



*finding a*  
Forever  
Family

A Profile  
of Adopted  
Arkansas  
Children and  
Those Waiting  
for Homes



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# FINDING A FOREVER FAMILY:

## A Profile of Adopted Arkansas Children and Those Waiting for Homes

**M**ore than 400 children in Arkansas are waiting to find an adoptive family. They are in the custody of the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) and their parents' rights have been terminated because they were unable or unwilling to care for them. Many of these children wait a long time for a family, especially older children, minorities and those who have physical, mental, or emotional difficulties. All of these children deserve loving, "forever" families.

In this report, we see where the system is working best and where it needs improvement by examining which children have been adopted and the conditions under which they were adopted. Using data from DHS Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), we examine the characteristics of children who have been adopted in the past and those who are waiting to be adopted. Between 2002 and 2009, more than 3,200 Arkansas children were adopted from DHS custody. Another 425 children are currently waiting in the foster care system.

### **What do we know about these children?**

- It took an average of 30 months for them to be adopted after entering the system. In the life of a child, 2.5 years is a long time to be without a family.
- The time it takes for children to be adopted after entering foster care varied greatly by geography. Children in Northwest Arkansas were adopted within an average of 25.3 months while children in the Delta waited an average of 51.42 months.
- Minority children, older children and children with special needs waited longer to be adopted than other children.
- Children still waiting for adoption tend to be older, in larger sibling groups, more likely to be boys, and are more likely to be multiracial.

Fortunately, there are many promising steps that the state and supporters can take to help Arkansas children in foster care find their forever homes faster. These include better coordination to ensure adoptive families are ready for children as soon as they're available for adoption, mobilizing local groups to help children become adopted faster, and focusing efforts on older children.

## Background

In most cases when children are removed from their parents by DHS because of abuse or neglect, the children are returned to the parents once the parents show that they are able to provide a safe home for their children. Unfortunately, that does not always happen, and a court may terminate the parental rights of parents who have abused or neglected their children. These children need families. According to the Child Welfare League of America, children who “age out” of the foster care system without a family are more likely to be homeless, to not finish high school, to be teen parents, to be incarcerated and to be unemployed.<sup>1</sup>

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed by Congress in 1997 to address the problem of children languishing in foster care. The goal is to more efficiently and quickly find a permanent home for children. It requires states to seek termination of parental rights for children who have been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months.<sup>2</sup> Once parents’ rights are terminated, the children are legally free for adoption. These children need and deserve permanent homes.

## Number of Children Adopted

Between 2002 and 2009, 3,286 children in the custody of the State of Arkansas were adopted by new families.<sup>3</sup> The number of adoptions has increased dramatically over the last seven years (see Table 1). In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2002, 348 children were adopted. By SFY2009, more than 600 had been adopted. The number of children adopted nearly doubled from the year with the fewest (315 in 2005) to 2009 (627). See Appendix 1 for the number of children who were adopted in 2009 by county.

Fourteen-year-old Tiffany and her younger brother were placed in foster care after being sexually abused by their step-father. They were in the same foster home for two years. Recently, a family that knew the children through church and scouting inquired about adopting them.

The children were excited to hear the news from their therapist during a counseling session. The family was brought into the session and Tiffany said over and over:

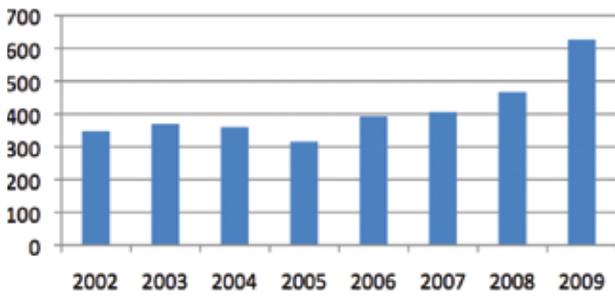
**“Thank you,  
thank you for  
adopting us.”**

## Length of Time to Adoption

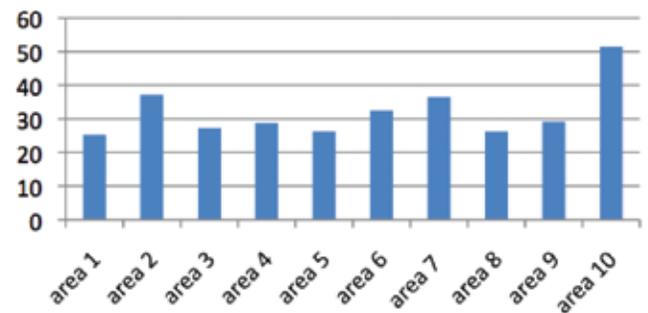
The average time to adoption from the time a child entered DHS custody over the past eight years was about 30 months. In the life of a child, 2.5 years is a long time to wait. There has been some improvement over the past four years, from 35.39 months in 2002 to 29.69 months in 2009 (see Table 2). ASFA requires the state to pursue termination of parental rights and adoption when a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. The state can pursue termination earlier if it’s in the child’s best interest.



