IMPROVING ADOPTION RECRUITMENT IN TEXAS
February 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The need for adoptive families in Texas is great. On August 31, 2020, there were 2,749 children in Child Protective Services (CPS) Permanent Managing Conservatorship in Texas who were waiting for adoption and not in a placement intended to be permanent. In fiscal year 2020, there were 1,267 youth who aged out of foster care in Texas without a permanent home. Many children awaiting adoption in the foster care system are part of sibling groups or have special needs that make it harder for them to find permanency. It is also more difficult to recruit adoptive families for older children. Adoptive families play a critical part in the life of a child by providing a permanent, safe, and loving home. A stable and healthy family life is crucial to healthy child development and is associated with a variety of positive outcomes.

Efforts taken to recruit prospective adoptive parents are critical to helping children in the Texas child welfare system find a permanent family.

There are a number of current initiatives underway in Texas to recruit prospective adoptive families. Caseworkers begin by using regional recruitment efforts to identify prospective adoptive families. When a child's caseworker does not identify a family for a child whose approved primary or concurrent permanency goal is adoption by the 60th day after the court orders Termination of Parental Rights, the caseworker is required to register the child on the Texas Adoption Resource Exchange (TARE), the leading recruitment tool for prospective adoptive homes for children in the Texas child welfare system. After posting on TARE, other recruitment efforts may begin, including in the Texas Heart Galleries and posting on national adoption websites.

While there are processes in place, in reality, these processes vary by region and there are a number of factors that may delay recruitment, which ultimately means that finding a permanent home is delayed for the child. The longer a child is in care, the more difficult it often is to find a permanent placement. For those children that are not able to reunify, finding an adoptive placement quickly is critical. This report is intended to increase understanding of current adoption recruitment efforts underway in Texas, clarify the steps to recruiting adoptive families, identify barriers in current processes, and offer potential solutions to improve the system.

Key Findings

Only about one-third of the estimated number of children waiting for adoption on any given day whose placement is not intended to be permanent are registered on TARE.

This may **delay identification of prospective adoptive families**. There are a variety of possible reasons why a child waiting for adoption may not be registered on TARE, such as identification of an adoptive home prior to the deadline to register the child on TARE. However, study limitations prevented determining why the number of children waiting for adoption whose placement is not intended permanent is greater than the number registered on TARE.

TARE has not been optimized to recruit adoptive parents.

The TARE website includes photos and profile information on children available for adoption and allows families to provide information about their adoption preferences and interests in adopting a child. The goal of TARE is to reach prospective adoptive parents and help them make a connection with children who need a family. The quality of the photo shown can have a direct impact on whether a prospective family takes the first step towards adoption, yet not every child in TARE has a high-quality professional image. Additionally, the account creation required to view a child's strength-based narrative may result in some families failing to make an initial connection with a child during the "first glimpse." Furthermore, as discussed below, **technological limitations in TARE**, such as lack of an automatic email notification alert when inquiries are submitted, may result in a **delayed response to families**.

There may be delays in providing a response to inquiring prospective families.

There is some evidence, informed by the provider and adoptive parent community in Texas, that **inquiries through the TARE website from prospective adoptive parents are not responded to in a timely manner**. Further study is needed to quantify the extent to which this is occurring.

Not all children registered on TARE are featured in a Heart Gallery, a portrait exhibit and community education/outreach initiative featuring children in the foster care system available for adoption, created to find adoptive families.

Children in Heart Galleries have increased chances of finding permanency. Only about one-third of children registered on TARE are also featured in a Heart Gallery. As a result, the recruitment resources a child receives varies depending on where they are in the state. There are three main reasons why not all children registered on TARE are featured in a Heart Gallery: 1) Not all areas in Texas are served by a Heart Gallery; 2) Staffing and resource constraints limit Heart Gallery operations and ultimately the number of children included in existing Heart Galleries; and 3) Regional variations on how staff at the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) engage in Heart Gallery activities may delay or prevent a child's inclusion in existing Heart Gallery recruitment efforts.

Only about one-third of children registered on TARE are also featured in a Heart Gallery

There are a variety of innovative methods used in other states and in some Texas communities to identify prospective adoptive parents that could help children in the Texas child welfare system find a permanent family.

These approaches, which could be implemented or expanded in Texas, include virtual match events and specialized recruitment strategies, such as the evidence-based Wendy's Wonderful Kids Child-focused recruitment model or Kidsave's Weekend Miracles Houston program.

System-wide coordination and performance tracking can guide successful adoptive parent recruitment.

Efforts to coordinate and track statewide adoptive parent recruitment goals, strategies, and outcomes, can help the state of Texas maximize opportunities to recruit prospective adoptive parents for children in the Texas child welfare system. Clearly defined goals provide a framework through which child welfare administrators can take action to implement adoptive parent recruitment strategies. Performance measurement can help identify process strengths and weaknesses and redirect resources as needed to improve recruitment efforts.

Opportunities for Improvement

Review TARE Registration Processes

The state of Texas should determine the reasons why some children waiting for adoption whose placement is not intended permanent are not registered on TARE. The review should also evaluate TARE registration processes to **identify and address obstacles** that may prevent timely registration of waiting children.

