Customer Service
and Customer Support
Protocols for Adoption Services

Minimum Standards for Customer Service Protocol
1. An inquiry from a prospective adoptive parent about the adoption process who does not have an approved home study must receive a response in 3 business days or less.

2. An inquiry from a prospective adoptive parent with an approved home study who wants to learn more about a specific child on the Explore Adoption website, AdoptUSKids, Heart Gallery or Children Awaiting Parents must receive a response in 3 business days or less.

3. Out of town inquiries require collaboration between the case managers of two jurisdictions or geographical areas and consistent contact with the prospective or approved adoptive parents must be required. Working agreements between CBC agencies include placement and supervision processes that ensure services and courtesy supervision are in place prior to the day of placement.

Minimum Standards for Provision of Post Adoption Services:
1. A sufficient number of accessible adoptive parent support groups are established that meet at least once a month with a CBC liaison assigned to each group to assist, when needed, in maintaining the groups over time. An adoptive parent support group for Spanish-speaking adoptive parents may need to be established in some areas. In rural areas where there are insufficient numbers of adoptive families for a support group, a monthly or quarterly newsletter may be established and maintained.

2. At the time of finalization, the adoptive parents must be provided a letter or document that explains the process for accessing post-adoption services, including specific contact information.

3. One or more post-adoption case managers are needed to temporarily assist adoptive parents after finalization. At a minimum, post adoption services must include temporary case management as needed for emotional support, educational advocacy, assistance in accessing services, and information and referrals.

4. A process is needed to inform adoptive parents of training/educational opportunities occurring locally, in the state of Florida and nationally related to adoption issues or specific behavioral, mental health, or medical challenges.

5. A process is needed that informs the post-adoption case manager when a child protective investigator has an investigation that involves an adoptive family. The post-adoption case manager may assist with an assessment for services related to the needs of the child, other children in the family or the adoptive parents.

6. With the assistance of an adoption competent facilitator, adopted teen support groups may be established to assist adopted teens and teens waiting for adoption to discuss adolescent issues related to the adoption process.

Adoption success begins with a stated commitment to customer service and support for adoptive families.

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning reported that over the last decade, the inclusion of "consumer voice" has become a vital part of the child welfare practice. Most states have started developing internal mechanisms for inclusion in their programs. In a subsection on stakeholder involvement, it reads, "Consumer voice can provide vital perspectives on what is "working" and what is not. Further, advocacy efforts not directly affiliated with an agency have also produced policy and practice changes."

Governor Crist has made adoption of Florida's children in foster care a priority of his administration. A reasonable customer service protocol for Florida's adoption process should be in place that requires an appropriate response to all inquiries from adoptive families, beginning with the initial inquiry and continuing after adoptions are finalized.

The goal is to make sure every customer (potential adoptive parent) is properly informed and feels comfortable and confident about the adoption process in Florida. Furthermore, the commitment to customer service must continue throughout the adoption process. Our prospective adoptive parents need guidance and encouragement to keep them engaged. They also need to be provided with realistic timeframes and expectations. The adoption process can be overwhelming and families may become frustrated when trying to navigate the system.

Post adoption support is also a critical element of the customer service protocol. Families adopting children whose experience includes foster care placement will face significant challenges in coping with abuse and neglect, attachment and residual loss issues. Agencies need to have services in place and available to families to successfully meet the life long challenges of adoption. These services include: education and training, mental health assistance, and supportive assistance.

Our customers are making a life changing commitment. In turn, they deserve a commitment from us.

Background:
Victor Groza, PhD, in an article appearing in the National Child Welfare Resource Center, wrote about the increase of international adoptions as a result of families being dissatisfied with the public adoption process. Groza stated, "There are several things public agencies can do to increase the number of families who adopt from the public system rather than internationally. These include:

- friendly and responsive customer service.
- predictability about the adoption process.
- support during the waiting period.