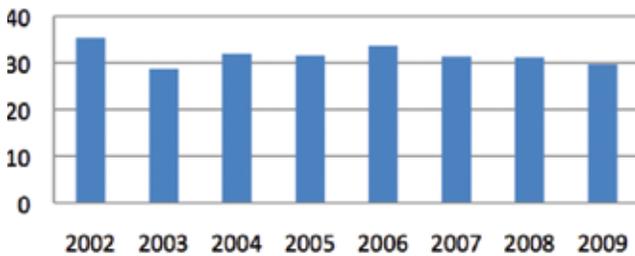
**Table 1: Number of Children Adopted**



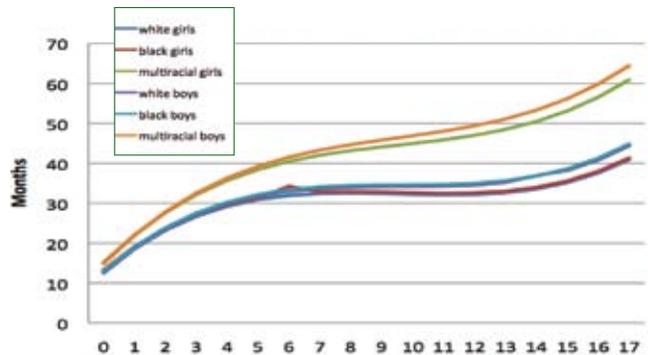
**Table 3: Months to Adoption, FY 2002-2009 by DCFS Area**



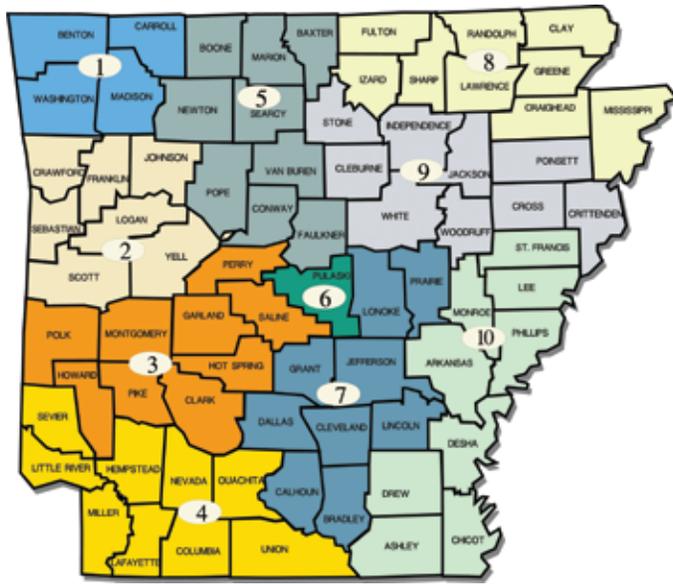
**Table 2: Months to Adoption by Fiscal Year**



**Table 4: Months to Adoption by Age**



## Map of DCFS Areas



The average time to finalize an adoption varies geographically. DCFS is divided into ten service areas in the state. The area of the state with the quickest time to adoption is Area 1 (see Table 3), in the northwest corner of the state, with an average of 25.3 months from entry into foster care until adoption. Area 10, which includes St. Francis, Phillips, Ashley, Arkansas, Drew, Desha, Chicot, Lee and Monroe counties, has an average 51.42 months from entry into foster care until adoption. Children in the Delta must wait twice as long for a permanent adoptive home as those in the northwest corner of the state.

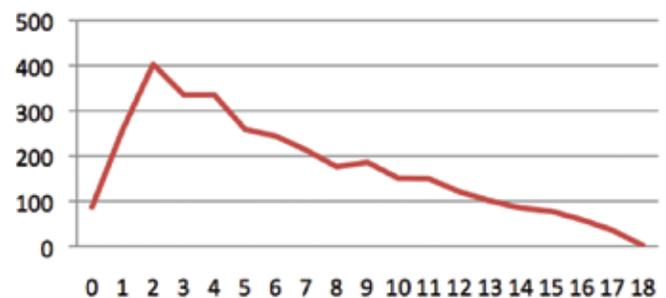
Race, age and gender also affect how long a child waits for adoption (see Table 4). A white child waits an average of 33 months for adoption, a black child 37 months, and a multiracial child 42 months. Growing older also increases the wait for

an adoption; as a child grows older, an adoption is likely to take longer. A 16-year-old waits on average 3.5 years. The effect is most significant for the youngest children (see table 3). A 1-year-old typically waits a year and a half for adoption, but a 2-year-old will wait two years.

