoptions can be low-cost, private adoptions and legal fees can be too much for many families. Insufficient mental health resources are a barrier not only for the adoption process, but for everyone that needs this type of medical help. Adoptive families often struggle to find therapists that understand the issues that children face in foster care. (Alabama Free Will Baptist Children's Home, 2025; Moyer,2025)

Data on Adoption Outcomes and Success Rates

ADHR has been able to make noticeable progress for adoptions in Alabama. In fiscal years 2020 and 2021, Alabama set two record highs for adoptions from foster care by finalizing 814 and 783 adoptions respectively.

Since 2018, the number of children exiting foster care into biological family guardianship has increased by over 300%, helping to maintain the children's family and community ties. According to the ADHR, in 2024 74% of foster children placed in a permanent home were reunified with biological parents or relatives, showing strong family preservation and reunification efforts.

As indicated in the table below, between 2018 and 2022, the number of children in foster care was trending downward for Alabama. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2025) A significant increase occurred after 2022 due to a change in the way states reported the

number of children in care over the age of 17 to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). (Alabama Department of Human Resources, 2025)

Child Welfare Data	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
# of Children in foster care	5844	5616	5400	5260	5828	5875*
# of Children adopted	734	815	789	772	741	715*
ALOC	32.58	31.40	32.21	33.46	33.56	33.68

*Figure 1: Child Welfare Data 2019-2024 *(VOICES for Alabama's Children, 2024)*

The length of a child's stay in foster care, indicated above as Average Length of Care (ALOC), depends on the individual situation. The average over the six-year period is 32.77 months, or just over two and one-half years (2 years, 8.77 months). (Alabama Department of Human Resources, 2025) Some may only need to stay in foster care for a couple of days before they are returned to their biological family. Others need longer foster services before they can be returned to their biological family. Unfortunately, there are also children whose biological parents have given up their parental rights or have been removed. For Alabama, these are the children that make up the total population in foster care that are eligible for adoption. In 2023, there were over 220 children eligible for adoption. (Alabama Department of Human Resources, n.d.)

Wendy's Wonderful Kids: A Proven Model for Success

Since its inception in 1992, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) has aimed to increase the number of adoptions for children waiting in the U.S. foster care system. In 2004, DTFA launched the WWK program to further this goal. The WWK program is unique for several reasons, one of which is the fact that it represents a corporate/philanthropic commitment to solving a social problem. DTFA employs a business model in its philanthropy through its emphasis on producing measurable results in terms of the numbers of children matched with

prospective adoptive families, placed pre-adoptively, and adopted. At the same time, with its particular focus on harder-to-place children, DTFA recognizes that adequate time and resources are needed to achieve adoption (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2025).

The Partnership Between ADHR and WWK

ADHR continues its partnership with WWK (hosted by DTFA) to expand its Office of Adoptions to help match children who have more significant needs and can be more challenging to match. ADHR's program has expanded from two WWK recruiters to seven recruiters in 2023. (Alabama Department of Human Resources, 2023) Recruiters often work long hours, handle administrative tasks, and attend meetings off-hours. The recruiter qualifications include, but are not limited to:

- At least a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW), counseling, human development, or a related human-services field is required. A master's degree in social work (MSW) is preferred but not always mandatory — some roles accept a bachelor's plus adoption/foster-care experience.
- Recruiters typically have 2–4 years of experience in child welfare, adoption, foster care, or related services. They must understand and navigate local child-welfare systems, adoption laws, and foster-care regulations.
- A clean background check (state and federal/FBI) is essential.
- Recruiters must have access to a personal vehicle with valid insurance and driver's license, as travel, sometimes overnight, is required for visiting children, families, and stakeholders.

- Expected to manage small caseloads (typically 12–15 “active” children; total may be 20–25), allowing for personalized, consistent engagement. Must build trusting relationships with children, families, welfare staff, and community partners.
- Strong communication, organization, and case documentation skills are essential. Ability to work with trauma-informed and collaborate across diverse cultures and agencies.
- Recruiters are required to collect and submit monthly data, track recruitment plans, and meet performance targets (e.g., a set number of matches and finalized adoptions per year).

These qualifications position recruiters to deliver personalized, evidence-based recruitment that significantly improves the odds for long-waiting children in foster care.