Customer service begins with the initial call from a prospective adoptive family. When a family calls, it is important to return the call in a timely fashion. When a family contacts to agency, it is critical to be welcoming and helpful. If agency staff are going to do something, such as mailing an invitation or information or calling back, the agency must ensure that the action actually happens.

Families need consistent, ongoing support throughout the process. A phone call to offer a kind word, an invitation to an event, or an e-mail lets them know they have not been forgotten.

Good customer service does not end with an adoption; it is essential for post adoption services also. There are unique health issues as well as behavioral, developmental, and psychosocial issues well-known from research with children adopted from foster care.

…"Good Customer Service: What Public Welfare Workers Should Know About International Adoptions", printed in *The Roundtable, Volume 23, Number 1*., 2009 National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption, Spaulding for Children, MI, www.nrcadoption.org

Overcoming Barriers to the Adoption of Foster Children
Jeff Katz, Listening to Parents Project

Research at Harvard University and the Urban Institute has documented that in any given year, 240,000 Americans call social service agencies for information about adopting a child from foster care. Yet only 10,000 to 15,000 of these will actually adopt. Interviews and focus groups with prospective adoptive parents have documented a range of barriers that keep prospective adoptive parents from completing the process. These include difficulty in reaching the right person at an agency, unpleasant initial contacts with agency staff, negativity about the children designed to scare off "uncommitted" parents, and frustration with agency bureaucracy.

Whatever the reason that public child welfare agencies treat prospective parents so poorly, one fact is clear: Few public child welfare agencies use traditional customer service feedback methods to assess the quality of their services.

To prevent the steep attrition of prospective adoptive parents and make the adoption process more accessible, public child welfare agencies can adopt a number of strategies. Elements of best practice include:

- Soliciting input from adoptive and prospective parents in every aspect of the adoption process. This can include surveys, focus groups, and interviews.
- Involving experienced adoptive parents in the design of the adoption process.
- Guaranteeing that prospective parents can reach the right person on the first try. Agencies should have a specialized adoption hotline where a well-trained and friendly individual can assure callers of a direct and immediate response.
- Emphasizing recruitment rather than screening in the beginning stages of the adoption process (initial calls, information meetings). Early in the process, the risks of alienating a potentially suitable parent far out weighs the risk of allowing an inappropriate parent to begin training.
- Addressing prospective parent's emotional needs during their initial contact with the agency. For most prospective adoptive parents, their first contact with a public child welfare agency in very emotionally charged. The first person to speak with prospective parents should be professional staff with a background in counseling and specialized training in adoption.

- Developing support systems for prospective parents as they go through the adoption process, such as matching programs with adoptive parents. As one prospective parent put it, "This is a very impersonal process for a very personal thing."

Responses to Inquiries
The following procedures (if not already implemented) are needed to make the process of adopting a child in foster care more efficient and effective.

The Adoption Information Center has developed a phone etiquette/protocol that can be helpful and worthy of replicating. Some of you already use similar procedures; others may need to make small adjustments in the way you respond to families.

1. Use a live person to answer adoption inquiry calls, and if not possible, return calls within one business day.
2. Keep a log of calls missed and after hour's calls, with date and time of incoming call and time call was returned.
3. Greet the family in a warm and friendly manner. The adoption recruiter should identify his or herself by name and agency and should refer to the caller by name during the conversation.
4. Obtain contact information from the caller to be able to follow-up on the call. Name, phone, address and email.
5. Ask the caller what motivated them to call and how they obtained your number. This is especially helpful as you plan adoption recruitment campaigns.

Adoption Orientations
National and local media campaigns about adoption inform the public that there are thousands of foster children waiting to be adopted. When prospective adoptive families realize that the adoption process is a prolonged process and that some children they have seen on a web site or know about in foster care already have a potential placement resource identified, and/or that there may be a wait for a match with a child, many lose interest or feel disenfranchised. It is also discouraging to families if they are told that they will have to wait months until the next cycle of training to begin with the adoption process. Clearly it is better to minimize waiting times.

