Finding Permanency and Stability for Children and Youth

Council of State Governments

Midwestern Legislative Conference
Health and Human Services Committee

November 13, 2026



Dave Thomas Foundation *for* Adoption®

Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

Mission

Dramatically increase the number of adoptions of children waiting in North America's foster care systems.

Vision

Every child will have a permanent home and a loving family.

We believe

every child is ADOPTABLE.



In the United States…

330,000+
CHILDREN

are in
foster care

100,000+
CHILDREN

are waiting to
be adopted

~20,000
CHILDREN

age out of care
every year without
a family

Youth aging out of foster care face significantly higher risks in adulthood



~1 in 4

experience homelessness after turning 18

Source: Children and Youth Services Review, 2024



By age 26

50% lower earnings and
20% lower employment rates

Source: Journal of Economic Perspectives, 2022

The Solution: Wendy's Wonderful Kids

Child-Focused Recruitment

- **Emphasizes a child's voice** and focuses on identifying **pre-existing relationships** who may be potential adoptive families
- That network may include relatives, neighbors, teachers, a best friend's parents, previous foster placements or others in the child's life



Typical Recruitment

- News segment: “Monica, age 12, is waiting for someone to step forward and adopt her; watch her story.”
- “Visit this website to read about and see pictures of youth available for adoption.”
- “We will check the list of potential adoptive parents who have expressed interest.”

Child-Focused Recruitment

- “Johnny’s friend Ben’s family already feels like family to him.”
- “Suzy remembers an aunt but hasn’t been in contact with her since they moved years ago.”
- “Amy has developed a strong relationship with her art teacher.”

These connections in the child’s life often aren’t aware they are in foster care or that adopting them would be an option.

Child-Focused Recruitment Model

Initial Child Referral

Introduce recruiter's role to caseworker and learn basics about child

Case Record Review

Take a deep dive into child's case record to find significant people from the past