WWK Program and Mission

The WWK program’s goal is to help find loving, permanent homes for children in foster care, especially those who are older, have special needs, or are part of sibling groups. The program works by hiring and training dedicated adoption recruiters who focus on each child’s unique needs and find the right family for them. Instead of waiting for families to come forward, these recruiters actively seek out the best matches for the longest-waiting children in foster care. The program’s impact is life-changing: children who might otherwise age out of foster care without a family get a chance to be adopted into safe, supportive homes.

Children are eligible for WWK services if they have a permanency goal of adoption or are free for adoption, and do not have an identified adoptive family. The program is designed to serve children who are considered challenging to place in adoptive homes due to age, sibling group membership, or disability. (Malm, K. et. al., 2011)

WWK Child-Focused Recruitment Model

The WWK program's success is based on its child-focused recruitment model. Using this model, recruiters work to place a child with someone already in their personal network (e.g., extended family, neighbors, teachers, or previous foster placements) where there is a pre-existing relationship. This extra care increases the likelihood of a successful adoption. The recruiter focuses on the child's history, wants, and needs – making them feel seen as a person and not just as another case. A recruiter's priority is to respect the child's voice, privacy, and dignity while finding them the right adoptive family. The motto of the WWK program is “Unadoptable is Unacceptable,” and the objectives below outline the priorities of WWK recruitment model:

- **Focused on finding the right family for the child:**

WWK professionals begin their search for a permanent family within a child's network of family, including extended family members, friends and others who already care for them and can meet their needs. WWK recruiters also reach out to the communities in which these children live, helping to achieve permanency which includes adoption or legal guardianship. If an extended family reunification is a safe option, it is always explored first.

- **Committed to respecting a child's voice, privacy and dignity:**

WWK recruiters are committed to building a trusting relationship with the young people they serve by helping them unpack fears and addressing misconceptions about adoption.

- **Rooted in the belief that every waiting child is adoptable:**

WWK recruiters work with smaller caseloads of 12–15 children to ensure that every child receives the time, resources and support they deserve.

This model has shown to be effective on a consistent basis. The data below supports the conclusion that children in the WWK program are three times more likely to be adopted, given the focus on that child's specific needs and situation:

