



# MARE Volunteer Handbook

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Volunteer Handbook created by Sarah Dickinson, MARE Graduate Student Intern 2002-2003. (updated March 2007)

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# Welcome

Thank you for taking the first step in becoming a volunteer with the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange, Inc. (MARE). As a prospective volunteer, you will be asked to complete a volunteer application and confidentiality agreement. If you will be working directly with the waiting children, you will also be asked to complete a criminal records background check (CORI).

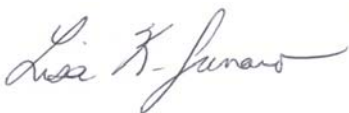
There are many different opportunities that volunteers can take part in, including office assistance and events. MARE also welcomes other opportunities that are personally shaped by the volunteer, based on their skills and background. As you think about the ways in which you would like to put your talents and skills to use, please keep in mind that MARE does very little direct work with the children.

MARE values the time, energy and commitment of our volunteers, and in turn, we want to make your experience meaningful and prepare you adequately so that you are equipped to deal with situations that may arise during your time with MARE. We have created this handbook in order to provide information and answer questions for individuals interested in volunteering with MARE. It includes information about the agency, the children and families we serve and the adoption process.

In addition, we realize that many of our volunteers are not familiar with the child welfare system, therefore we have also included helpful tools to get you oriented to the world of child welfare, and more specifically, to adoption. Throughout the handbook, you will notice asterisks(\*) next to certain words. This identifies a child welfare or adoption-specific term that is defined in the Definition section starting on page 23.

Thank you again for making a commitment to our mission of finding “a place to call HOME” for children awaiting adoption. We look forward to working with you, and we welcome your questions and feedback.

Sincerely,



Lisa Funaro  
Executive Director

# About MARE

The Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange, Inc (MARE)\* is a private, non-profit organization. MARE works in collaboration with agencies in the child welfare system\*, specifically both public\* and DSS contracted\* private adoption agencies, to find adoptive families for children in foster care\*. MARE is contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS)\* to act as the sole adoption exchange for the state. DSS and its contracted agencies register waiting children\* and approved homestudied families\* with MARE to receive the benefits of MARE programs and services. MARE is not a placement agency and most of the agency's work is conducted with the children's social workers.

## ***MARE History***

MARE was established in 1957 as a result of an annual meeting of the Massachusetts Conference of Social Welfare, held in 1954. During this session, the lack of adoption resources available for "hard to place" children, more specifically older children\*, children of color\*, children with physical and/or intellectual disabilities\*, and sibling groups\* was brought to light. A committee was formed to study adoption practices in Massachusetts, including policies and procedures. The committee's findings recommended the establishment of a state adoption exchange to facilitate adoptions for children with special needs.

On October 1, 1957, with \$10,000 in funding from the Children's Mission (predecessor of Parents' and Children's Services), as well as office space and equipment donated by Boston Children's Service Association, the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange began its work in special needs adoption\*. It was established as a trust under the Massachusetts Conference on Social Welfare to carry out the statewide service of arranging adoption placements through the exchange of information and resources among public and private agencies. MARE is unique in being the only exchange in the country to have been started under the auspices of both private and public agencies.

MARE is a small agency, consisting of only thirteen full-time staff members, two of whom are located in the DSS Springfield Office. MARE is headed by an Executive Director and a Board of Directors.

## ***MARE Mission Statement***

MARE exists to find "a place to call HOME" for CHILDREN in foster care, including sibling groups and children who are traditionally harder to place. We do this by recruiting, educating, supporting and advocating for FAMILIES throughout the adoption process.

# Programs and Services

Since 1957, MARE programs and services have expanded to include a number of specific services related to the recruitment, referral, and matching of adoptive families and waiting children, as well as a variety of training, support, and advocacy services. Among the most renowned MARE programs are “Wednesday’s Child” hosted by Jack Williams on CBS 4 News and “Sunday’s Child®” with the Boston Globe. Two other well-known and highly effective recruitment tools are the MARE Photolisting® and MARE adoption parties. Listed below are descriptions of these and other MARE programs and services:

## ***Information and Referrals***

Anyone seeking adoption information can call MARE. Staff members are available Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to answer questions regarding specific children and the adoption process in general. We can send an information packet and/or refer families to adoption agencies to start the process.

## ***Family and Child Registration***

Social workers register and photolist waiting children with MARE to find families for them through our wide array of programs and services. The Online Matching program allows all families and social workers to search and make inquiries on any child or family that is listed with MARE. Individuals and families who have been homestudied and approved to adopt a child from foster care can register with MARE, a free service through which a family’s criteria is compared with registered children to identify potential matches.