Relationship With Child

Meet with child monthly to build trust and understand child's needs

Diligent Search

Identify and contact people with whom the child has had a relationship

Network-Building

Work with all people involved with child

Assessment of Adoption Readiness

Determine if child has needs to address before moving forward with adoption

Adoption Preparation

Assure child is ready for process and family is ready to meet child's needs

Recruitment Plan

Customize comprehensive plan to find adoptive family based on child's needs

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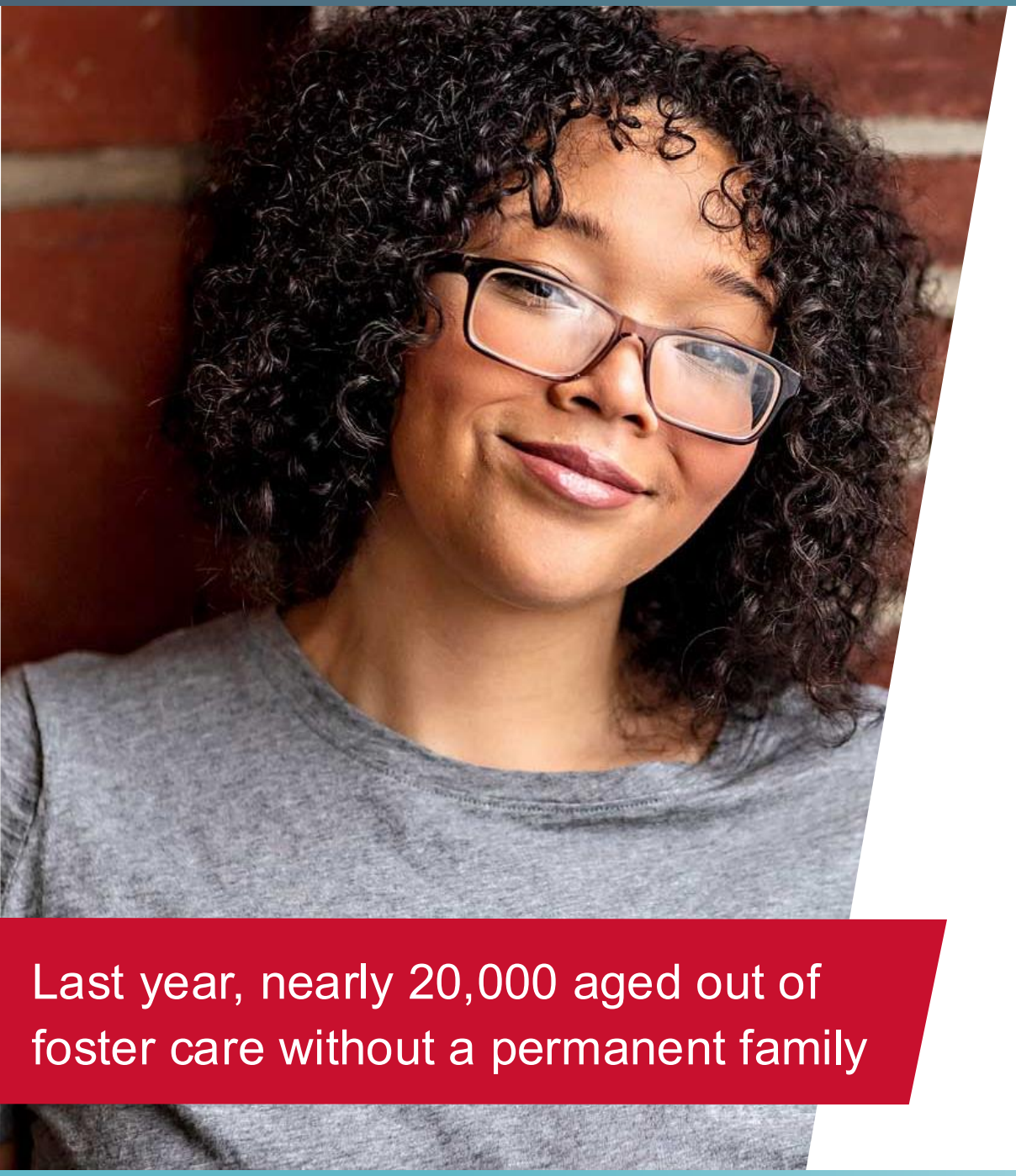
Wendy's **Wonderful Kids**®



Last year, nearly 20,000 aged out of foster care without a permanent family

Focus Population

Children ages 9 and older (or younger and one of the below)

- Sibling groups
- Children with special needs
- Children opposed to adoption
- Children in long-term foster care
- Children without an identified permanent resource

Building Bright Futures: Sean's Story

Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption



The Results

Rigorous National Evaluation

"Wendy's Wonderful Kids® substantially and significantly increases adoptions from foster care."
*— Child Trends**

- Children served by WWK are 1.7x more likely to be adopted
- Older children are up to 3x more likely to get adopted
- Children with specific mental health needs are more than 3x more likely to get adopted
- Older youth opposed to adoption were more likely to consider adoption when working with a WWK recruiter



***A National Evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids.** The Impact of Child-Focused Recruitment on Foster Care Adoption: A Five-Year Evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids. Malm, K., et. al; October 2011*

