

# Adoption Now: A Joint Initiative of New York's Courts and Child Welfare System

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In November 2002, Chief Judge Judith Kaye attended the National Adoption Day festivities in Albany County and New York County (Manhattan). Although pleased that 600 adoptions were being finalized statewide on this special day, she was concerned to learn more than 6,000 other children were free for adoption but had not yet found permanent families. Judge Kaye reached out to New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) Commissioner John A. Johnson and New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) then-Commissioner William Bell to come together and begin a discussion to identify and resolve systemic barriers to adoption. At a press conference in May 2003, Chief Judge Kaye, Governor Pataki, New York City Mayor Bloomberg, and Judges and Commissioners representing counties from across the state announced the Adoption Now initiative that set a goal of finalizing adoptions for 5,000 children (3800 in New York City and 1200 upstate) by the end of 2003.

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To implement the Adoption Now workgroup initiative, a multicounty, multidisciplinary workgroup<sup>2</sup> was formed. The workgroup was comprised of OCFS regional and central office representatives, Family Court Judges and other local court staff, including NYS Court Improvement Project staff representing its two pilot sites, Buffalo, (see Figure 1) and New York City (see Figure 2), representatives of the Office of Court Administration (OCA), New York City ACS staff, and county social services district (DSS) representatives. Representatives from OCFS and OCA cochaired the workgroup. The Adoption Now workgroup was charged with identifying and ameliorating systemic issues that impeded the expedited finalization of foster care adoptions. Meetings were held monthly via videoconference from court and OCFS sites, with at least four areas participating across the state.

Collaboration was hard—at least at first! Participants came to the workgroup with opinions of the other members' systems and work performance in those systems, including preconceived opinions of the inadequacies of each other's work. This was based at times on a lack of understanding of the other systems. Until working relationships were established, the workgroup struggled to address issues proactively and come to agreement on resolution of issues. As time went on, the tendency to point fingers began to lessen and real accomplishments were achieved.

Differences in regional practice across the state and from jurisdiction to jurisdiction were also taken into consideration and resolved. New York State local social services districts range in size from ACS, that provides services to the five boroughs of New York

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<sup>1</sup>New York State has a state-supervised, locally administered social services system.

<sup>2</sup>The NYS Court Improvement Project was closely involved with this initiative. Several team members took an active role in many of the workgroups and often used their local stakeholders as "sounding boards" and secondary reviewers on various projects. Moreover, the ongoing collaboration of the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, administrator of the NYS CIP, with the NYS Office of Children and Family Services served as a strong foundation for the effort.

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**FIGURE 1**
**Buffalo Initiatives Stemming from the Adoption Panel Review Process**


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- **Case Management Plan.** A unified filing and review process was implemented that centralizes the filing and management of the adoption packet with the Court Attorney Referee handling the Permanency Hearings and reviews for children that are freed for adoption. The key is having the relevant parties, already part of the hearings, disclosing potential barriers early on and using a multi-system approach to resolving those issues.
  - **Collaborative Workgroup.** Development of a collaborative workgroup assigned to address systemic issues arising from the panel reviews and institute local change efforts.
  - **Appellate Reform.** Collaboration with the Appellate Division for the Fourth Department led to the identification of a law clerk designated to specifically manage child permanency cases. Strict timelines have been set in place and guidelines have been outlined to prevent the inappropriate use of extensions.
  - **Court Order Processing.** An ad hoc workgroup was developed to monitor the order generation and entry process, recommend modifications and track order processing.
  - *Birthfather Identification.* DSS improved communication between the child welfare and support collection departments to maximize location efforts for birthfathers. Through this initiative, children's service now has access to advanced "search" tools that were previously only accessible to child support.
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City (population 8,104,079), to small, rural Hamilton County (population 5,227.) The New York City Family Court has more than 50 judges presiding in courts in each borough, while the sole family court judge in Hamilton County is a so-called "triple-hatter," presiding over county criminal, surrogate, and family court matters.