Agencies must have sufficient staff to handle the adoption orientations and pre-service trainings. Another solution would be to utilize experienced adoptive parents and foster parents. Some agencies provide compensation to their adoptive or foster parents for their roles in recruitment or training. Explore opportunities for grants through national adoption agencies such as NACAC.

Pre-service Training
Recruitment and Orientation meetings should be designed to help families "select in" not to screen families out. Pre-service training for adoptive families should include a self-assessment tool where they can make informed decisions about adopting or fostering.

Pre-service training is designed to educate prospective parents about specific emotional, developmental, and behavioral needs of children who enter the child welfare system. During this time, families are being prepared for their role as foster parents or adoptive parents and possibly beginning their home studies.

Additional training that is more adoption specific (such as Adoption 101) should be available while they are waiting for placement. Once a child has been identified, adoptive parents should be provided child-specific training to be able to meet the specific needs of the child (such as parenting a child who has experienced trauma, attachment deprivation, or physical/sexual abuse).

Support During the Waiting Period
When families do have to wait, another good customer service practice is keeping them engaged. Strategies of engagement might include keeping prospective adoptive parents informed about:

1. How long it will take for a child to be placed in their home.
2. What to expect and what the next steps will be.
3. Defining concurrent planning and options to foster and/or open up their acceptance criteria.
4. Adoption events and local, state, and national web sites where they can view available children, including the AdoptUsKids web site at www.adoptuskids.org .
5. Arranging times to touch base or sponsoring support or "while you wait" groups.
6. Connecting them with mentors who are experienced adoptive parents.
7. Or, in some other way, conveying that your agency values them, understands their anxiety during the process, and that staff are there to support them before during and after placement, all of which will collectively result in higher retention rates.
8. Families can be referred to other volunteer opportunities such as mentoring or serving as a Guardian ad Litem. This way, they can become familiar with the children and the child welfare system.

**Project Adoption
"…Survey Says!"**

Project Adoption Success:
"…Survey Says!"

Success

Project Adoption Success was a two-day workshop addressing customer service in public adoption. Forty-five participants were invited from across the state of Florida, representing all roles and responsibilities in the public adoption system.
The outcome was successful as it provided an opportunity to engage and participate in a solution-based workshop with adoption agencies, adoption-related staff, and adoptive parents.

The project began with a pre-workshop survey of those individuals to identify specific areas of concern. There were six major systemic challenges identified within the state of Florida's public adoption process. They included:

1. Call-backs on Inquiries
2. Families Being Prepared to Adopt
3. Professional Knowledge, Skills and Abilities
4. Legal, Paperwork, and Casework Issues
5. Inter-jurisdictional issues
6. Transitional and Post-Adoption Services

In the workshop, a facilitator engaged the participants in activities to identify essential solution criteria and to develop goals for each challenge. Goals:

1. Effective engagement and retention of prospective adoptive parents who are appropriate for adopting children in the foster care system from inquiry through post-adoption.

2. Families will have the knowledge, skills and capacity necessary to provide for an adopted child's welfare.

3. Florida will have adoption-competent professionals providing services and involved in the decision-making process.

4. Establish/implement a state-wide, uniform best practice for all professionals engaged in the decision-making for permanency options for children.

5. Children with the goal of adoption will achieve permanency in a timely manner through increased cooperation between all entities involved in adoption throughout Florida.

6. All adoptive families will have early and ongoing access to quality transitional and post-adoption services statewide.

It is important to solicit feedback from your adoptive parents throughout the adoption process. Some agencies are required to complete client satisfaction surveys as a part of their Council on Accreditation procedures. Adoptive parents need to be able to express their concerns in an appropriate format. Adoption support groups may provide another venue for feedback, training and support.

A sample Customer Satisfaction Survey is included below for modification by your agency.