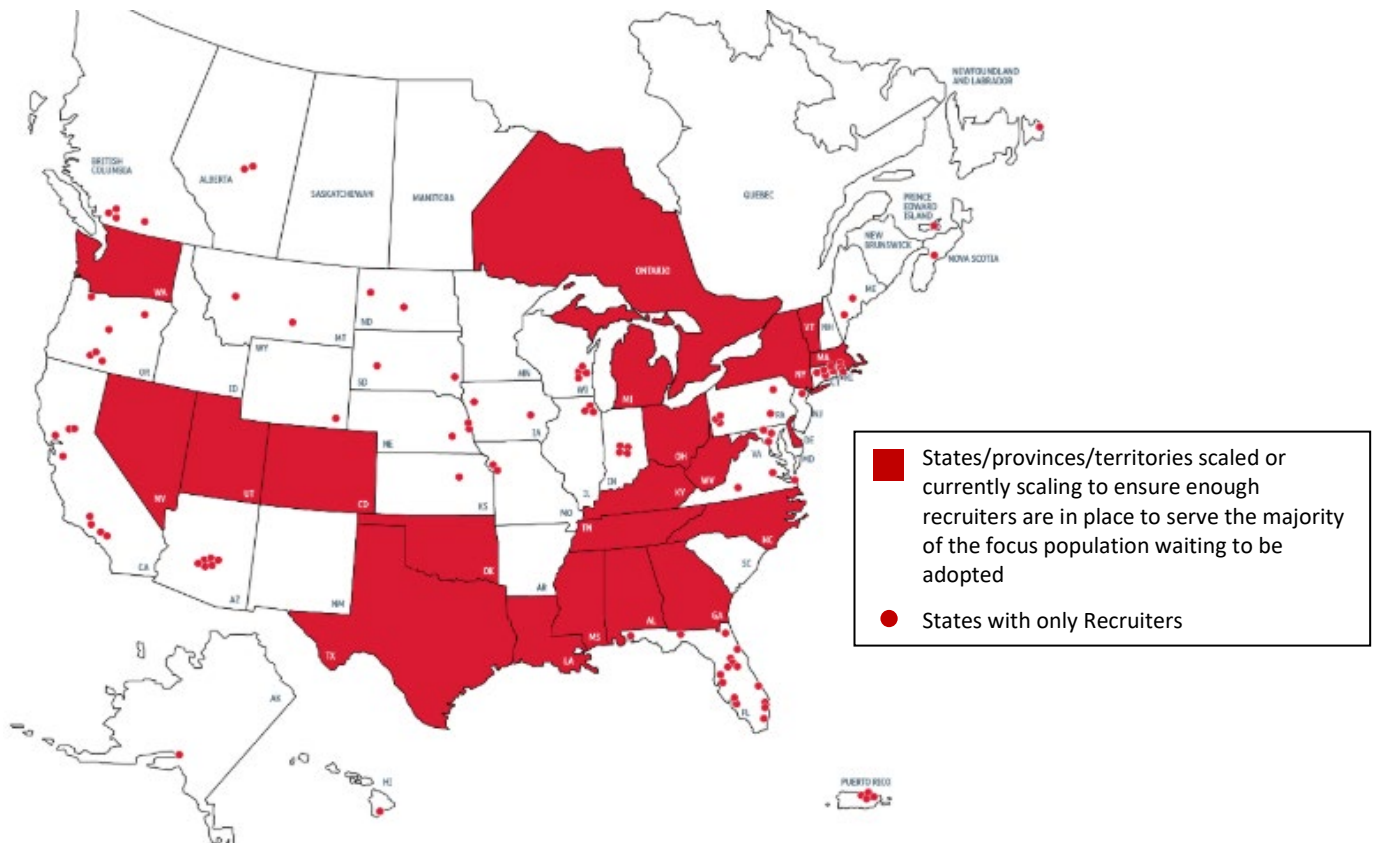


Figure 2: Overall Reach for WWK Program

WWK program results to date: (US and Canada)

- 21 states and provinces
- 15,500+ adoptions
- 550+ adoption recruiters trained, and
- Implementing a proven model by research to be up to 3x more effective at serving the longest-waiting children

Children currently served by WWK (U.S. and Canada):

- 91% - Are older than age 8
- 35% - Have had six or more placements
- 27% - Have been in foster care for more than four years, and
- 87% - Had minimal or no foster care adoption recruitment efforts on their behalf before being referred to WWK (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, n.d.)

As of 2024 Alabama has:

- 7 WWK recruiters with a case load of 15-20 children
- Approximately 6000 children in foster care, and
- 119 children eligible for WWK adoptions

Strategies Employed by WWK to Enhance Adoption Outcomes

The program model components include the initial case referral, building a relationship with the child, conducting a case record review, assessing the child, ensuring the child and prospective family are prepared for adoption, network building, developing and updating a recruitment plan, and performing a diligent search for adoptive resources. The table below compares child-focused recruitment activities which are required by the WWK model with the traditional recruitment activities frequently used in child welfare agencies. (Malm, K. et. al., 2011)

Recruitment Activity	Child-Focused WWK Model	Child-Specific
Initial Child Referral	Recruiters contact the child's caseworker to introduce the role of WWK, gather initial referral information, establish a date to begin review of the child's case file, and schedule an initial meeting with the child.	Summary of child's history only