Redesign the TARE Website

The TARE website should be **redesigned to optimize how it is used to recruit adoptive parents**, including improved user access, navigation, layouts, content, and functionality with IMPACT. Operational adjustments to TARE should also be made, such as configuring an automatic email notification alert when inquiries are submitted.

Review the Inquiry Response System

The state of Texas should determine the extent to which inquiries received from prospective adoptive parents are responded to in a timely manner. The state should also evaluate current methods used to manage inquiries from prospective adoptive parents about specific children or youth who are listed on the TARE website or in a Texas Heart Gallery program and make modifications needed to ensure an effective and timely response system. **The system design should keep inquiring families engaged and move the process forward by helping families learn more about children who may be a good match.**

Create a Statewide Heart Gallery Program

The state of Texas should create or contract to develop a statewide Heart Gallery program with **common components that include all children throughout Texas who are awaiting adoption**. To address staffing and resource constraints, the state should fund: 1) a dedicated state-level Heart Gallery Coordinator position housed at either DFPS or a community-based organization to coordinate statewide Heart Gallery strategy and oversee regional Heart Gallery activity, including agreements or contracts with Heart Gallery community-based organizations; and 2) dedicated regional Heart Gallery Coordinators at DFPS or provided through community-based organizations who are contracted to perform regional Heart Gallery activities. The statewide Heart Gallery program should include standardized written protocol that clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of all participating staff.

Expand Innovative Specialized Recruitment Programs

The state of Texas should expand innovative specialized recruitment programs, such as **developing a public-private partnership** with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption to implement the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program statewide, an approach that other states have taken. The program, which exists in three locations in Texas, uses an evidence-based, child-focused recruitment model to find the right family for every child. Other specialized recruitment program options include Kidsave's Weekend Miracles Houston program efforts to match youth with weekend host families who commit to having a youth in their home one weekend per month for one year and incorporating them into their community and family life. The goal of the program is to build connections that will ultimately result in the identification of an adoptive family, while allowing the youth a positive experience with family life.

> *The program, which exists in three locations in Texas, uses an evidence-based, child-focused recruitment model to find the right family for every child.*

Coordinate Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) Activity with Statewide Recruitment

As the state of Texas **continues to transition from traditional foster care to Community-Based Care**, the state should support collaborative recruitment efforts implemented by SSCCs, such as the Texas Adoption Portal and adoption capacity building efforts.

Track Data to Measure Recruitment Strategy Success

The state of Texas should establish **adoptive parent recruitment goals** to guide strategies and use performance indicators to measure the success of recruitment efforts.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to **describe the adoption recruitment strategies used in Texas**, including TARE and the Texas Heart Galleries, and to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement that will help children and youth find adoptive families.

Scope

This report focuses on how TARE and the Texas Heart Galleries are used to recruit families to adopt children from the Texas child welfare system, whereby families are "matched" with a child with whom they did not previously foster. Adoptions from the child welfare system may also include "foster to adopt" families and kinship adoptions, however strategies to recruit these types of adoptive families are not included in the scope of this report. The steps taken by DFPS or other child welfare partners to prepare and assist prospective adoptive families after recruitment, such as the home study process, are also beyond the scope of this report.

Methodology

Data and information was collected for this study using the following research methods:

- **Regulatory review**
  Statutory and administrative documents were reviewed to obtain an understanding of TARE and Heart Gallery program requirements, including the Texas Family Code and the Texas Administrative Code. Other documents reviewed included the DFPS CPS Handbook, DFPS CPS Adoption Resource Guide (July 2021), TARE Manual (October 2020), and process information documents provided by Heart Gallery community partners.

- **Key Informant Interviews**
  Qualitative information was collected during eight key informant interviews: 1) DFPS State Office staff (Heart Gallery focused); 2) DFPS Region 5 (Heart Gallery focused); 3) Partnerships for Children; 4) Gladney Center for Adoption; 5) Belong Texas Adoption Portal; 6) BELONG Adoption and Independent Living; 7) Our Community Our Kids; and 8) Guadalupe County Child Welfare Board. Interview participants were asked about their experience with the adoptive parent recruitment process, including detail about system aspects that are working well and areas for improvement. DFPS staff were only interviewed about Heart Galleries and did not provide information about other recruitment efforts underway in Texas due to communication limitations.

- **Process Mapping**
  The study author used the information collected during the regulatory review and key informant interviews to map the process of how prospective adoptive parents are recruited to identify gaps, inefficiencies, and areas for improvement. The map was refined during a follow-up interview with Partnerships for Children and Gladney Center for Adoption.

- **Adoptive Parent Input**
  Parents who adopted a child through the Texas child welfare system were asked about their experience with TARE and the Texas Heart Galleries.

- **Best Practice Research**
  Information on best practice strategies and innovations used in other states to recruit prospective adoptive parents was collected through a review of relevant literature.

IMPORTANCE OF ADOPTION RECRUITMENT INITIATIVES

Every child deserves a family. And for children in foster care who cannot return to their family of origin, we must do everything we can to find a permanent family. Adoptive families play a critical part in the life of a child by providing a permanent, safe, and loving home. A stable and healthy family life is crucial to healthy child development and is associated with a variety of positive outcomes. Children in foster care who age-out of the system without a permanent family face substantial challenges in life. Youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care are faring worse than their same-age peers across several domains.[1]

CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH WHO AGE OUT OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

EDUCATION They often have significant educational deficits, and relatively few appear to be on a path to obtain the skills necessary to thrive in today's economy.