Customer Service Survey:

Customer Satisfaction Rating					
	Excellent	Good	Average	Fair	Poor
Staff was available in timely manner.					
Staff greeted you, was courteous, and offered to help					
Staff answered your questions					
Staff provided information, realistic expectations and time frame					
Staff showed knowledge of the services and system.					
Staff offered pertinent advice.					
Staff offered resources and referrals					
Staff was positive and committed to process					
Overall, how would you rate our customer service?					
Open-Ended Questions					
What did you like best about our customer service?					
How could we improve our customer service?					
Is there a staff person you would like to commend?					
Name: Reason:					
Thank you for taking time to complete our customer service survey.					

Agency Assessment for Customer Service
It is important to look at the adoption process you use locally and make adjustments as needed to ensure every prospective family or "customer" feels comfortable and confident about the adoption process in Florida.

1. Ensure all available children are listed in FSFN with accurate and current information.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain:_____

2. When possible, the inquiries are answered directly by a live adoption staff person.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

3. Assign a specific point of contact to accept and process adoption Home Studies.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

4. Document all families that have an approved adoptive home study and have no identified child in FSFN as an approved adoptive parent provider. .
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

5. An agency person acknowledges receipt of a home study and follow-ups with families referred by the Adoption Information Center.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

6. Have regular orientation meetings for prospective families and post dates, times and places on the agency website.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

7. Include the child's FSFN ID# on all child specific material, including Heart Galleries.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

8. Have a system in place to survey or gather feedback from adoptive families.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

9. Have a website with local information including adoption events and trainings.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

10. Sign inter-agency agreements that remove barriers to interjurisdictional placements.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

Customer Support--Post Adoption Services   Successful adoption programs require the recognition that adoption is a life long process, the understanding that there will be life long challenges associated with adoption, and the commitment to all adoptive families that supportive assistance will be available when needed. Agencies should have in place:
- An intake process for families to return for needed services,
- A designated case manager to respond to adopted children and families post-legal finalization,
- A system to notify families of continued training, adoption workshops, and support group meetings, and
- A resource guide that includes adoption information and adoption competent service providers.

Education and Training
Adoptive parents benefit from education and training related to adoption issues, with an emphasis on strategies for handling loss, grief, relationship building, and acting out behaviors. Continued parent training must be included in post-adoption support to equip adoptive parents with the skills needed to meet the developing needs of children. Collaboration with the Children's Mental Health Office, Children's Medical Services and local school districts is needed in order to keep families informed of training opportunities that may be of interest to them as well as state and national conferences.

Mental Health Services
Adopted children and their parents continue to need mental health services beyond the adoption finalization. Mental health services help children (and their adoptive families) cope with their childhood, foster care and adoption experiences, and the behavioral aftermath of these experiences. Services include individual counseling, family counseling, medication management, educational supports, and temporary residential treatment. Intervention should be tailored to the specific emotional and behavioral needs of children in the child welfare system. Research studies have provided data suggesting that adoptive parents and adoptive practitioners have a significant need for mental health providers to be knowledgeable about adoption issues. Mental health providers who are adoption competent will provide the most successful treatment. Research also indicates a higher success rate for adoptive families when the therapeutic focus shifts from child-centered to family-centered.

Adoptive parents have identified the need for a coordinated effort between child welfare, mental health, and education professionals regarding the provision of post-adoption services for our children and their adoptive families. School issues (including academic performance, behavior management, educational supports, social skills, etc.) are a significant concern for adopted children. Adoption competency is necessary for all who make decisions that impact the adopted child and adoptive family.

Supportive Assistance
Post-adoption support refers to services and assistance offered to families after the legal finalization of their adoption. Although there is not an open case in dependency court or within the adoption agency, the ongoing needs of the child continue. The fundamental goal is to ensure that children remain stable in their adoptive families. Post-adoption services are provided by lead agencies, sub-contractors, and/or fee-for-service staff members. Services

identified to support the adoptive placement include: case management, financial assistance, medical coverage, education and counseling, support groups, and respite care.