Adoption Now was launched during the same period that OCFS was implementing the New York State Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address issues identified in the child welfare system during the federal 2001 CFSR. One strategy of the New York State PIP was to improve collaboration between local DSS and family courts through a number of activities, chief among which was the provision of cross-training events for family court and DSS personnel. The court/agency training committee worked with the Adoption Now workgroup to assure that the work of both groups was coordinated and complementary.

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**FIGURE 2**NYC Initiatives Stemming from the Adoption Panel Review Process

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- **Case Management Plan.** The NYC Family Court assigned time frames for completion of the various court functions involved in processing adoption cases as part of an “Agency Adoption Case Management Plan”. The Plan requires the court to establish dates for submission of the additional information requested. In addition, it calls for calendaring of adoption cases, at stated intervals, and for the court to assess the status and make interim orders, where appropriate, to expedite the case.
- **Judicial Directive.** A directive was issued by Administrative Judge Joseph Lauria as an immediate response to issues arising directly from the initial round of agency adoption case reviews. The directive sets forth procedures for expediting TPR orders, identified at the reviews as either missing or unsigned, as well as for expediting the court’s review of adoption submissions which were identified at the reviews as not in compliance with the above outlined Plan.
- **Routine Reporting.** The Court has mandated a monthly report of pending adoptions. It is a compilation of all docketed cases which have been pending in the court in excess of 90 days along with a brief description of the status of the case, including reason for any delay. In addition, all judicial officers must account for all adoptions pending with their part for more than 6 months on a quarterly basis.
- **Enhanced Representation.** Finally, the Pro Bono Adoption Project which was created in 2003 as a result of the “Adoption Now” initiative, is a collaboration among the private bar, MFY Legal Services, The Legal Aid Society, NYC Family Court, and ACS and their contract agencies. The project’s mission is to provide legal representation to adoptive parents of children in foster care through trained and supervised pro bono legal counsel from the participating law firms and corporations.

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Ultimately the workgroup formed subcommittees to develop various projects. Subcommittees used early morning telephone conferences and email to advance the work. Some of the products and ongoing initiatives of the workgroup will be described in this article.

This initiative was advanced with no new funds or personnel. Projects were undertaken with existing staff, adding to existing duties, mostly during regular business hours. The accomplishments of the workgroup were reported and reviewed at the monthly meetings between the state leaders, maintaining the project’s impetus and focus. OCFS accessed limited CFSR resources to film the video and print the time lines and other materials developed by the workgroup. The annual Sharing Success statewide collaborative conference has been used to showcase the work of the Adoption Now workgroup. This training conference that brings together local collaborative stake-

holder teams comprised of court and DSS staff is cofunded by OCFS, using funds allocated for the PIP, and the New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, using CIP funds.

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## Adoption Panel Reviews

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As collaborative discussions progressed, it became clear that the knowledge of issues and barriers was anecdotal and often case-driven. In one of the first few meetings held between State leaders and Judge Kaye, the group reached an agreement to hold multi-disciplinary panel reviews to assess the child-specific barriers in every jurisdiction across the state. The workgroup developed the adoption panel review process in order to have a better understanding of the barriers, to be able to evaluate whether specific barriers were regional or statewide, and to begin to identify areas where the workgroup could have a major impact in expediting adoptions. The process has been a dynamic one, adjusting to incorporate local practice and needs. It continues to this day across all regions of the state. Some local jurisdictions have adapted the process for use by local collaborative teams to review child welfare cases in preparation for the recent Federal IV-E Review.

The panels were conducted under the direction of ACS in New York City and the OCFS Regional Office Adoption Specialists upstate. The panels included the key players—OCFS, local family courts, local DSS and local agency staff. Generally, the panel process was simple. Using a list produced by OCFS from statewide data of all the children in care in that region who had the goal of adoption (as indicated in the state adoption monitoring computer system), the group convened a multidisciplinary case conference for each case.