Youth Currently Served*

WWK Caseloads

14
average age

70%
at least one special need

78%
part of a sibling group

5,295
Being served

Prior to WWK

5.6
average number of placements

3.2
average years spent in care

84%
had minimal or no adoption recruitment efforts

21%
had a failed or disrupted adoption

*As of 9/30/26

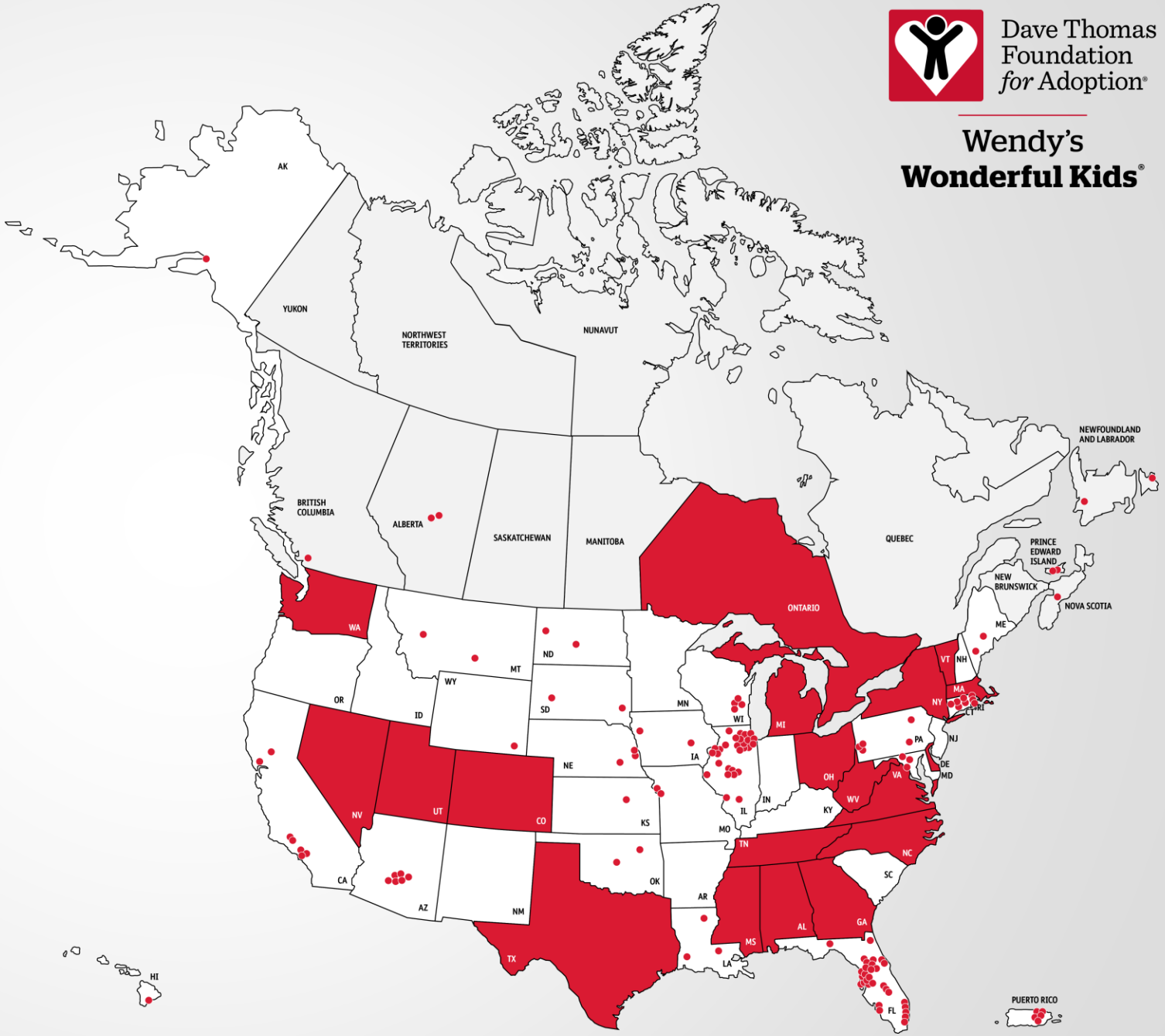
The Results

(as of Sept 2026)

19
states & provinces
scaled/scaling

~500
adoption
recruiters

16,500+
adoptions



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Wendy's **Wonderful Kids®**

Nationwide Impact

Significant long-term social return on investment from reduced homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, early parenting and substance abuse

Measurable actual return on investment to states, for example:

- Ohio adoptions 12/2015 – 4/2021
- Investment of $21.1M resulted in $133.6M in savings to the state