EMPLOYMENT They are less likely to be employed than their peers, and earning from employment often does not provide adequate income.

HEALTH They are more likely to continue to struggle with physical and mental health issues throughout adulthood.

JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT They are much more likely than their peers to find themselves involved with the criminal justice system.

Efforts taken to recruit prospective adoptive parents are critical to helping children in the Texas child welfare system find a permanent family. The need for adoptive parents in Texas is great. In fiscal year 2020, there were 1,267 youth who exited DFPS legal custody due to youth emancipation (i.e., aged out of foster care without a permanent home).[2] On August 31, 2020, there were 6,186 children in CPS Permanent Managing Conservatorship in Texas who were waiting for adoption.[3] These are children where a court has ordered Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) or both birth parents have agreed to give up their parental rights. Of these children, 3,437 (55.6%) children were in an intended permanent placement, including children in foster to adopt homes. **The remaining 2,749 (44.4%) were not in a placement intended to be permanent.[4]**

Many children in the foster care system are part of sibling groups or have special needs that make it more difficult for them to find adoptive parents. In fiscal year 2020, there were 1,970 children with disabling conditions placed in adoptive homes.[5] Disabling conditions include learning disabilities, drug or alcohol related, emotionally disturbed, medically involved, physical, or other disabling conditions.[6] Furthermore, as a child gets older, it becomes more difficult for them to find an adoptive family.[7] As shown in **Figure 1**, most children waiting for adoption who are not in a placement intended to be permanent are age 12 and older.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF CHILDREN WAITING FOR ADOPTION BY AGE – AUGUST 31, 2020

	Age 0-17	Age 5-17	Age 12-17
Number of children waiting for adoption on August 31	6,186	4,152	2,028
In an intended permanent placement	3,437	1,802	573
Not in a placement intended to be permanent	2,749	2,350	1,455

Source: DFPS Data Book, Fiscal Year 2020

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT ADOPTIVE PARENT RECRUITMENT INITIATIVES IN TEXAS

There are strategies underway in Texas to recruit parents to adopt children from the child welfare system. When a court orders termination of parental rights (TPR) or both birth parents agree to give up their parental rights, each child's caseworker must make a concentrated effort to find a prospective adoptive family for the child during the first 60 days following TPR.[8] The caseworker uses **regional recruitment efforts**, including regional radio broadcasts; local television, such as *Wednesday's Child* and *Forever Families* segments and videos on television station websites; discussions with private child-placing agencies (CPAs); discussions with regional foster and adoption home development staff; regional match parties and other events; and statewide radio broadcasts.[9]

Before initiating regional recruitment efforts, the child's caseworker must talk with the current foster parents.[10] The purpose of this discussion is to inform the foster parents that CPS intends to begin active recruitment efforts to identify potential adoptive placements and to determine whether the current foster parents are interested in adopting the child.[11] The caseworker must have this conversation even if there have been previous discussions with the foster parents about adopting the child and even if the foster parents have declined to proceed with adoption.[12] The caseworker must document a summary of this conversation and the foster parents' decision in IMPACT.[13]

When a child's caseworker does not find a prospective adoptive family for a child whose approved primary or concurrent permanency goal is adoption by the 60th day after TPR, **the caseworker must register the child on TARE**.[14] According to DFPS, "the TARE website is the leading recruitment tool for prospective adoptive homes for DFPS. The purpose of TARE is to expedite permanency for available waiting children by increasing the number of prospective adoptive home resources."[15] The TARE website contains information and resources for prospective adoptive families, including:[16]

Requirements and steps to get started on the process of becoming a foster or adoptive home.	**Information on CPS faith-based initiatives.**
Calendars for regional information meetings and recruitment events.	**Photolisting and profiles of children waiting for adoption.**
Information about child placing agencies in Texas.	**Registration process that allows families to create a family profile to make inquiries on waiting children by creating an account with a login and password.**
Highlights of media campaigns, Heart Galleries, and success stories of adoptive families and children.	

The TARE application, accessed by DFPS and SSCC staff through a portal on the DFPS Intranet,[17] consists of three databases that are used to collect, track, and manage information posted on the TARE website.

- ## Child Registry

  The Child Registry is a comprehensive database of all children registered on TARE. This database is used by staff involved in the recruitment of adoptive homes for specific children and includes the children's demographic information, as well as profiles, photos, special needs, and videos.[18]

- ## Family Registry

  The Family Registry is a database of prospective adoptive families who have created an account with a login and password, and who have completed a family profile on TARE. Family profiles include demographic data, household data, and adoption preferences, as well as the most current home screening (if available). This database is used by staff involved in the recruitment of adoptive homes for specific children.[19]