The goals of the adoption panel reviews included:

- developing a regional understanding of existing systemic barriers to adoption;
- collaborative “brainstorming” of specific barriers preventing the adoption of a child;
- collaborative resolution of child specific barriers whenever possible;
- establishing accountability and setting time frames; and

- forming a partnership between ACS or the local DSS, voluntary agencies, Family Court and OCFS to facilitate an exchange of information on children waiting to be adopted.

Each of the six OCFS regions designed its own protocols for the panel reviews. OCFS created a database for the upstate counties and for children directly in the care of ACS. The OCFS database generated lists of children, identified the current status of the adoption, and outlined identified barriers. OCFS has updated the database throughout the project to demonstrate outcomes and track progress.

Upstate, OCFS Regional Adoption Specialists convened panels to meet with each county child welfare department (in larger counties, with each worker) and with each voluntary agency providing adoption services. The panel review team used the OCFS database to identify the current status of each child's progress toward adoption and to outline identified barriers. A key feature was the graphic portrayal of the number of months a child had waited at each milestone (time since placement, goal set, termination of parental rights). Agency representatives quickly discussed the status, relevant case history, and barriers preventing the finalization of the adoption for each child. Court representatives commented on ongoing legal barriers or strategies. Team members took responsibility for issues to be investigated or barriers to be addressed and "solved." All team members contributed ideas and strategies for moving specific children toward adoption. Some panels identified "target cases" to be finalized by the year's end, including all cases with no barriers and those where the barriers could easily be resolved. Panel participants committed to accomplishing targeted tasks toward finalization within a given time frame.

The New York City panel reviews followed a consistent protocol through five rounds of biannual panel reviews that examine approximately 1,500-2,000 cases per cycle. The ACS Adoption Review Unit (ARU) spearheaded the follow-up to the review. The ARU was responsible for tracking the adoption progress of the 500-600 cases identified for filing and any problem cases identified. The ARU communicated with OCFS, the agencies, and the courts on the follow-up areas. Additionally, the ARU provided agency-specific and aggre-

gate data on the number of cases that were filed within the set time frames as well as a breakdown of the adoption barriers. In 2004, New York City added representatives from one of the three contracted recruitment agencies—You Gotta Believe, Association of Black Social Workers, and Council on Adoptable Children—to the panel review to assist a contract agency with those children freed for adoption who were in need of an adoptive placement. The recruiters gathered preliminary information on the children needing placement and identified potential resource families.

The overall panel review process created a unique opportunity for different constituents to work together on a specific population of children with the goal of expediting permanency for these children by identifying and removing barriers to adoption. The presence of court staff and DSS directors of services on the panels led to the increased probability that local administrative changes would be implemented to reduce operational barriers and to instill adoption cases with a sense of urgency.

The reviews highlighted some common themes across the state.

- **Lack of uniformity of practice.** Court-to-court, and sometimes judge-to-judge, the reviews demonstrated that practice and expectations varied throughout the state. Agency representatives and attorneys discussed the differing expectations from judge to judge in terms of information filed prior to finalization. Discussions resulted in an adoption summary template, known as the Comprehensive Adoption Report, which will be detailed later in the article. In addition, the workgroup supported the legislation proposed by OCA, known as the One Judge/One Family law, which requires one judge to preside over a family's surrender or termination of parental rights proceeding and later filed adoption proceedings for child welfare-involved cases. The new law, passed in 2006, paves the way for greater consistency in practice.
- **Appeal delays.** At the beginning of the review process, it was not uncommon to have 2-year delays before termination appeals were resolved. The Chief Judge supported dialogue



with the Appellate Courts, and most judicial departments have instituted significant practice changes for cases involving appeals of termination of parental rights orders. The Appellate Courts instituted case management strategies including designated calendar slots for expedited oral argument, scheduled orders with rigid time lines, and restricted use of filing extensions. The work has shortened the average time to decision by one year and improvements continue.