Post-Permanency Strategy



- Extending our commitment to well-being outcomes
- Threading permanency with post-permanency efforts
- Funding and testing 16 post-permanency initiatives in WWK sites in 12 states (7 scaling states)
- FY26: 1,141 families notified of services, 367 served

Develop and implement approach to identify possible expanded role in providing and/or funding post-adoption supports, e.g., needs assessment, potential offering(s), operational model, partnerships/staffing, pilot testing, evaluation

Legal Barriers to Permanency



Reasonable Efforts

Reasonable Efforts

- United States Code
  42 USC § 671(a)(15)(C)
  - "Reasonable efforts shall be made to place the child in a timely manner in accordance with the permanency plan"

- Code of Federal Regs
  45 CFR § 1356.21
  - Child welfare agency must make "reasonable efforts to finalize the permanency plan …within twelve months of the date the child is considered to have entered foster care…and at least once every twelve months thereafter"



Federal Adoption Recruitment Requirement

Agency required to document efforts at finding permanency

> "At a minimum, such documentation shall include child specific recruitment efforts such as the use of State, regional, and national **adoption exchanges** including electronic exchange systems to facilitate orderly and timely in-State and interstate placements."

42 USC § 675(1)(E)

Meeting the Reasonable Efforts Requirement

Child-focused strategies for youth (used by WWK)

- Monthly meetings with youth
- Smaller caseload
- Looking within the youth's network

Benefits to child-focused recruitment

- Evidence-based
- Respects and encourages youth voice
- Broadens resources engaged
- Active recruitment



Termination of Parental Rights

Termination of Parental Rights Statute

42 U.S. Code § 675

- Federal law requires TPR 15/22 months unless
  - Child being cared for by a relative
  - Agency documented **compelling reason** that it is not in best interests of the child
- No one-size fits all
  - Legal guardianship is a legal permanency option that does not require TPR and can come with subsidies to help support family

“Adoptability” Required for TPR

- State statutes or practices requiring a finding that a child is “adoptable” or has an identified adoptive resource prior to terminating parental rights
- Courts concerned about creating “legal orphans”
- Barriers to recruitment:
  - Recruiting/maintaining adoptive placements
  - Preparing the child for adoption
  - Procedural issues
    - Difficulty serving bio parent
    - Timing to move through legal process

Family of Origin's Value

- Terminating the legal relationship between biological parents and the youth **does not terminate the emotional relationship**
- Consider preserving **safe and appropriate** connections for older youth post-termination of parental rights while still giving the youth an opportunity to find legal permanency





Valuing Placement Stability over Legal Permanency

Placement Stability

Despite statutory prioritization of legal permanency, youth still linger in foster care to maintain placement stability because:

- Current placement may not want to commit to legal permanency
- Youth appears to be stable in the current placement
- Youth may be hesitant to consider permanency
- Mistaken belief that older youth are unlikely to be adopted based on general recruitment tactics



Value of Legal Permanency

- Secure and lasting
- Legal rights — adoption
  - Inheritance
  - Healthcare decision-making
- Commitment/sense of belonging