## ***MARE Photolisting® and Online Photolisting***

MARE maintains a book containing biographical descriptions and photographs of children who are registered with MARE and available for adoption. Updated monthly, the MARE Photolisting® is located in numerous public libraries throughout the state, as well as in many adoption agencies. We also have a MARE Online Photolisting on our website that includes a partial list of children who are legally free and photolisted with MARE.

## ***Child-Specific Media Campaigns***

MARE coordinates numerous ongoing media campaigns featuring specific children available for adoption.

## **Television**

Wednesday’s Child is a weekly television recruitment program hosted by Jack Williams on the CBS4 Boston News. Only New England’s legally free children are featured each week during the Wednesday 6:00 p.m. newscast. Read profiles and view the actual TV segments of the children featured at <http://cbs4boston.com/wednesday/>.

En Busca de Hogar is a monthly Spanish television recruitment program hosted by Sara Suarez on the Univision New England News. Only New England’s legally free children are featured on the third Thursday of every month at the 6:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. newscasts.

## **Newspapers**

The Boston Parents' Paper hosts a monthly recruitment feature of legally free children.

The Boston People's Voice hosts a biweekly recruitment column featuring legally free children of African American descent.

The Daily Hampshire Gazette hosts a bi-monthly monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the second and fourth Saturday of the month. The paper is distributed in Western Massachusetts.

The Daily Times Chronicle hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

The Dorchester Community News hosts a biweekly recruitment column. The paper is published every other Friday and features only legally free children.

El Mundo is a Spanish newspaper which features legally free children of Latino descent on a "space available" basis.

The Free Bird Times hosts a monthly recruitment column featuring legally free or legal risk children. The paper is distributed in Southeastern Massachusetts and on Cape Cod.

The Lynnfield Villager hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

The No. Reading Transcript hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

La Semana is a Spanish newspaper which features legally free children of Latino descent on a "space available" basis.

Rumbo hosts a biweekly column featuring legally free children of Latino descent. The column is printed in English and Spanish.

Siglo 21 hosts a biweekly column featuring legally free children of Latino descent. The column is printed in Spanish.

The Stoneham Independent hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

Sunday's Child is a weekly recruitment column in the Sunday Boston Globe. Individual children and sibling groups are featured, both legally free and legal risk.

The Taunton Daily Gazette hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the last Thursday of the month.

Today's Child is a weekly recruitment column in the Sunday Boston Herald. Individual children and sibling groups are featured, both legally free and legal risk. The column is coordinated by DSS Public Affairs, but MARE handles all inquiry calls.

The Wilmington & Tewksbury Town Crier hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

The Worcester Telegram and Gazette hosts a monthly recruitment column. Only legally free children are featured in the column that is published the last Sunday of the month.

### ***Adoption Parties & Recruitment Events***

Four to six times per year, MARE hosts adoption parties to bring together social workers, waiting children and prospective adoptive parents in casual and fun settings. Each party is held in a different region of the state. Families can learn more about adoption, meet waiting children and network with social workers.

In addition, MARE hosts matching meetings for social workers and single prospective adoptive parents with approved homestudies. At these meetings, social workers present specific waiting children through verbal descriptions, pictures, videos, etc.

### ***The Heart Gallery***

The Heart Gallery is a striking portrait exhibit of children in the Massachusetts foster care system in need of permanent families. Professional and amateur photographers volunteer their expertise to create visual images of the children, and the exhibit moves to different locations around the state in addition to permanent exhibits at all Jordan's Furniture stores.

### ***National Adoption Month***

November is National Adoption Month. It is a month set aside to raise awareness about adoption of children from foster care. Each year there are national and state events to recognize and celebrate adoption. During this month, MARE coordinates National Adoption Day as well as other events.

# Who are the Waiting Children?

## ***Did you Know...***

- There are more than 118,000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted nationwide.
- There are approximately 11,000 children in the foster care system in Massachusetts.
- There are approximately 3,000 children in foster care in Massachusetts with a goal of adoption.
- About 1,000 children in Massachusetts who have a goal of adoption are legally free for adoption.
- Approximately 650 of the children in Massachusetts with a goal of adoption have no identified match.
- MARE typically has between 300-400 children actively registered children.
- Over 50% of the children registered with MARE are of color.
- MARE has helped place more than 5,000 children since its inception, averaging 150 MARE-assisted placements annually.

## ***The Children:***

The children that MARE serves are referred to as special needs, meaning they are harder to place as a result of age, race, ethnicity, being a part of a sibling group, need or disability.