- ## Inquiry Registry

  The Inquiry Registry is a database of inquiries received from prospective adoptive families. There are two types of inquiries: general and child specific. The general inquiry database lists families who have requested general information about fostering or adopting a child in Texas. These families may not have yet begun the process to become verified or approved. This database is specifically for foster/adoption home development (FAD) and SSCC staff who handle prospective foster care and adoption inquiries. It enables staff to track any follow-up actions and responses sent to the interested family. It also enables staff to track where the family is in the approval or verification process. The child-specific database is specifically for the TARE Coordinator or Caseworker to view inquiries received from families and track any actions or responses to child-specific inquiries.[20]

After posting on TARE, other recruitment efforts may begin, including **child participation in the Texas Heart Galleries.**[21] The **Heart Gallery programs are** a portrait exhibit and community education/outreach initiative featuring children in the foster care system available for adoption. In the words of Cathy Maier, the professional photographer who first conceived the idea of the Heart Gallery, "Through the art of photography, the unique spirit of these children shines, engaging the hearts of prospective families." Now, in its twentieth year, many communities across the country, including in Texas, have replicated the Heart Gallery model. There have also been national Heart Gallery exhibits featuring children from around the country. The [Heart Gallery of America](#) is a collaborative project of over 80 Heart Galleries across the country.

Talented photographers create inspiring portraits of older children and sibling groups waiting for adoption. Heart Galleries use the power of photography to capture the individuality and dignity of children living in foster care to advocate for their permanency and raise public awareness about their needs.

DFPS oversees implementation of [Heart Galleries](#) throughout Texas to raise awareness about adoption and promote the adoption of individual children in the Texas child welfare system. The Heart Gallery professional portraits are exhibited at locations within Texas communities, such as churches, libraries, museums, hospitals, and businesses.[22] DFPS has agreements with community-based organizations to implement and oversee some of the Heart Galleries in Texas. Other Heart Galleries are led exclusively by DFPS.

Additional recruitment efforts that may also begin after posting on TARE include **posting on national adoption websites**.[23] DFPS partners with four national photolisting sites to broaden recruitment efforts and reach families across the country.[24] According to the DFPS CPS Business Plan for fiscal years 2021-2022, CPS has entered into a service plan with AdoptUSKids that focuses on "assistance with best practices for adoption recruitment, photo listing, and youth engagement."[25] The work will include collaboration with external stakeholders to recruit adoptive families for older youth, sibling groups, and children with special needs.[26]

CPS is also working with Community-Based Care partners to ensure continued growth in permanency outcomes through adoption.[27] For example, BELONG, the Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) for Region 8b, is planning to launch the **Texas Adoption Portal (TAP)**, an online photo listing of waiting children in their area which will link to TARE.[28]

IMPROVE ADOPTION RECRUITMENT IN TEXAS

The following sections in this report discuss the key issues impacting the effective recruitment of prospective adoptive parents for children and youth in the Texas child welfare system and opportunities for improvement.

Key Findings

I. Some Children Waiting for Adoption are not Registered on TARE

Only about one-third of the estimated number of children waiting for adoption on any given day whose placement is not intended permanent are registered on TARE. There are a variety of possible reasons why a child waiting for adoption may not be registered on TARE, such as identification of an adoptive home prior to the deadline to register the child on TARE. However, study limitations prevent determining why the number of children waiting for adoption whose placement is not intended permanent is greater than the number registered on TARE.

II. TARE is not fully Optimized to Recruit Adoptive Parents

TARE has not been optimized to recruit adoptive parents. The goal of a photolisting is to reach prospective adoptive parents and help them make a connection with children who need a family. The quality of the photo shown can have a direct impact on whether a prospective family takes the first step towards adoption. **Yet not every child in TARE has a high-quality professional image.**

The TARE website includes a written profile of each child. According to DFPS, the purpose of the child profile is to introduce each child through a strengths-based description.[29] While anyone with Internet access can view waiting children and read one or two sentences about the child, to read a profile with additional detail, the prospective adoptive parents must first create an account in TARE. **Required account creation may result in some families failing to make an initial connection with a child during the "first glimpse."**

DFPS agency rule §700.1502 – Foster and Adoptive Home Inquiry and Screening requires that DFPS provide a written response to inquiries received as a result of recruitment efforts within 10 working days to provide families information about the process of becoming a foster or adoptive parent with DFPS.[30] **Technological limitations in TARE, such as lack of an automatic email notification alert sent to DFPS staff when inquiries are submitted, may result in a delayed response to families.** Current processes require that DFPS proactively enter the TARE application to determine if children have received inquiries from prospective adoptive families.[31]

III. Response to Inquiries from Prospective Adoptive Parents May be Delayed

There may be delays in providing a response to inquiring prospective families. There is some evidence from the provider and adoptive parent community in Texas that inquiries received from prospective adoptive parents are not responded to in a timely manner. Further study is needed to quantify the extent to which this is occurring.

