

## Heeding the call to adopt

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Something rather unusual in the annals of governing happened recently.

In 1997, the federal government set a goal for the states: Double the number of foster care adoptions by 2002. Remarkably, they did it.

Not only did the states achieve that goal, they exceeded it.

The result is that more than 90,000 additional children nationwide now live in permanent adoptive homes rather than in foster care. In fact, more children were adopted during that five-year period than in the previous 15 years.

It started with an \$82 million nudge from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as well as a new law that abusive or neglectful parents be given a shorter time frame in which to get their lives together before their parental rights are terminated. The feds sped things up with financial bonuses for states that exceeded their previous annual adoption numbers.

That meant thousands of children who had languished within the foster care system, often ricocheting from foster home to foster home, never feeling a true sense of permanence and connection, found families.

Illinois averaged 2,200 adoptions a year before former DCFS Director Jess McDonald made an adoption push. The number more than tripled to 7,113 in 1999. The state's foster care caseload has been reduced by more than half in the last six years. How? DCFS and the juvenile court system took the permanency initiative seriously, as well they should have. Illinois had one of the most deplorable systems in the nation for warehousing children.

The juvenile court started putting caseworkers on notice when they didn't show up for hearings or showed up unprepared. Four additional judges were added to work through the backlog of petitions to terminate parental rights. Judges received more rigorous training to better understand drug abuse, parental bonding and treatment effectiveness, so they could make better judgments about whether parents were making good-faith efforts to clean up.

DCFS and the courts made sure to have on hand people who could make on-the-spot assessments of parents' problems and work with "recovery coaches" to get the parents into--and sometimes back into--treatment. DCFS, recognizing that 85 percent of its often

clumsily-prepared termination petitions were rejected by state's attorneys, had its own attorney start screening them to ensure they met legal muster.

Of the nation's half a million children who remain in foster care, roughly 126,000 await adoption. Half of them are at least nine years old; adoption becomes increasingly unlikely beyond that age. The federal government traditionally has shied away from child welfare matters, leaving that to the states. But imagine what powerful good might happen if federal lawmakers built on the success of their own adoption initiative and developed other, narrowly-focused incentives aimed at producing outcomes that make kids and families better off.

What if it provided incentives, for example, to recruit and train new foster families to take in the more challenging older kids? Or prodded states to work intensively with at-risk families as a way of keeping children out of foster care? Or encouraged better training of private foster care caseworkers, who in Illinois shoulder 70 percent of the caseload?

Renewal of the 1997 legislation is now moving through Congress with bipartisan support. If lawmakers merely continued the good thing they started six years ago, that would be fine. But wouldn't it be a feather in their caps to encourage other proven ideas that would benefit kids?

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