Extended Foster Care

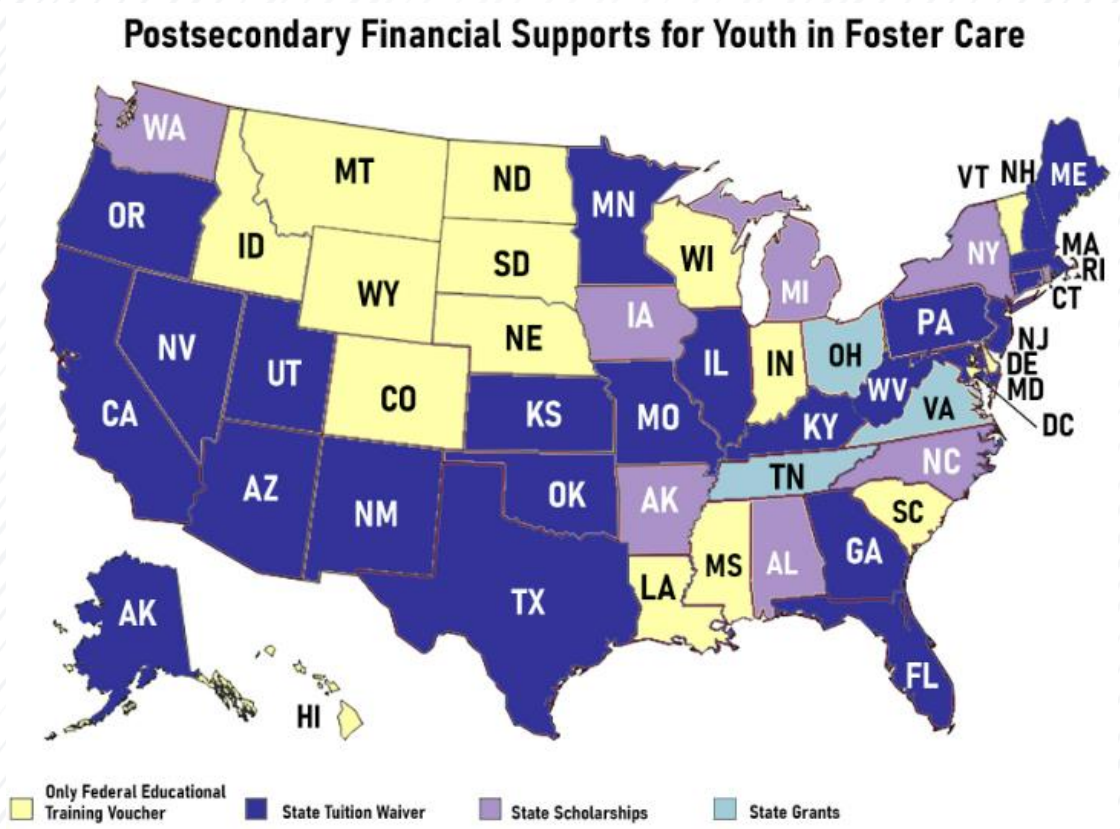
Extended Foster Care (EFC) Limitations

36 States Extended as of July 2025

- **Qualification Requirements**
  - Completing secondary or post-secondary education
  - In program to remove employment barriers
  - Employed at least 80 hours a month
  - Incapable due to a documented medical condition
- **Continued system involvement – requirements vary by state**
  - Sign voluntary care agreements
  - Continued caseworker visits & services plans
  - Participation in review hearings
- **What happens if youth do not meet qualification requirements?**

Permanency Resources

- Adoption & guardianship assistance
- Education assistance
  - Chafee ETV
  - FAFSA “independent status”
  - State tuition waivers, scholarships or grants



Source: University of Washington (https://depts.washington.edu/fostered/tuition-waivers-state)

Impact on Legal Permanency

- Qualifications can be **difficult to meet** and require extensive child welfare involvement can **deter** young adults from participation
- **Limited** financial support and independent living programs **cannot replace family** as a safety net
- Supports are **only until age 21** — youth needs support beyond
- Independent living and extended foster care are services — **not outcomes**

EFC as Support While Pushing for Legal Permanency

- Advocate for state statutes that prioritize permanency until age 18 and view extended foster care as supportive back up service if needed
- Child welfare agencies can use time from 18-21 during EFC to continue to explore legal permanency options, especially for youth who were unable to finalize before age 18
  - Check state adoption statutes to see whether adult adoption is an option
- Advocate for same benefits for youth in EFC and youth who achieve legal permanency

THESE  AREN'T UNADOPTABLE



DISCUSSION

How do we ensure that young adults have the support they need – even beyond age 21?

THANK YOU!

Every child deserves a safe, loving, permanent family.
Together, we can make that a reality.

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