- **Failure of attorney to file in a timely fashion.** Although not a routine delay, when an attorney was delinquent in filing the adoption petition and supporting papers, it often resulted in extensive delays in finalization. Two areas of improvement were identified: training for attorneys in the process and information for adoptive parents as to the responsibilities of the adoption attorney. The workgroup developed and supported training in many regions statewide that resulted in a "list" of knowledgeable attorneys. In addition, the workgroup developed a legal guide for prospective adoptive parents that will be detailed later in the article.
- **Adoption subsidy applications.** Since the start of the Adoption Now Initiative, processing of subsidies overall has improved through the panel review of specific issues; however, in particular, compiling the documentation for a handicapped subsidy application was often seen to occur too late in the adoption process. This was due to delays both by foster parents in requesting the documentation and scheduling professional appointments, and by professionals in providing the requested material. Requirements for necessary documentation of special-rate subsidy appeared to be somewhat subjective and varied from case to case. To address these discrepancies, a list was developed of conditions considered irreversible that would automatically qualify a child for handicapped subsidy. OCFS is also considering whether documentation from other systems, including, health, education, developmental disabilities, and mental health, would be sufficient to support a diagnosis qualifying for a higher rate subsidy without further documentation.



- **Cross-county placements.** Several counties expressed concern about how to better work with other counties and agencies within the state in the placement of children for adoption. Miscommunication, lack of supervision, delays in home studies, and requests for high fees from the placing agency were among the problems encountered. OCFS is revising a protocol working successfully between two upstate regions to address statewide issues. In addition, passage of the recent federal Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-239) provides short time frames for completion of home studies and should speed local practice.

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### Adoption Time Line

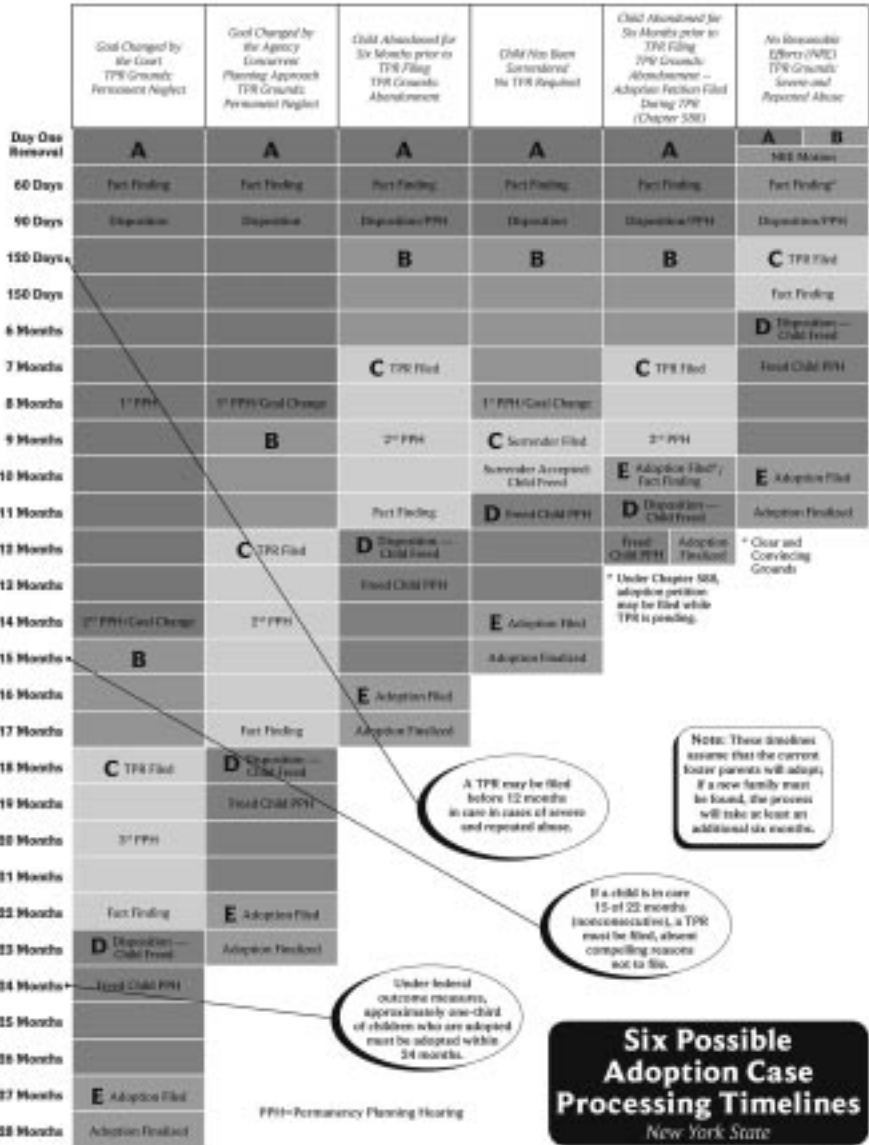
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The adoption panel reviews highlighted how adoption practice varied across the state, from county to county and, sometimes, from judge to judge. Caseworkers and attorneys caused delays in adoption finalization as they struggled to comply with these often idiosyncratic practices. As the workgroup discussed strategies more immediate than enacting legislative changes to standardize practice, the idea was born of creating a best practice time line for children with the goal of adoption that graphically demonstrated the milestones to timely adoption finalization, as seen in Figure 3. The workgroup developed several tracks to recognize that the legal ground for termination of parental rights, the issuance of a surrender, or the identification of a potential adoptive family will affect the overall case time line. Based upon the in-depth analysis of the best practices paper described below, the time line identified critical times during each case where local DSS could take steps to expedite permanency by collecting documentation, assessing legal strategies, and supporting interested preadoptive parents.