IV. Texas Heart Galleries are not Featuring all Children Registered on TARE

Heart Gallery photographic exhibits are a powerful tool to help recruit adoptive parents for waiting youth and raise community awareness around adoption, foster care, and permanency. According to the DFPS CPS Handbook, children included in a Texas Heart Gallery must first be registered on TARE.[32] As shown in **Figure 2, very few of the children registered on TARE are subsequently featured in a Heart Gallery.** As a result, the recruitment resources a child receives varies depending on where they are in the state. Specifically, only about one-third (336) of children registered on TARE are featured in a Heart Gallery. The exception is Region 7 where Partnerships for Children has an agreement with DFPS to operate the Heart Gallery and there are more children in the Heart Gallery than who are registered on TARE. This may result if the Heart Gallery Coordinator is not notified that a child was removed from TARE and should then also be removed from the Heart Gallery.[33]

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF CHILDREN FEATURED IN A TEXAS HEART GALLERY – NOVEMBER 2021

DFPS Region	Children Waiting for Adoption on 8/31/20[56]	Children Registered on TARE on 11/10/21	Children Featured in Heart Gallery on 11/10/21
1	193	81	24
2	130	27	9
3	563	196	57
4	162	61	27
5	97	32	11
6	428	140	32
7	285	106	110
8	513	174	38
9	112	49	0
10	47	14	8
11	219	79	20
Statewide Total	**2,749**	**959**	**336**

Source: DFPS Data Book, TARE website, Texas Heart Gallery website.
Notes: The data shown are a daily snapshot and may vary over time. The number of children waiting for adoption on August 31, 2020, approximates the number waiting on any given day and only includes those whose placement is not intended permanent. Study limitations prevent determining why the number of children waiting for adoption is greater than the number registered on TARE.

There are three main reasons why not all children registered on TARE are featured in a Heart Gallery:

- **Not all areas in Texas are served by a Heart Gallery.** As shown in **Figure 3**, not every DFPS region has a Heart Gallery. Specifically, there is no Heart Gallery operating in Region 3b or 8a. Also, a Heart Gallery in a given region may not serve all cities in that region. For example, the Heart Gallery of Wichita Falls in Region 2 does not include Abilene.[34] Additionally, some of the existing Heart Galleries are not actively taking and displaying portraits in the community. For example, the Heart Gallery in Region 8b and Region 9 are not currently displaying exhibits in the community.[35] Due to study limitations, this assessment could not determine the activity level of Heart Galleries in Texas.

FIGURE 3: TEXAS HEART GALLERIES – NOVEMBER 2021

DFPS Region	Heart Gallery	Lead Agency
1 (CBC)	South Plains	Saint Francis Community Services in Texas (SSCC) Lubbock Interagency Adoption Council
1 (CBC)	High Plains	Potter Randall County Child Welfare Board
2 (CBC)	Wichita Falls	DFPS
2 (CBC)	Brownwood Heart Gallery	Brownwood County Child Welfare Board
3a	North Texas	Gladney
3b (CBC)	**No Heart Gallery**	**N/A**
4	North East Texas	Moberly Baptist Church of Longview
5	Deep East Texas	DFPS
6A	Houston	BEAR - BE A Resource for CPS Kids
6B	Hearts of Hope	Crosspoint Church
7	Central Texas	Partnerships for Children
8a	**No Heart Gallery**	**N/A**
8b (CBC)	Bluebonnet Country	DFPS
9	Heart of Texas	DFPS
10	El Paso	DFPS
11	South Texas	DFPS
11	Heart and Soul	Rotary Club of Historic Brownsville

Source: Analysis of DFPS Heart Gallery website, DFPS Heart Gallery spreadsheet, and key informant interviews.

- **Staffing and resource constraints may limit Heart Gallery operations and ultimately the number of children included in existing Heart Galleries.** For example, in at least one of the Heart Galleries led by DFPS, the staff person assigned to manage Heart Gallery activities has many other job responsibilities and cannot devote the time needed to obtain photos and prints of all the children and secure additional sponsors in the community to display the prints.[36] Furthermore, not every area has a community-based organization participating in Heart Gallery activities that could supplement or supplant DFPS activities. A child may not be included in a Heart Gallery simply because available staff have limited time to facilitate obtaining a high-quality professional photo which is exacerbated due to wide geographic placement of children in a given region.[37]

- **Regional variations on how DFPS staff engage in Heart Gallery activities may delay or prevent a child's inclusion in existing Heart Gallery recruitment efforts.** There are different methods by which a Heart Gallery Coordinator may learn about a child who should be included in a Heart Gallery. These methods include receiving a list of children from DFPS staff or DFPS staff submitting an online Heart Gallery referral form.[38] In some cases, the Heart Gallery Coordinator may cross-reference the children registered on TARE with those currently in the Heart Gallery to identify children missing from the Heart Gallery.[39] If the Heart Gallery Coordinator does not learn about a child, their entry into a Heart Gallery may be delayed or not occur. After learning that a child should be included in a Heart Gallery, the Heart Gallery Coordinator coordinates with DFPS staff on the Heart Gallery photo session and written narrative.[40] A child's timely inclusion in the Heart Gallery depends on effective coordination and communication between DFPS staff and the Heart Gallery Coordinator. See **Appendix A** for a process map of the Adoptive Parent Recruitment Process in Texas that includes additional detail on how children awaiting adoption are included in TARE and Heart Galleries.