Every circuit and community based care agency providing adoption services should also provide adoption support groups for their adoptive families. These support groups could be:
- Offered to waiting families, families who are in the placement process, and after finalization.
- Held in conjunction with a foster parent association or support group
- Led by an adoptive parent or by an agency liaison
- Supported by a faith-based community
- Operated through a contract with another program (but still connected to adoption)
- Supplemented by a newsletter or Web site

A secondary benefit of an adoption support group is that participation provides the venue for building relationships that could lead into opportunities for respite care.

Agency Assessment for Customer Support   (Post-Adoption Services)
It is important to look at the services you have in place to support adoptive families (education/training, mental health assistance, supportive assistance).

1. A designated adoption competent staff person responds to requests from adoptive families.
   ð Current practice ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain:_____

2. An intake process is in place for families to request needed services.
   ð Current practice ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

3. A system is in place to notify families of adoption workshops and support group meetings- such as a Web site.
   ð Current practice ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

4. A resource guide that includes adoption information and service providers.
   ð Current practice ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

5. A support group for adoptive parents that meets on a regular basis.
   ð Current practice ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

6. Assess mental health services for providers who are adoption competent.
   ð Current practice   ð Can implement ð Cannot implement;
   explain: _____

The Basis of Great Customer Service-   Susan A. Friedman

1. **Know who is boss**. You are in business to service customer needs, and you can only do that if you know what it is your customers want. When you truly listen to your customers, they let you know what they want and how you can provide good service. Never forget that the customer pays our salary and makes your job possible.

2. **Be a good listener**. Take the time to identify customer needs by asking questions and concentrating on what the customer is really saying. Listen to their words, tone of voice, body language and most importantly, how they feel. Beware of making assumptions- thinking you intuitively know what the customer wants. Do you know what three things are most important to your customers?

3. **Identify and anticipate needs**. Customers don't buy products or services. They buy good feelings and solutions to problems. Most customer needs are emotional rather than logical. The more you know your customers, the better you become at anticipating their needs. Communicate regularly so that you are aware of problems or upcoming needs.

4. **Make customers feel important and appreciated**. Treat them as individuals. Always use their name and find ways to compliment them, but be sincere. People value sincerity. It creates good feelings and trust. Think about ways to generate good feelings about doing business with you. Customers are very sensitive and know whether or not you really care about them. Thank them every time you get a chance.

5. **Help customers understand your systems**. Your organization may have the world's best systems for getting things done, but if customers don't understand them, they can get confused, impatient, and angry. Take time to explain how your systems work and how they simplify transactions. Be careful that your systems don't reduce the human element of your organization.

6. **Appreciate the power of "Yes".** Always look for ways to help your customers. When they have a request (as long as it is reasonable) tell them that you can do it. Figure out how afterwards. Look for ways to make doing business with you easy. Always do what you say you are going to do.

7. **Know how to apologize**. When something goes wrong, apologize. It's easy and customers like it. The customer may not always be right, but the customer must always win. Deal with problems immediately and let customers know what you have done. Make it simple for customers to complain. Value their complaints. As much as we dislike it, it gives us an opportunity to improve. Even if customers are having a bad day, go out of your way to make them feel comfortable.

8. **Give more than expected**. Since the future of all companies lies in keeping customers happy, think of ways to elevate yourself above the competition. Consider the following:
    *   What can you give customers that they cannot get elsewhere?
    *   What can you do to follow-up and thank people even when they don't buy?
    *   What can you give customers that is totally unexpected

9. **Get regular feedback**. Encourage and welcome suggestions about how you could improve. There are several ways in which you can find out what customers think and feel about your service.
Listen carefully to what they say.
Check back regularly to see how things are going.
Provide a method that invites constructive criticism, comments and suggestions.

10. **Treat employees well.** Employees are your internal customers and need a regular dose of appreciation.
Thank them and find ways to let them know how important they are. Treat your employees with respect and
chances are they will have a higher regard for customers. Appreciation stems from the top. Treating customers and
employees well is equally important.

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