The time line has been dynamic, with revised versions distributed to address changes to NYS law as to the timing of Permanency Hearings. It was distributed through the annual Sharing Success conferences, through other statewide professional conferences and is available on the OCFS website. Along with its com-

**FIGURE 3**

Milestones to Timely Adoption Finalization



Note: This timeline is a product of the Adoption Now Workgroup, a multidisciplinary collaborative. NYS, 2005

**FIGURE 3**

## Milestones to Timely Adoption Finalization continued

**Early Steps to Expedite Permanency***Social Services Districts and/or Contract Agencies***A Prior to Goal Change to Adoption** **Gather Birth Family Information:**

- Child's birth certificate – multiple certified copies
- Family heritage
- Religious faith preference
- Certified death certificates of birth parents

**Other Steps:**

- Identify birth/positive father – check registry/federal parent locator
- Assess status of foster parent interest in adoption
- Identify relatives or other significant persons as permanency resources
- Collect any legal papers such as orders of filiation or custody
- Evaluate use of concurrent planning
- Place child in foster/adoptive home, if indicated
- Evaluate merits of mediation referral

**B After Goal Change/Prior to Filing**

- As early as possible, refer case to district or agency attorney for TPR or surrender filing
- Establish joint responsibility for case planning – foster care and adoption unit – or assign adoption expediter
- Assess status of foster parent interest in adoption
- Evaluate case for Chapter 588 adoption filing

**Adoptive Parent Information:**

- Address
- DOB
- Religion
- Certified copies of birth, death, marriage, and/or divorce certificates

**Child Specific Data:**

- Update adoptive child medical and psychosocial history for subsidy application
- Recognize and address any ambivalence toward adoption in older children

**If No Adoptive Resources:**

- Interview child
- Review relatives and significant persons
- Develop individual adoption plan
- Employ targeted recruitment methods

**C During TPR**

- Provide notice to adoption unit of filing of TPR
- If appropriate, file Chapter 588 adoption petition prior to TPR disposition
- Have TPR order prepared for submission to court as disposition
- Brief foster parents about the adoption process and their selection of an adoption attorney