Innovative Methods are Used in Some Areas to Identify Prospective Adoptive Parents

There are a variety of innovative methods used in other states and in some Texas communities to identify prospective adoptive parents that could help children in the Texas child welfare system find a permanent family. These approaches, which could be implemented or expanded in Texas, include **virtual match events and specialized recruitment strategies**, such as the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's evidence-based child-focused recruitment model, Wendy's Wonderful Kids.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, DFPS has hosted regular in-person match events where children awaiting adoption, including sibling groups, and prospective adoptive families could meet each other. Historically, in-person match events have also provided an opportunity for volunteer professional photographers to capture high-quality photos of waiting children who are gathered in one place with their siblings.[41] According to key informant interviews, in-person match events have stopped occurring due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[42] There are also geographical constraints that impact the ability to hold in-person match events.[43] Children may be living in foster homes that are widely dispersed within a geographic area.[44] Implementation of virtual match events could address challenges faced due to limited in-person match events which have reduced recruitment opportunities.

V. Coordination and Performance Tracking Can Guide Successful Adoptive Parent Recruitment

System-wide efforts to coordinate and track statewide adoptive parent recruitment goals, strategies, and outcomes, can help the state of Texas maximize opportunities to recruit prospective adoptive parents for children in the Texas child welfare system. Clearly defined goals provide a framework from which child welfare administrators can take action to implement adoptive parent recruitment strategies. Performance measurement can help identify process strengths and weaknesses and redirect resources as needed to improve recruitment efforts.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

I. Review TARE Registration Processes

The state of Texas should determine the reasons why some children waiting for adoption whose current placement is not intended permanent are not registered on TARE. The review should also **evaluate TARE registration processes to identify and address obstacles** that may prevent timely registration of waiting children.

II. Redesign the TARE Website

The **TARE website should be redesigned** to optimize how it is used to recruit adoptive parents, including improved user access, navigation, layouts, content, and functionality with IMPACT and the SSCC systems. The redesign should ensure that every child's posting in TARE include a high-quality professional image, strengths-based narrative, and recruitment video (if allowed and desired). **Figure 4** shows examples of statewide photolisting websites in other states that are engaging and easy to navigate. Many of these websites include high-quality images, a strength-based narrative, and videos. Additionally, these websites do not require account creation to view the child's strengths-based narrative.

FIGURE 4: INNOVATIVE PHOTOLISTING WEBSITES IN OTHER STATES – FEBRUARY 2022

State	Program Name
Idaho	Idaho Wednesday's Child
Indiana	Indiana Adoption Program
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange
Michigan	Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange
Utah	Utah's Adoption Connection

Source: Review of state adoption photolisting websites on the Child Welfare Information Gateway.

Operational adjustments to TARE should include:

Ensuring coordination with the Texas Heart Gallery program, including establishing a streamlined process to use the professional Heart Gallery photo in the TARE application.

Updating the TARE Manual, associated forms, compliance tools, and training as needed to ensure each child's initial registration and updates in the redesigned TARE website are timely and accurate.

Configuring an automatic email notification alert sent to DFPS staff when inquiries are submitted.

Allowing anyone searching waiting children access to a strength-based narrative without having to create an account.

III. Review the Inquiry Response System

Centralized Recruitment Programs are shown to improve communications. The South Carolina Department of Social Services launched a Centralized Recruitment Program in November 2019 to address a breakdown in communication between inquiring families and children's caseworkers. The Centralized Recruitment Office has two staff who receive inquiries for waiting children from the state-maintained website, AdoptUSKids, and the South Carolina Heart Gallery. Each inquiry is responded to within three business days. All families have an electronic file stored in an internal database on SharePoint. The Centralized Recruitment Office has two weeks to review all documents for a potential match.

The state of Texas should determine the extent to which inquiries received from prospective adoptive parents are responded to in a timely manner. The state should also evaluate current methods used to manage inquiries from prospective adoptive parents about specific children or youth who are photolisted on the TARE website or through a statewide Heart Gallery program and make modifications needed to ensure an effective and timely response system. A response system includes how a state responds to, engages, and begins supporting inquiring families. The system should keep inquiring families engaged and move the process forward by helping families learn more about children who may be a good match. According to AdoptUSKids, effective photolisting response systems are responsive and timely; accessible and engaging; supportive; data-driven; and consistent in messaging.

IV. Create a Statewide Heart Gallery Program

The state of Texas should **create a statewide Heart Gallery program with common components** that include all children throughout Texas who are awaiting adoption. A statewide program would ensure that all areas in Texas are served by a Heart Gallery. To address staffing and resource constraints, the state should consider allocating funds to DFPS to fund:

- A dedicated state-level Heart Gallery Coordinator position housed at either DFPS or a community-based organization to coordinate statewide Heart Gallery strategy and oversee regional Heart Gallery activity, including agreements or contracts with Heart Gallery community-based organizations; and

- Dedicated regional Heart Gallery Coordinators at DFPS or provided through community-based organizations who are contracted to perform regional Heart Gallery activities.

The common components of a statewide Heart Gallery program might include:

A volunteer base of professional photographers to ensure that every child who is waiting in foster care for an adoptive family to be found has access to a professional photo shoot experience designed specifically for them.	An engaging and easy to navigate state-level website with video segments as permitted, such as in Arkansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Utah.
Vendor agreements to obtain prints at a free or reduced cost.	Linkage between the online portion of the Heart Gallery program and TARE.
Photo exhibits, including permanent digital format displays.	Child-specific media campaigns using a strengths-based model, including outlets that reach communities of color, such as Spanish language television stations.