- **School-aged Children (age 6 and older):** Especially children above the age of 8 who greatly need parenting and guidance. There are more boys available than girls.
- **Children of Color:** Of all ages, especially children above the age of 5. More than half of the children registered with MARE are of African American, Hispanic/Latino or biracial descent.
- **Sibling Groups:** Especially school-aged children in groups of two, three or more.
- **Children with Intellectual, Physical or Emotional Difficulties or Disabilities:** Children of all ages with disabilities are in need of permanent, loving families. Further explanations of needs is given in section labeled *The Needs of Children Who Wait*.
- **Children at Legal Risk:** Children of all ages who are not yet legally free for adoption. Although these children have been separated from their biological parents, they are technically in foster care until the court frees them for adoption. This process can take up to two years. The elements of risk in each situation can be fully explained to prospective families interested in a legal risk child.

## ***The Needs of Children Who Wait***

**Emotional Needs:** The children MARE serves have been removed from their birth families\* due to neglect\* and/or abuse\* and have varying degrees of emotional needs. Having suffered past losses and often finding the adults in their lives unreliable or unable to care for them, many of these children are slow to trust a new person or family. Emotional difficulties can also result in a child having behavioral difficulties. Behaviors such as hoarding food, being withdrawn, having difficulty telling the truth or competing for attention are among the most common.

It can be especially challenging to deal with a child who has been through a traumatic experience. If the child has never discussed it with anyone, you may not know exactly what the child endured. If a child is non-verbal or unable to discuss these experiences, the frustration may be so overwhelming that it affects the child's ability to function on a day-to-day basis. A sense of security, on the other hand, along with support services, will often help a child make great strides in a new family. Most of the waiting children benefit from counseling and other therapeutic services.

**Physical Difficulties:** While most of the waiting children are basically healthy, some do have physical difficulties or disabilities. Some waiting children have minor physical disabilities, which might include asthma, cleft palate, mild forms of bronchitis or allergies or easily correctable medical conditions. Other children have more severe physical disabilities, such as limb deformities, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, congenital heart disease, life-threatening illnesses and various types of developmental disabilities.

**Learning Disabilities:** Many waiting children have difficulties comprehending, processing or retaining oral and/or written information. Within the general public school population, 10 to 20 percent of children have some form of learning disability. Learning disabilities can manifest themselves in any number of ways. The most common problems are Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), hyperactivity and dyslexia.

**The Older Child:** Older children often long to be part of a family and need love like any other child, but many are not able to verbalize these needs. Conflicting emotions are often present, and an older child may still have ties to a biological or foster family, or be grieving over the loss of biological and/or foster families. More than anything else, these children need strong, permanent commitments from their adoptive families. An older child may have lived in several foster homes along the way or had disrupted adoptive placements. These children have never had the support or the opportunity to build positive relationships and, as a result, may suffer from low self-esteem.

# Volunteer Opportunities

## ***MARE Volunteer Opportunities***

Thank you for your interest in volunteering with MARE. The following are a few examples of volunteer opportunities at MARE, but we appreciate your time and talents and are open to discussing other opportunities.

NOTE: MARE requires the completion of an application and confidentiality agreement to become a volunteer. For volunteers assisting with children, a criminal records background check (CORI) is required.

## **Events**

Volunteers can assist in the planning of agency events as well as assisting at the events themselves.

## **Wednesday's Child and Univision**

These child-specific television programs air on weekday nights. MARE staff and volunteers take calls from families interested in finding out more about adoption and the child or sibling group featured. For the program on Univision, we are seeking Spanish-speaking volunteers.

## **Office Assistant**

Volunteers can provide information and referrals for couples and individuals interested in adoption. This includes referring callers to the social workers for specific children. MARE also needs assistance with general office work such as updating children's files, helping with mailings, photocopying, executing computer related tasks or covering the easy-to-handle switchboard by answering and forwarding calls.

## **Photographers**

Professional and amateur photographers are needed for the Heart Gallery ([link](#)) as well as at various agency events.

## **Internships**

- MARE offers a variety of internship experiences to both undergraduate and graduate students. Internships can be tailored to meet the needs of individual students.

# Volunteering at Events

## ***Tips for Volunteering at Events***

When attending Adoption Parties or other MARE events, you will have the option to choose an activity that is comfortable for you. This may be taking registration information, helping families find a specific social worker, taking pictures, or assisting the children with activities. Below are a few helpful tips to orient you in working with waiting children and families:

### **Interacting with Waiting Children**

- When talking with children, discuss things they like to do, “favorites”, or the activities they are currently engaged in.
- Do not talk about or question the children as to why they came into care, abuse or neglect, foster care or being adopted. These are very personal things to share with strangers.
- Please do not touch the children. This includes things that you might find non-threatening like a pat on the head, on the back, messing up of hair, etc.
- Don't Make Any Promises. A child might ask you- “Are you going to adopt me?” “Can I go home with you today?” Reinforce that he/she is a wonderful child and whomever their adoptive family ends up being is going to be very lucky. Do not say yes, no or maybe.
- Always be truthful, but sensitive, supportive, and age appropriate.
- If a child starts disclosing information to you or says anything that you feel is inappropriate to be talking about with the child, please direct them to their social worker and let the social worker know what happened (away from the child).