**Adoptive Parent:**

- Signs intent to adopt form
- Completes adoption application
- Identifies back-up resources
- Provides certified copies of birth, death, marriage and/or divorce certificates, if not already in file

**New Reports:**

- Adoption home study
- Determination of eligibility for adoption subsidy
- Adoption subsidy request submitted and approved

**Updated Reports:**

- Putative Father Registry / Federal Parent Locator
- SCR background checks on all household members over 18
- Criminal clearance
- Foster parent medicals
- Child's medical

**If No Adoptive Resources:**

- Continue recruitment activities
- Child's photo ready for photostating

**D At Freeing**

- Provide notice to adoption unit of disposition: freeing child and/or confirm joint responsibility for case
- Provide notice of freeing and date of permanency hearing to foster and/or adoptive parents and encourage attendance

**Adoptive Parent:**

- Adoption attorney must be retained

**New Documents:**

- Freeing Orders
- Adoption placement agreement signed
- Adoption home study approved
- Adoption subsidy approved

**Other Steps:**

- Review adoption package
- Coordinate filing of adoption petition with adoption attorney for prospective parents, if not yet filed
- Prepare for freed child permanency hearing

**If No Adoptive Resources:**

- Child must be photostated
- Efforts to find adoptive home within six months must be intensified

**E At Adoption Filing****New Documents:**

- Affidavit of Financial Disclosure
- Affidavit of No Appeal
- Affirmation of Denial
- Verified Schedule
- DCA Affidavit Receipt
- Affidavit of Readiness
- Redetermination of eligibility for adoption subsidy

plementary training, the time line has become a bar for the standard of New York adoption practice.

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### **Freed Child Permanency Hearing Best Practices Paper**

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One serious issue identified by the workgroup was the significant time lag between a child becoming freed for adoption and that child achieving permanence by finalization of his or her adoption. In 2002, New York State passed legislation that required a permanency hearing to be scheduled either immediately following or within 60 days of the hearing at which a child was completely freed for adoption. The workgroup identified this review as providing an ideal opportunity for the parties and the court to assess a child's well being, review steps already taken toward adoption finalization, and develop strategies to quickly achieve permanency for a child, as presented in Figure 4. A subcommittee was formed to draft a "best practices" white paper regarding permanency hearings for freed children which would outline recommended practices for the actual permanency hearing, the steps leading up to it and those steps to be taken after the first permanency hearing has occurred after a child has been freed for adoption.

The paper stressed facilitating adopting a child by early gathering of information and preliminary work toward a child's adoption once a termination of parental rights proceeding was commenced. The paper then described a "best practice" permanency hearing once a child was freed for adoption. It detailed the people necessary to appear at the permanency hearing to enable a meaningful review of a child's status to occur, including the caseworker responsible for processing the adoption and the child's foster parents. The paper provided checklists for the report to be submitted to the court and parties prior to the hearing and to guide the court proceedings, as seen in Figure 5. In addition, the paper provided recommendations for preparation of the child and foster parents to appear and provide relevant information to the court.

In 2004, OCFS produced a video of an "ideal" permanency hearing for a child freed for adoption. The video demonstrated an ideal permanency hearing by depicting all participants in a good light—

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**FIGURE 4**

At the first Permanency Hearing after the child is freed for adoption the court will:

1. Review the service plan and permanency goal, including whether appropriate services have been provided to the child and/or the prospective adoptive parent(s), to expedite the adoption of the child.
2. Review the status of the documents and information needed to finalize the adoption.
3. Where the foster parent(s) have indicated intent to adopt the child but have taken no other steps to finalize the adoption, the court should explore potential impediments to adoption with the foster parent(s) and determine whether services or other assistance is necessary.
4. Establish a schedule for submission of documents and finalization of the adoption.