Relationship With Child	Recruiters meet with the child monthly, at a minimum, to develop trust and openness and facilitate their assessment of the child's adoption readiness, prepare the child for adoption, and develop an appropriate recruitment plan, preferably in person and one-on-one.	Contact with child focused on recruitment activities
Case Record Review	Recruiters conduct an in-depth review of the existing case file. An exhaustive case record review may take several days.	Summary of child's history only
Assessment	Recruiters determine the child's strengths, challenges, desires, preparedness for adoption and whether the child has needs that should be addressed before moving forward with the adoption process.	Not typically the job of the recruiter
Adoption Preparation	Recruiters ensure that the child is prepared for adoption. During the matching process, the recruiter is expected to assure that the prospective adoptive family is adequately prepared to meet the needs of the child.	Assumed to have been completed when recruitment begins
Network Building	Recruiters meet with significant adults and maintain regular and ongoing contact with the child's caseworker, foster parent, attorney, CASA volunteer, teacher, therapist, relatives, etc. Monthly contact with the child's caseworker is expected.	Minimal involvement beyond approval of recruitment activities
Recruitment Plan	Based on the case file review, interviews with significant adults, and the input of the child, recruiters develop a comprehensive customized recruitment plan or enhance the existing recruitment plan.	Existing recruitment tools used for children as appropriate
Diligent Search	Recruiters conduct a diligent search for potential adoptive families and identify connections to additional resources. Recruiters conduct aggressive follow-up with contacts identified, with the approval of the child's caseworker.	Assumed to have been completed when recruitment begins

