

Social Services Should Work for Adoptions

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By Richard Miniter; SPECIAL TO INSIGHT

Incentives matter. That's long been the rallying cry of supply-siders, but Conna Craig found a way to make it work for children trapped in foster care.

Craig, a former foster-care child, is president of the Institute for Children, a nonprofit foundation in Cambridge, Mass. About 4,000 children are eligible for adoption in Massachusetts, but until recently no one made a real effort to find those children permanent homes. The bias against adoption in state-run child-care systems runs deep. There are many reasons for this bias: state agencies don't see adoption as part of their formal mission; they aren't trained or equipped to recruit potential parents; the adoption paperwork can be onerous; adoptive families can be hard to find; and, finally, agency budgets are determined by the number of children in foster care, not the number adopted.

Craig knows many of the children caught in the cross fire. One is a 10-year-old named John, who has been in and out of foster care and group homes since he was a toddler. His drug-addicted mother has lost any legal claim to him; his father is unknown. He is free to be adopted yet languishes in foster care.

To help children such as John, Craig convinced Massachusetts Gov. William Weld to change the incentives of the Bay State's foster-care system. Adoption is now part of its formal mission. State employees are trained and equipped with manuals and other aids to help recruit potential parents; the paperwork has been streamlined; and a computerized tracking system has been put in place to help locate people eligible and likely to adopt foster-care children.

Streamlining the paperwork was a big step. Under previous law, child-welfare agencies had to track down missing parents and give them an unlimited number of chances to regain their children. Biological parents now have 30 days from birth to establish their rights and from then on must maintain contact and, if possible, provide financial support.

The biggest change has been in the culture of the Department of Social Services. State employees are encouraged to help find families for orphans and praised when they succeed. The governor has made state workers feel that adoption is important by investing the mantle of his office in a statewide campaign that uses television and billboards to promote the idea.

Craig's inspiration and Weld's perspiration paid off. The number of adoptions of foster children surged 47 percent from 1993 to 1994.

Other states urgently need such reforms. The number of children in substitute care - everything from foster care to group homes - is growing 33 times faster than the U.S. child population, according to the American Public Welfare Association. Timely adoption could make a world of difference for children languishing without families.

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Richard Minter is a senior fellow at the Fairfax, Va.-based Commonwealth Foundation of the South.

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