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**FIGURE 5**

The Freed Child Permanency Hearing report should include:

- Permanency plan for the child
  - Update on the child's health information and needs, including medical, dental and psychological information
  - Update on the child's educational information and next steps
  - Description of services currently being provided to the child and the child's progress
  - Description of reasonable efforts made to finalize the child's permanency plan
  - Status of the subsidy application, if applicable, and next steps
  - Status of the homestudy and next steps
  - Status of the adoption placement agreement and next steps
  - Status of the SCR screen update and Criminal History Review update for the adoptive household and next steps
  - Description of Interstate Compact (ICPC) issues and what steps will be taken to resolve identified issues
  - Whether the child is an Indian child subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), and if yes, what steps have been taken to comply with the requirements of ICWA
  - If the child is over the age of 16, description of the transitional services being provided to assist the child to prepare for independent living
  - Description of any impediments to achieving adoption and what steps will be taken to resolve them
  - Timetable for completion of all activities necessary to finalize the adoption
  - Copy of any agreement for post-adoption contact between the child and the birth family
  - Where a child indicates an unwillingness to be adopted by his or her foster or pre-adoptive parent(s), report on steps taken to work with the child to facilitate permanency for the child, and next steps
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everyone showed up on time and was fully prepared. The young man who portrayed the youth for whom the permanency hearing was held was an actual former foster youth who had been adopted. The video highlighted many messages, including presenting the adoption of an adolescent in a positive light, the importance of post adoption contact with birth family to an adolescent, and even the scheduling of the hearing for a time certain later in the afternoon to minimize lost time from school for the youth and work for the adoptive parents. The video and paper formed the basis for 11 regional trainings presented to multidisciplinary teams of court and local social services personnel from every jurisdiction of the state.

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### **Comprehensive Adoption Report**

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Another issue identified as causing delay in adoption finalization was the report of the adoption home study and investigation submitted to the court. The report, as defined by statute and court rule, is intended to provide the court with information regarding the investigation into the allegations of a petition for adoption, and to ascertain such other facts relating to the adoptive child and adoptive parents as will give a judge adequate basis for determining the propriety of the adoption. Inconsistency and inadequacy—in the amount of information provided in the report by different agencies or local DSS and inconsistencies from court to court in the information required for the report—occasioned delays. The workgroup recommended development of a model form—a comprehensive adoption report (CAR)—to provide a structure to enable the local DSS or agency submitting the report to be reasonably assured that in most instances the information provided, if accurate and up-to-date, would be sufficient for court approval on the first submission.

The subcommittee drafting the report erred on the side of inclusion without duplication in determining the information to be incorporated. With this project, the upstate/downstate differences were magnified. Judges presiding over adoptions in New York City wanted considerably more information regarding the adoptive parents than their upstate counterparts. This variance was attributed the upstate judges' greater familiarity with the foster parents in their

communities. To accommodate the differing needs of the jurisdictions, OCFS developed a website-based version of the report that permitted individualized selection of the categories of information to be downloaded into the report. The categories included an introduction section that detailed information such as a child's biological relationship to the adoptive parents, if applicable, the adoptive parents' prior experience with the adoption process and understanding of the legal commitment of adoption, and information regarding the child, the adoptive parents, and the adoptive family's home.

OCFS developed training to provide orientation to the new report. To date, the CAR has been field-tested in one borough in New York City with positive, though limited, results. The workgroup trained additional judges and agency staff in the winter of 2007 when a larger New York City pilot was initiated. In addition, a smaller upstate county is also expected to begin a pilot in the spring of 2007. Ultimately, the CAR will be incorporated into CONNECTIONS, the NYS Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System, when the adoption module is introduced. The report will then prepopulate with information available in the child's case record and information from approval of the adoptive parents. The incorporation is expected to significantly reduce the amount of caseworker time spent preparing the report.