To ensure that a child's inclusion in Heart Gallery recruitment efforts is not delayed or prevented due to lack of effective coordination and communication, the statewide Heart Gallery program should include standardized written protocol that clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of DFPS staff, the dedicated state-level Heart Gallery Coordinator, and regional Heart Gallery Coordinators. Protocol should address, at a minimum, the notification of children awaiting adoption and coordinating professional photo shoots and the strengths-based written narrative.

V. Expand Innovative Specialized Recruitment Events and Programs

The state of Texas should partner with SSCCs and CPAs **to implement regular virtual match events** whereby a videographer records child interviews that are compiled into a video presentation shown at virtual meetings with licensed adoptive families. Virtual match events are intended to supplement and not supplant in-person match events where children awaiting adoption, including sibling groups, and prospective adoptive families come together to meet each other. In cases where geographic limitations or other barriers, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, prevent or delay in-person match events, virtual match events can provide an additional method to recruit prospective adoptive parents. For example, the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange provides meet and greets through a virtual platform. Organizations in Texas serving the child welfare population have also participated in virtual match events.

Among the youth who wait the longest for adoption are those ten years and older and living in residential care settings.[45] Research shows that these youth are most likely to be adopted by someone who has already had the opportunity to get to know them as an individual.[46] However, for many of these youth, residential care leaves them with minimal natural networks and community supports. The state of Texas should **develop a specialized recruitment program modeled after efforts in other states that incorporates youth into a host family's social networks**, thereby exposing the youth to a new community of adults in the hopes that an adoptive family will come forward to adopt that child.

Weekend Family Connections Introduces Youth to New Adults. The Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange, in partnership with Cambridge Family and Children's Service and the Department of Children and Families, established the Weekend Family Connections Program in 2019 that pairs youth in foster care who are waiting for adoption with host families who are committed to actively incorporating the youth into their community and family life. The program matches youth over the age of 10 and living in residential care with host families who commit to having a youth in their home one weekend per month for one year. The host family provides the youth with opportunities to meet other adults in their lives, such as neighbors, co-workers, members of their faith communities, or sports teams. The goal of the program is to build connections that will ultimately result in the identification of an adoptive family, while allowing the youth a positive experience with family life.

Through the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) program, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption provides funding to hire recruiters dedicated to finding permanent families for children in foster care across the United States and Canada.[47] The program uses an evidence-based, child-focused recruitment model to find the right family for every child.[48] Recruiters work with smaller caseloads of 12 to 15 children to ensure that each child receives necessary time, resources, and support.[49] A five-year national evaluation found that older children and those with mental health challenges served by Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters are three times more likely to be adopted.[50]

The program began in 2004 with pilots in seven cities.[51] In 2012, the state of Ohio committed to an innovative public-private partnership to implement Wendy's Wonderful Kids statewide.[52] Between 2017 and 2020, the program expanded statewide in Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington.[53] There are Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters in select cities in other states, including Texas.[54] Currently, there are three agencies in Texas with WWK recruiters. These include **Arms Wide Adoption Services**, **Helping Hand Home for Children**, and **Upbring**.[55] The state of Texas should **develop a public-private partnership with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption to implement WWK statewide**, like many other states have done.

VI. Coordinate SSCC Activity with Statewide Recruitment

As the state of Texas transitions from traditional foster care to Community-Based Care, **the state and SSCCs should maximize efforts to coordinate on adoptive parent recruitment goals and strategies**, including TARE and Heart Galleries. Other SSCCs may consider collaborating with BELONG as they work to launch TAP.

VII. Track Data to Measure Recruitment Strategy Success

The state of Texas should **establish adoptive parent recruitment goals to guide strategies and use performance indicators to measure the success of recruitment efforts**. The state should collaborate with a stakeholder group to establish the goals, performance indicators, benchmark targets, and method for assessment. The state should, at a minimum, track performance data that measures compliance with the requirements that 1) children are registered on the TARE website by the 60th day following an Order for Termination of Parental Rights; and 2) potential adoptive parent inquiries receive a written response within 10 working days.

Research in this publication was generously supported by the Opt Institute, a newly formed national non-profit resource for adoption-focused people and organizations.
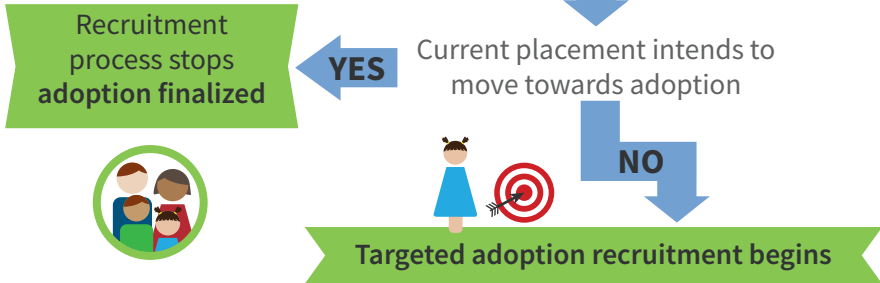
APPENDIX A: TEXAS ADOPTIVE FAMILY RECRUITMENT