Figure 3: Child-Focused WWK Model

The Children Served by the WWK Program

The WWK program is designed to serve the children least likely to be adopted. Almost half of the children served by the WWK program are:

- Age 12 or older
- African American (non-Hispanic, 42%)

- Typically male (58% male versus 42% female)
- Have a sibling or their sibling is already in the program (40%)
- Have at least one disability (45%), and
- Have more than one diagnosed disability (23%), with the most common disabilities being mental health disorders and/or learning disabilities. (See Figure 4.)

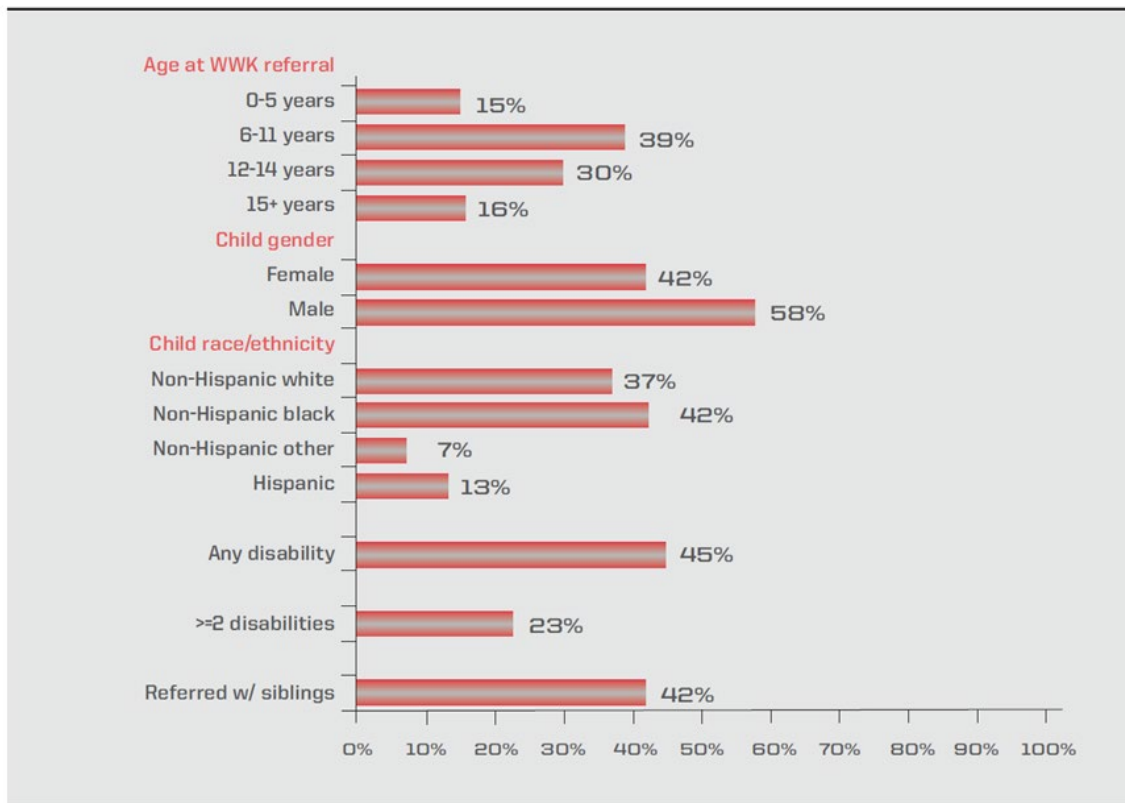


Figure 4: Characteristics of Children Served by WWK, as of April 2010

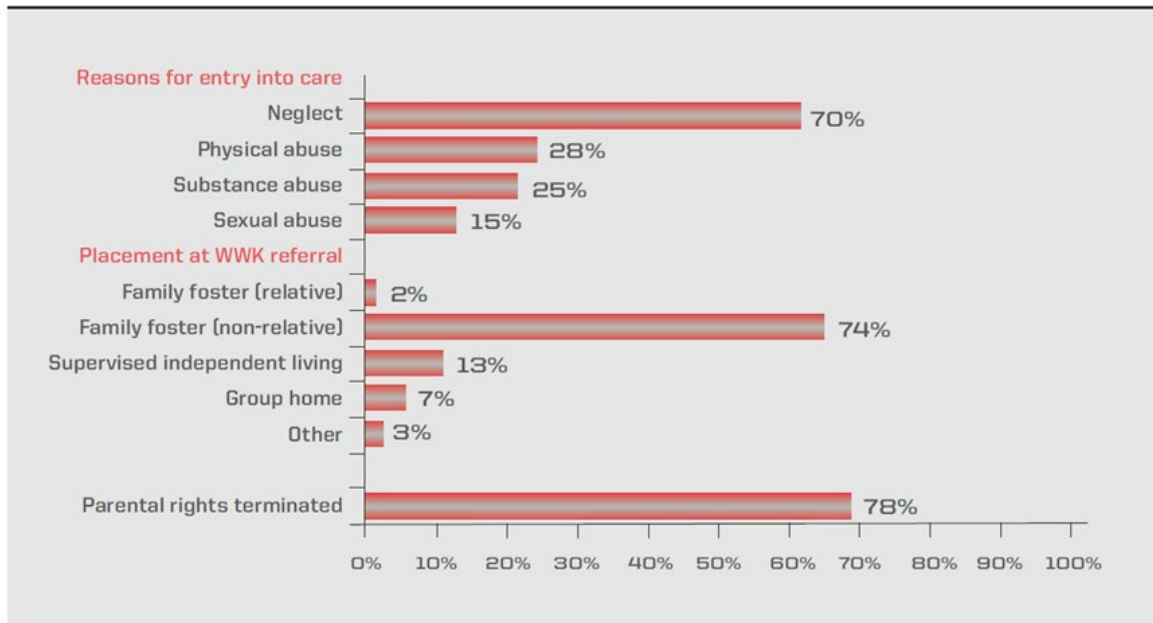


Figure 5: Child Welfare History of Children Served by WWK, as of April 2010

Most children served by WWK (70 percent) entered the child welfare system due to neglect, and most have had their parents' rights terminated (78 percent). (See Figure 5.) At the time of referral to WWK, most children (74 percent) were living in a non-relative foster home, and 20 percent were living in a group home, institution, or supervised independent living placement. Most children served by WWK have lived in up to five placements at the time of referral, 20 percent have lived in six to 10 placements, and nine percent had lived in 10 or more placements. (Vandivere, S, et. al., 2011)

The children referred to the program have typically received minimal recruitment efforts, with only four percent of children having experienced intensive child-specific recruitment. Some children served by the program also experienced prior failed adoptions; 14 percent had a pre-adoptive placement disrupt pre-finalization, and 8 percent had an adoption dissolved post-finalization. (See Figure 6.)

