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A real home for the holidays

Unified efforts help move children into safe, permanent homes
JESS MCDONALD AND NANCY SIDOTE SALYERS
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In the past five years, 230,000 children who were languishing in foster care have found permanent loving adoptive families. As we join with our families to celebrate the season, it is heartening to know that these children will also be celebrating with their families.

Since 1997, 33 states, including North Carolina, and the District of Columbia doubled the number of children adopted from foster care. Before the enactment of federal legislation in 1997 that overhauled the adoption process, many people believed that helping the thousands of children languishing in foster care find permanent homes was simply a pipe dream. Child welfare systems, courts and an overwhelming number of families willing to adopt turned conventional wisdom on its head. Today, thousands of children have found permanent, loving homes, thanks to state child welfare systems that did a number of things well, and were able to use federal financing creatively to get them done.

For example, to encourage states to think creatively about moving children who could not be returned home to adoption, the federal government began offering adoption incentives to states. These incentives were used to provide post-adoption services, programs that eased adopted children's transitions into their new homes.

In some instances, successful states also used federal money to hire additional caseworkers, helping to make caseloads manageable, and ensuring that children received prompt attention and timely services.

Successful states promoted collaborations between adoption specialists and key stakeholders, among them judges and attorneys. In Illinois, particularly in Chicago's Cook County Juvenile Courts, judges and caseworkers worked together to evaluate what children's needs were. Judges began tracking the movements of their caseloads to identify and loosen bottlenecks. This was partnership and collaboration at its very best.

The lessons learned from states that have increased adoptions can be applied in others. Initiatives that have proven successful can make these improvements universal, and more creative use of federal financial incentives will fuel even greater results.

The work of moving children to permanent homes has just begun. Nationwide there are more than 100,000 children awaiting adoption. These first happy endings are only the hint of what's possible when we, as a nation, care about these children as we care about our very own.

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