Children in the foster care system become legally free for adoption when a court orders termination of parental rights

START HERE

Parental rights are terminated and child is assigned an adoption caseworker

✳*Each child's caseworker must make a concentrated effort to find a prospective adoptive family for the child during the first 60 days following termination of parental rights*✳

Current placement intends to move towards adoption

YES → Recruitment process stops **adoption finalized**

NO → **Targeted adoption recruitment begins**

OTHER ADOPTION RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Texas Adoption Portal

AdoptUSkids

Child-focused recruitment models *(KidSave's Weekend Miracles and DTFA's Wendy's Wonderful Kids)*

1 TEXAS ADOPTION RESOURCE EXCHANGE

DFPS Staff register child on the Texas Adoption Resource Exchange (TARE) website → Caseworker coordinates child photograph and writes narrative for TARE submission → Caseworker registers child on TARE → TARE state office staff publish registration on TARE → Inquiries from potential adoptive families are received

What is TARE?

The Texas Adoption Resource Exchange (TARE) is an adoption recruitment website that matches children awaiting adoption with adoptive families. It includes photos and profile information on children available for adoption, resources and education materials around adoption and allows families to register and provide information about their adoption preferences.

Once a child is registered on TARE they are eligible to be enrolled in additional adoption recruitment opportunities in Texas and nationally

2 TEXAS HEART GALLERIES

What are Heart Galleries (HG)?

Heart Gallery programs* are portrait exhibits and community education/outreach initiatives that feature children in the foster care system who are waiting for adoption. Portraits are taken by volunteer professional photographers in the community.

Some are run by DFPS, some are run in collaboration with DFPS by community partners

Child is referred to a Heart Gallery program by caseworker → Caseworker and HG Coordinator work to get needed information and coordinate logistics → Child receives professional photograph as well as an opportunity for recruitment through a local news station if available in the region → Child HG profile is linked to TARE. Inquiries can be received through both the HG and TARE websites

Photos exhibits are displayed throughout the community

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL RECRUITMENT

Delay in registering a child on TARE can be a barrier to the child participating in other recruitment opportunities.

Logistical planning can be a **barrier** due to functionality of HG programs in some areas

Referral to a HG program is not standardized and the process is left to caseworker discretion

HG programs have regional variances and not all areas of the state are covered

✳ **DFPS staff involved in adoption recruitment**

Child's caseworker; Foster and Adoptive Home Development (FAD) staff; regional TARE coordinator; TARE state office staff; HG regional liaison; HG state office liaison; and Faith Based & Community Engagement Specialists

ENDNOTES

1   Mark E. Courtney and Amy Dworsky, "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19," Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, May 2005.

2   DFPS Data Book, https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Conservatorship/Exits.asp

3   DFPS Data Book, https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Adoption/Children_Waiting_Adoption.asp

4   DFPS Data Book, https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Adoption/Children_Waiting_Adoption.asp

5   DFPS Data Book, https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Adoption/Placements-by_Disabling_Conditions.asp

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17 DFPS TARE Manual, October 2020.

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19 DFPS TARE Manual, October 2020.

20 DFPS TARE Manual, October 2020.

21 DFPS CPS Handbook Section 6900 Adoption Preparation and Support Services.

22 Key informant interview with DFPS State Office staff, October 5, 2021; Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

23 DFPS CPS Handbook Section 6900 Adoption Preparation and Support Services.

24 DFPS TARE Manual, October 2020.

25 DFPS CPS Business Plan, Fiscal Years 2021-2022.

26 DFPS CPS Business Plan, Fiscal Years 2021-2022.

27 DFPS CPS Business Plan, Fiscal Years 2021-2022.

28 Key informant interview with BELONG, October 12, 2021.

29 DFPS TARE Manual, October 2020.

30   Title 40 Social Services and Assistance, Part 19 Department of Family and Protective Services, Chapter 700 Child Protective Services, Subchapter O Foster and Adoptive Home Development, Rule §700.1502 – Foster and Adoptive Home Inquiry and Screening.

31   Key informant interview with Partnerships for Children, 10/6/21.

32   DFPS CPS Handbook Section 6900 Adoption Preparation and Support Services.

33   Email from Michele Freeman, Partnerships for Children, 11/21/21.

34   Email from Jeannette McQueen, Foster/Adoption Ministry Director, Beltway Park Church, 10/27/21.

35   Key informant interview with Guadalupe County Child Welfare Board, November 9, 2021.

36   Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

37   Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

38   Key informant interview with Partnerships for Children, 10/6/21; Key informant interview with Gladney, 10/20/21; Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

39   Key informant interview with Partnerships for Children, 10/6/21.

40   Key informant interview with Partnerships for Children, 10/6/21; Key informant interview with Gladney, 10/20/21; Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

41   Key informant interview with DFPS State Office staff, October 5, 2021; Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

42   Key informant interview with Region 5 Faith Based and Community Engagement Staff, October 11, 2021.

43   Key informant interview with BELONG staff, October 25, 2021.

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48   https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/our-programs/wendys-wonderful-kids/

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55   https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/agency-search/?_locations=texas

56   DFPS Data Book, https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Data_Book/Child_Protective_Services/Adoption/Children_Waiting_Adoption.asp