### **Working with Waiting Families**

- If you are asked a question about a child or the adoption process please address the question away from the child.
- When a family has specific questions about a child, introduce them to the child's social worker.
- If you are asked a question and are unsure of the answer, please direct the question to a MARE staff person or social worker.
- Please report any inappropriate behavior or comments immediately to MARE staff.

# Confidentiality and Responsibilities

## ***Confidentiality***

Volunteers are responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of all privileged information to which you are exposed while serving as a volunteer, whether this information involves a MARE staff member, volunteer, waiting child, waiting family, prospective family, social worker, other adoption agencies and/or staff, or other persons involved in the overall business of the agency.

In addition MARE requires all volunteers to sign a confidentiality agreement. By signing this agreement, the volunteer agrees to maintain the confidentiality of the children and families MARE serves. Failure to uphold this agreement will result in immediate dismissal of the involved party from service at MARE and may result in legal action, if appropriate.

## ***Responsibilities***

Volunteers are viewed as a valuable resource to MARE, its staff, and the populations served. Volunteers have the right to be given meaningful assignments, the right to be treated as equal coworkers, the right to effective supervision, the right to full involvement and participation, and the right to recognition for work done.

In return, volunteers shall agree to actively perform their duties to the best of their abilities and to remain loyal to MARE's goals and procedures. Additionally, volunteers are required to maintain a time sheet as MARE processes volunteer time as in-kind donations.

# The Adoption Process

There are three types of adoption: Foster Care\* (also referred to as “Special Needs”), Domestic Infant\* and International\*. Domestic Infant Adoption refers to the adoption of infants born in the United States and who generally are not involved in the child welfare system. International Adoption refers to the adoption of children who are citizens of a different country and requires working with INS. There are fees involved with both of these types of adoptions.

MARE is involved with Foster Care Adoption. All of the children MARE serves are in the custody of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), and the majority of these children are ages six and older, children of color of all ages, sibling groups, children with intellectual, emotional or physical difficulties or disabilities, and children at legal risk. MARE works with DSS and private agencies that contract with DSS to find permanent, loving homes for these children.

## ***The Adoption Process***

- **Choose an Agency:** Once a family makes the decision that foster care adoption is right for them, the next step is to select an adoption agency. To adopt a child from foster care, families can work with the public agency, the Department of Social Services (DSS) or one of the approximately 10 agencies that contract with DSS. We recommend that families talk with more than one agency to find the one that fits their needs. It is also helpful to consider if the agency is close to their home, as they will be attending classes at the agency and may want to avoid unnecessary travel time. There are no fees involved in adopting a child from foster care, irrespective of which agency a family chooses to work with.
- **MAPP Training:** After a family has chosen an agency and completed necessary paperwork, the next step is attending the Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP), which is a training course required of all prospective adoptive parents and foster parents in Massachusetts. The class usually involves a group of 8-20 prospective parents who meet one night a week for 3 hours for a period of 8 weeks. Its purpose is to help families prepare for adoption or foster care, through a group-oriented, experiential, adult educational model. The classes help parents understand the losses that waiting children have suffered, as well as the birth family issues that can exist.
- **The Homestudy:** After attending MAPP training, the homestudy is conducted. The homestudy is a process as well as the final written document. It involves a series of interviews, which are done during planned visits to the home by a social worker. This process helps the social worker assess the family’s appropriateness and skills to parent an adopted child; inform and educate adoptive parents about adoption issues and needed skills; and help the social worker understand who the family is in an effort to provide appropriate matches based on the family’s skills and strengths and the children’s needs. The final result of this process is the homestudy, a narrative report on the prospective family and what they are seeking in a child or sibling group. If the homestudy is approved, the family is licensed meaning they can legally adopt. The document is forwarded to

children's social workers when matches are identified. Not all families that go through MAPP training and the homestudy are approved for adoption.