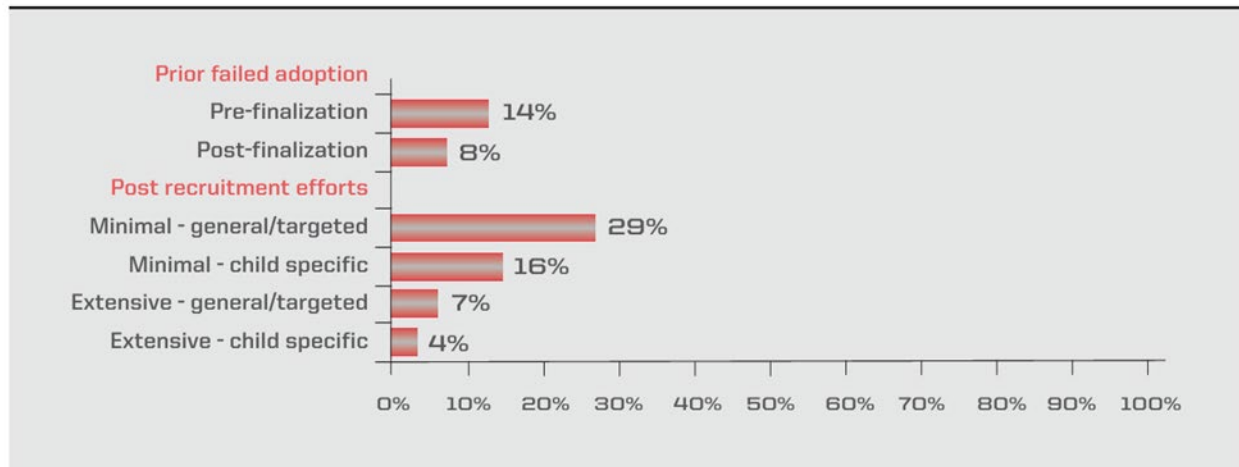


Figure 6: Child welfare history of children served by WWK, as of April 2010

The child is also made part of the recruitment activity; this is extremely important so that the child participates in their own adoption.

WWK's Impact on Adoption

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption performed a 5-year evaluation of its child focused Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) program between 2004 and 2010. Through the end of the study in April 2010, WWK had served 5,645 children, including 1,438 who have had adoptions finalized. Since then, nearly 15,000 more children in the program have been adopted.

The data presented herein summarizes findings from the first such evaluation of an adoption recruitment model — specifically, the child-focused Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK), a signature program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption — carried out over a five-year period between 2004 – 2010. The evaluation shows that WWK is substantially and significantly more effective than other services in terms of achieving adoptions for foster youth.

When states work with Wendy's Wonderful Kids, it gives more children a real opportunity at being adopted – especially those who have been waiting the longest. These partnerships mean kids are not just placed somewhere quickly; they are placed with the right people, in the right home, for good.

- **Evidence-Based Model and Enhanced Adoption Rates:**
 - A rigorous five-year national evaluation demonstrated that children referred to WWK are 1.7 times more likely to be adopted than peers in traditional systems—with older children and those with mental health challenges being up to 3x more likely to be adopted. (Malm, K., et. al., 2011)
 - State-level expansions (e.g., Ohio, Georgia, and West Virginia) maintain this improved adoption likelihood when implemented in partnership with public agencies.
- **Small, dedicated caseloads** – (<15 children per recruiter) allow for intensive family-finding work, often starting within the child’s known circle. (Malm, K. et. al., 2011)
- **Public-Private Collaboration Enables Scale** – Partnership with state agencies provides shared funding for recruiter positions, enabling jurisdictions to scale WWK statewide, as seen in Georgia and West Virginia. (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2022)
- **Proven Impact Across Multiple States:**
 - In Georgia, the joint effort added six WWK recruiters and plans for four more, with the goal of expanding adoption for longest-waiting foster youth. (Birmingham Parent, 2023)
 - West Virginia’s statewide rollout similarly shows the partnership model’s flexibility, finding homes for high-needs youth.
 - Alabama’s collaboration expanded capacity sixfold, increasing from serving 30 to 105 children and by adding recruiters through state partnerships. (Public News Service, 2023)

- **Extended family is the first choice** – WWK recruiters first look at people the child already knows like relatives, past foster families, or teachers before expanding outward. This often leads to more stable and comfortable placements.