Very few children are noted in the DCFS data system as having special needs such as developmental delays or mental health problems. One indicator is whether a child has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is required for all children who qualify for special education services. Although few children are noted as having an IEP, those who do have an IEP wait, on average, an additional 16 months for an adoption when compared to children without an IEP.

It is important to note that this analysis is based only on the children who were adopted: older children, children in minority groups, and those in larger sibling groups may also be more likely to remain in foster care until they “age out” at 18 without a family. As shown in Table 5, far more adoptions happen among younger children than among older ones.

**Table 5: Number of Children Adopted by Age**



**Marcus, 14, entered the foster care system with his two brothers when he was 7 years old.** Their mother had a severe mental illness and was unable to take care of them. Shortly after Marcus entered foster care, he began having outbursts and several behavioral problems. He entered therapeutic foster care and was treated by a local hospital for his behavioral problems. His younger and older brothers were adopted four years ago by a family. However, Marcus has now spent half his life in foster care and has been placed in multiple homes and has had multiple therapists and caseworkers. The one constant person in his life since he entered the foster care system has been his CASA volunteer. He recently has been able to have visits with his brothers, and his current foster family is considering adopting him.

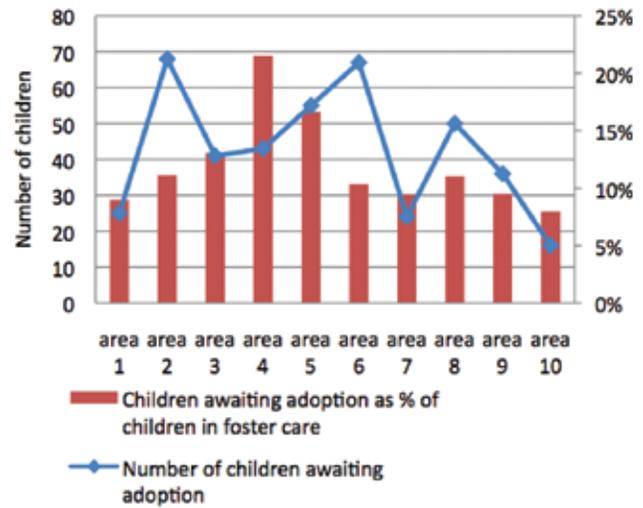
## Children Available for Adoption

As of December 2009, 425 children were identified as being available for adoption in Arkansas. These are children for whom parental rights have been terminated for both their mother and their father and who are legally free for adoption. These children have some important differences from those who have been adopted. They are older (nearly ten years old on average for those waiting compared to just over six years old for those adopted), they are in larger sibling groups (2.43 children compared to 2), and they are more likely to be boys (58% compared to 49% of those adopted). Additionally, they are more likely to be multiracial (12.5% compared to 5.6% of those adopted).

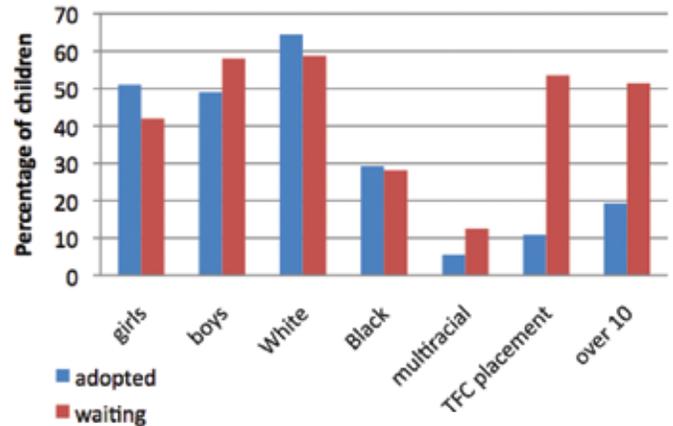
Although it can be difficult to identify children with special needs, one indicator is whether a child has spent time in therapeutic foster care (TFC). All children who have spent time in TFC do not have special needs, as these more intensive resources are sometimes used when a regular foster home is not available. However, only 10.8% of adopted children have spent time in TFC, while 53.5% of children waiting for adoption have. Of the children waiting for adoption, 14% are identified as being developmentally delayed and 8% as having a mental health diagnosis. Yet only 1.6% are identified as having an IEP, which is required for children with specialized education needs. It seems likely that these special needs are not being adequately documented in the DCFS system.