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### **What to Expect from an Adoption Attorney Guide for Adoptive Parents**

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The workgroup struggled with how to address the issue of delay that may occur as result of the attorney hired by the adoptive parents to complete the adoption. Permanency hearings provide the court with the opportunity to assess the progress made toward adoption finalization. Although the adoptive parent is invited to the permanency hearings, the adoptive parent's attorney usually does not attend. The workgroup determined that the best way to address the issue was to empower adoptive parents with a greater understanding of the adoption finalization process, enabling them to make sure that the steps toward finalization are completed in a timely manner. The workgroup drafted a four-page pamphlet that



describes the adoption process and specifies the rights the adoptive parent will have in the relationship with the attorney selected to represent the adoptive parent. The caseworker provides it to the adoptive parents when the conversation regarding hiring an attorney takes place. 7500 copies of the pamphlet have been printed in English and Spanish for distribution to local DSS adoption agencies and courts. After that distribution, the pamphlet will be available on the OCFS website for downloading and printing.

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### Ongoing Work

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Much of the success of this project may be attributed to the individual group members representing the key stakeholders in the NYS child welfare process. However, it is the steadfast leadership and commitment from the agencies' highest administrators that rooted the collaboration and driven its accomplishment. In many instances, the project's outcomes are measurable and concrete. Its success was again recognized on a national level in 2005 when, for the second consecutive year, New York State received a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Adoption Incentive Award for the state's efforts to move children in the state's foster care system into permanent, loving families.

In order to maximize the potential and authority of this type of collaboration, the group's continuing initiatives fall into the following categories:

- Requiring the involvement of statewide, multisystem stakeholder groups.
- Building relationships with other state and federal agencies.
- Working on issues requiring statewide rule making and implementation.

Its agenda is set with tasks derived from the ongoing adoption panel reviews, annual Sharing Success conferences, and support of legislative changes.

To initiate system improvements that involve multiple agencies or require the involvement of statewide stakeholders, the group engages local, specialized assistance to resolve certain barriers. For example, the group is facilitating an ad hoc committee to address

issues that impede timely permanency in cases where a child cannot return home before the child is completely freed for adoption—especially any issues involving the process to terminate parental rights. This unique group is comprised of state agency administrators, Family Court Judges, DSS Commissioners, and private attorneys. In addition, the workgroup is developing key relationships with other state and federal agencies. The workgroup is building a relationship with the state Department of Health to expedite the issuance of postadoption birth certificates and is working with the Social Security Administration to clearly define the process for obtaining initial or revised Social Security Cards for adopted children. It is also working on the statewide implementation of the comprehensive adoption report through a partially prefilled template accessible through the state CONNECTIONS case management system. Finally, the workgroup continues to develop a statewide protocol for expediting the placement of children across county lines.

As its work continues, the group struggles to involve as many stakeholders at the local level as possible in the process and to communicate its best practice strategies to our partners statewide. While members changed and changed again since the workgroup was first formed, affiliations remained consistent. The workgroup achieved the best results when it worked on “products” or specific issues. The use of videoconferencing allowed the workgroup to come together monthly without significant lost time from daily duties; although it oftentimes impeded free-flowing discussion, causing frustration to members.

Over the life of the workgroup, the number of children in foster care dropped from 37,080 children in 2002 to 27,364 children in care in June of 2006. Considering the significant overall decrease in the number of children in foster care, adoption finalization rates remained consistently high, although the number of adoptions finalized decreased from a high of 4,522 in 2003, the first year of the Adoption Now initiative, to 3,162 in 2005. Strategic work with adolescents resulted in sustained increase in the number of older adolescents with the goal of adoption and youth 18 years or older achieving adoption finalization. In 2002, of the 2,917 youth 18

years or older in foster care, only 126 had the goal of adoption and 81 had an adoption finalized. In June of 2006, of the 2,865 youth 18 years or older in foster care, 248 had the goal of adoption and 70 already had an adoption finalized.

The workgroup remains committed to facilitating the child specific panel reviews and its other collaborative efforts. By disseminating tangible projects such as the time line, Freed Child Permanency Hearing best practices paper, and the Adoption Attorney Guide, and the increasing success of the Sharing Success conference as a vehicle for sharing best practice, the Adoption Now workgroup is recognized as a New York leader in child welfare reform.

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