Model Component	Optimum Practices
Component 1: Initial Case Referral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiter met with child in person within or before first month of the child's active status. • Recruiter began review of the case record within or before the first month of the child's active status. • Recruiter contacted the child's case worker within or before the first month of the child's active status.
Component 2: Case Record Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiter spent at least six hours reviewing the child's case file. • Recruiter used a standard instrument to review the case file.
Component 3: Relationship With Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiter met with child at least once per month while case was on active status[*]. • Recruiter communicated with the child by phone or e-mail at least once per month while the case was on active or monitoring status.
Component 4: Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiter developed the child's assessment within three months of the child's first active date[*]. (While the model proscribes that the assessment be carried out "initially," it can be inferred from the fact that quarterly updates are required that the initial assessment should occur in the first quarter.) • Recruiter updated the child's assessment every quarter, beginning in the second quarter that the case was on active status[*]. • Recruiter used a standardized instrument to conduct assessment.
Component 5: Recruitment plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiter worked on developing a recruitment plan within or before the first three months of active status[*]. (While the model proscribes that the recruitment plan be carried out "initially," it can be inferred from the fact that quarterly updates are required that the initial recruitment plan should occur in the first quarter.) • Recruiter updated the recruitment plan every quarter, beginning in the second quarter that the case was on active status[*].
Component 6: Diligent search	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiter identified at least two potential adoptive resources within the first three months that the case was on active status. • Recruiter contacted at least two potential adoptive resources within the first six months that the case was on active status.

Component 7: Adoption preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Component could not be included in analysis due to lack of data. This component pertains to ensuring that the child is prepared for adoption and assuring during the matching process that the prospective adoptive family is adequately prepared to meet the needs of the child.
Component 8: Network building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Component could not be included in analysis due to lack of data. This component involves maintaining monthly contact with adults significant to the child.
<i>* Denotes practices for which the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has defined specific time frames as part of the program model. (All practices are relevant model components, but the Foundation has not specified time frames for all.)</i>	

Figure 7: Model Components and Quantifying Implementation

Key strategies the WWK program employs are child-focused recruitment model components (e.g., relationship building with the child and diligent search – see Table 2) may be more important than others for successful adoption outcomes.

When we examined the association of individual model components with program success, we found two in particular — relationship building with the child and diligent search for adoptive resources — to be associated with adoption/guardianship and pre-adoptive placement. This finding corresponds with what program staff have told us in individual, in-person interviews: They overwhelmingly report that building a relationship with the child is the most important component of the WWK model, as it encourages children to be open and more receptive to adoption. (Malm, K. et. al., 2011)

WWK Success Stories

These are just a few examples from the thousands of adoption success stories families have with the help of the WWK program: (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2024)

Marisol



At 5 years old, Marisol entered foster care after enduring physical abuse. For the next 14 years, she lingered in care, traveling between group homes, giving up hope that she would ever be adopted. Thankfully, everything changed when Marisol was referred to the Dave Thomas

Foundation for Adoption's Wendy's Wonderful Kids program and met her recruiter, Scott, and was adopted by Heather and Edwin. (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2024).

Darianne

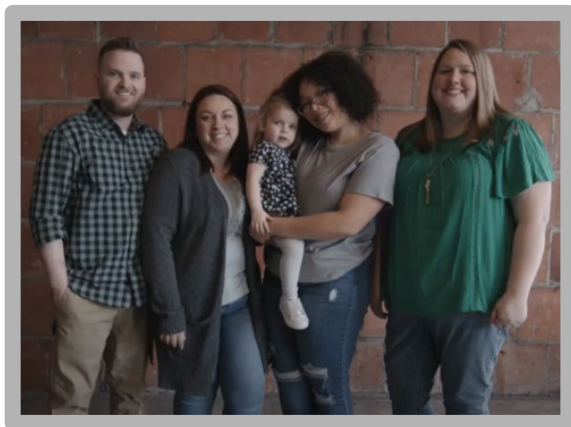
Darianne's story is not unlike many children that experience time in the foster system. She began in the foster system when she was 8 months old but unfortunately stayed there due to a long list of existing medical conditions. Sadly, children who experience these conditions slip through the cracks of many adoptive parents' wish lists. Thankfully, Wendy's Wonderful Kids was there to make sure Darianne's search for a forever home was not tossed aside. Darianne joined the program in 2011, and through the efforts of a match program, was finally united with a family in 2017 at age 15. Darianne's adoptive parents praised the work of the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program – stating the complete follow-through and follow-up process with Wendy's Wonderful Kids program staff was a major factor in their decision to adopt Darianne. This example is one that points to the diligent efforts of Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters – as they ensure diligent efforts never stop to find children in the program the right parents for their situation. (Children's Home Society of Washington, 2020)