Children awaiting adoption are from all areas of the state (see Table 6), though nearly one-third are from either Pulaski (67 children) or Sebastian (63 children) counties. Pulaski County is in DCFS Area 6 and Sebastian County is one of seven counties in Area 2. When viewed as a percentage of the children in care, area 4 has the highest: 22% of all children in care are awaiting adoption. This includes Columbia, Hempstead, Lafayette, Little River, Miller, Nevada, Ouachita, Sevier, and Union Counties. Area 5, which includes Baxter, Boone, Conway, Faulkner, Marion, Newton, Pope, Searcy, and Van Buren Counties has 17% of all children in care awaiting adoption. The number of children currently awaiting adoption by

**Table 6: Children Awaiting Adoption, by DCFS Area**



**Table 7: Children Adopted and waiting Adoption**



county is available in Appendix 1.

Having many or few children available for adoption is a result of two factors: whether children are being freed for adoption when it is in their best interests and grounds to terminate parental rights exist, and whether children, once adoption is the goal of the case, are placed into adoptive homes. Area 10, in which it takes the longest for adoptions to be completed, also has the fewest children awaiting adoption. This indicates that fewer children are being made available for adoption through termination of parental rights, even in cases where it is in the children's best interest.

## Current Efforts by DCFS:

DCFS has already made several changes to address the issue of finding adoptive families for children more quickly. These include:

- Accessing data from the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) to identify the cases in which termination of parental rights has occurred and therefore the children are available for adoption. DCFS's data needs improvement in this area, and they are accessing AOC's data on a regular basis to determine which children are available for adoption.
- Moving the adoption specialists under one supervisor located in the central DCFS office, as opposed to being supervised by the area director(s) in their service area.
- Hiring a new staff member to assess the customer service skills of DCFS staff members who take inquiries from potential foster and adoptive families and provide training to these staff members.
- Working with KTHV Channel 11 to run a segment called "A Place To Call Home" and Fort Smith's KHBS Channel 40/29 on the "Forever Family" series to feature children available for adoption.
- Creating Permanency Roundtables with the assistance of Casey Family Programs. These roundtables include organizations and individuals in local communities and have been successful in other states in finding permanent placements for children. They develop a plan for each child to find a permanent home and also identify and address barriers through creative thinking, policy change, and resource development. The first round of Permanency Roundtables in Arkansas has begun looking for permanency options for children and youth in Pulaski and Sebastian Counties who have been in care for 36 months or more. They will expand to other counties and will eventually begin to look at those children and youth who have been in care for 24 months or longer and, finally, 18 months or longer.



## Recommendations to Make the Adoption Process More Efficient:

There is much more to be done to keep children from lingering in the system.

A DCFS adoption specialist should become involved in a child's case when either the main goal or the concurrent goal of the case plan is adoption. Currently, the adoption specialist often isn't involved until the process of terminating parental rights begins (and in many cases only after it has occurred). At this point, the child has likely already been in foster care for more than a year. If the process of identifying potential adoptive parents begins sooner, then adoption can occur more quickly once termination of parental rights occurs.

Since older children often wait the longest and age out of the system without finding an adoptive family, initiatives should be developed to find adoptive homes for them. Child-specific recruitment is essential, such as identifying adults already involved in the child's life who may be willing to adopt. DCFS is using the "Wendy's Wonderful Kids Model" as one way to help find relatives and significant others. It includes reviewing the case record for adults whom the child knows. DCFS should also help recruit mentors for these youth. Once these adults have developed a strong relationship with a foster youth, they can help them navigate the transition to adulthood and may be willing to adopt the youth or may be better able to

identify potential adoptive parents.

DCFS does a good job of ensuring that each foster child receives a PACE evaluation, which is an assessment tool to determine a child's physical and mental health needs. Since more than half of the children awaiting adoption may have special needs, DCFS needs to document and follow up on recommendations contained in the PACE evaluation.

More local community groups should be enlisted to help with recruitment of adoptive families. The CALL, an organization of Christian churches that help find foster and adoptive families, is one example and has been expanded to 15 counties. Another opportunity is in developing more adoption coalitions in local communities. Several years ago, DCFS received a grant to develop these coalitions, which were made up of adoptive families who organized events to recruit other families. The grant has ended, but several of the coalitions are still active and work with local DCFS offices. DCFS should work to form more adoption coalitions around the state. These community groups can help identify families to adopt children who wait the longest and be valuable partners with permanency roundtables.

Every child needs a family, and no child should leave foster care and have to make his or her way in the world without any healthy adult to turn to in times of trouble or when guidance and support are needed. Sustained attention is needed to making sure that every child has a forever family.

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