Damon and Gage

Adopting a child is a difficult and emotional undertaking without any special circumstances on top, but it is an even larger cost when there are siblings involved. This does not discourage Wendy's Wonderful Kids staff from ensuring that all children, including those as sibling groups, receive the love that a child needs. The example of Damon and Gage, two brothers who experienced the foster care system together, is a testament to Wendy's Wonderful Kids' proactive effort to not break the family bond. While the band of brothers entered the foster care system at age 13, the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program was able to get Gage adopted by age 15. His brother Damon had an existing medical issue which prevented them from being adopted together, but that did not stop the bond between the brothers. The Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter, along with the adoptive family, kept the boys connected and bonded through Damon's 18th birthday. At this point, the family was able to take guardianship of Damon – thereby ensuring that his physical and emotional needs were met, and that he and his brother could once again be a part of the same family. Stories like Damon and Gage's are strong evidence behind the benefit of Wendy's Wonderful Kids program in making success through even the most difficult circumstances. (The Villages of Indiana, 2022)

Merriah

Merriah was placed in foster care at age 6 after enduring abuse and neglect. For nine long years, she waited for a permanent place to call home. Fortunately, with support from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and her Wendy's Wonderful Kids



adoption recruiter, Merriah was adopted by Emilie and John just before her 15th birthday. (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2022).

Recommendations for Strengthening Adoption Services in Alabama

To ensure that every child in Alabama’s foster care system has the opportunity to be placed in a safe, loving, and permanent home, the Strengthening Adoption Services in Alabama Project Team has identified several key recommendations.

Recommendation #1 - Continuing the Partnership with Wendy’s Wonderful Kids (WWK)

Expanding Alabama’s partnership with the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids program is critical to ensuring more children—particularly those who are older, part of sibling groups, or have special needs—are matched with permanent families. By increasing the number of recruiters and refining referral processes, the state can scale a model that has already demonstrated exceptional success.

Recommendation #2 – Create a Database for Potential Adoptive Parents

Creating a centralized database of potential adoptive families will provide ADHR with a powerful tool to streamline matches outside of the WWK program. This resource would help caseworkers more efficiently identify suitable families, reduce wait times, and strengthen placement stability by aligning children’s needs with well-prepared, pre-screened parents.

With a comprehensive database of information, ADHR will also be able to compile multiple formats of statistical information that can be used to show the growth and success of the Family Services work within the foster care and adoption services.

Recommendation #3 – Raise Public Awareness and Partnerships

To elevate adoption as a shared community responsibility, Alabama must invest in strategic public awareness campaigns and foster partnerships with organizations that can amplify

outreach. From schools and community centers to media outlets and social platforms, building broad-based support will expand the pool of prospective families and reduce stigma around fostering and adoption.

These proposals build upon existing successes while directly addressing the most pressing gaps in adoption services across the state. Rooted in research, stakeholder feedback, and proven models like Wendy’s Wonderful Kids, the following recommendations aim to enhance recruitment, streamline processes, expand support networks, and increase public awareness—ultimately creating a more responsive and effective adoption system for Alabama’s most vulnerable children.

Conclusion

Every child in Alabama’s foster care system deserves a permanent, loving family and the opportunity to thrive. This white paper has highlighted the significant strides Alabama has made in adoption services—particularly through its strategic partnerships, innovative recruitment practices, and commitment to child-centered care. Yet it has also underscored persistent challenges, especially for children who are older, part of sibling groups, or living with disabilities.

The Wendy’s Wonderful Kids program, in collaboration with the Alabama Department of Human Resources, has proven to be an evidence-based model capable of transforming the futures of these children. Its personalized, consistent, and data-driven approach stands in stark contrast to traditional systems that too often overlook the most vulnerable youth. By focusing on relationship building, diligent family searches, and child-led recruitment, the WWK model demonstrates that unadoptable is unacceptable.

Looking ahead, Alabama’s opportunity lies in strengthening its commitment to this model and expanding statewide capacity. By increasing recruiter coverage, developing a robust adoptive parent database, and investing in sustained post-adoption support and awareness, Alabama can lead the nation in effective, equitable adoption services.

Adoption is not just a policy issue—it is a moral imperative. With the right strategies, partnerships, and resources in place, we can ensure that every child in foster care has not just a chance at a better life, but a family to share it with. (OpenAI, 2024)

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