- **Matching:** This is a process that takes place over a period of time and requires informed adoptive applicants to make the final decision. The family's social worker will look for children to match with the family, and the family can do some searching on their own by reviewing the MARE Photolisting®, media outlets, other child profile resources and attending adoption parties. This part of the adoption process can be the longest and the most frustrating. During this time families are encouraged to keep looking and develop a positive support and resource system to assist as needed.
- **Disclosure & Visitation:** When a potential match is identified, a family meets with their worker and the child's social worker to discuss the child in more detail and become familiar with the child's history and current issues. If all parties agree that this is a good match, an initial meeting between the family and child is arranged. If that initial meeting goes well, additional meetings and longer visitations are arranged. The period of visitation varies from child to child, but typically lasts from two to five months.
- **Pre-Adoptive Placement:** Following a successful visitation period, a child moves in with a family on a full-time basis. In Massachusetts, there is a waiting period of at least six months before the adoption can be legally finalized. During this time, most agencies will conduct home visits to provide support and monitor how the placement is going.
- **Finalization:** This is the point at which the adoption is legally recognized. It is accomplished in court and ratified by a judge. It establishes the rights and responsibilities of the adoptive parents, as well as the rights that the adoptive child will have, such as rights to inheritance.

# Frequently Asked Questions About Adoption from Foster Care

## **Is there an age requirement for adoptive parents?**

You must be at least 18 years old to adopt a child from foster care. There is no upper age limit when adopting a child from foster care.

## **Can a single person adopt?**

Yes, single parent adoptions are on the rise, and single people have an equal right to adopt. Single parents can find information and support through the Single Parents for Adoption of Children Everywhere (SPACE) chapter of the Adoption Community of New England (ACONE). The SPACE Chapter has monthly meetings for support and social interaction. They also hold a national conference every other year with a wide variety of workshops pertaining to single parent adoption. For further information visit [www.geocities.com/odsspace/](http://www.geocities.com/odsspace/) or call ACONe at 1-800-93-ADOPT (1-800-932-3678).

## **Can gay or lesbian individuals and couples adopt?**

Yes, gay or lesbian individuals and couples may adopt in the state of Massachusetts. Though one may legally adopt regardless of sexual orientation, individuals or couples may find that there continues to be some social workers who are more responsive to gays and lesbians than others.

## **Can I adopt if I already have a child or children?**

Yes, you can. Families who have parenting experience are a great resource for waiting children. Some families adopt children while their biological children are still in the home. Many families who have grown children may experience the "empty nest" feeling and will become adoptive parents, most often adopting an older child or sibling group. Massachusetts does limit families to having a maximum of six children in the home (any combination of biological, step, foster, adopted, etc.).

## **How long does it take to adopt a waiting child?**

It usually takes an average of one to two years to adopt, from making your initial inquiry to having a child placed in your home. One of the main factors affecting this time period can be the family's flexibility in regard to the type of child they seek to adopt. Families seeking to adopt younger children with less needs tend to wait longer because there are fewer of these children available. Older children, children of color, sibling groups and those with more significant needs are more readily available. Families who are interested in parenting a child who is at legal risk (see below) will wait longer to legalize the adoption in the courts.

## **What does "legally free" and "legal risk" mean?**

Legally free children are those whose birthparents have voluntarily surrendered their parental rights, or have had them terminated through a court process. These birthparents have no legal recourse or claim to the involved children. Children at legal risk are those for whom the process to terminate birthparents' rights has not yet concluded. DSS has determined that adoption is in the child's best interest and does not want to delay recruitment of a family while the court pursues termination of the birthparents' rights. The court case can last as long as

two years or more until the final decision is made. In some cases, the birthparents retain the right to visit their child during the time the case is technically in foster care status. The majority of legal risk placements result in the foster child being adopted by the pre-adoptive family. The elements of risk in each situation can be fully explained to families interested in adopting a legal risk child.

### **What does open adoption mean?**

Open adoption is a situation in which communication between the adoptive family and the birth family exists. The amount of contact varies, from an exchange of letters to having visits with birth parents on a scheduled basis.

### **Is there financial support available for adoptive families?**

Yes. Children with special needs who are adopted through DSS are eligible for adoption subsidy. The Federally Funded Subsidy Program is referred to as the Title IV-E program. The subsidy program is administered by DSS under the federal guidelines. Massachusetts also uses state funds to provide a State Funded Subsidy to children with special needs who are unable to meet the criteria for the federal program. Both programs provide supplemental health insurance through MassHealth.

The subsidy programs are intended to remove financial barriers to the adoption of children with special needs, but they are not intended to cover the full costs of raising a child. The amount of this subsidy cannot be greater than the amount that child would have received in family-based foster care. Subsidy approval is not based upon the family's income, rather the special need(s) of the child being adopted. Here are the program guidelines:

1. There must be a signed subsidy agreement in place prior to legalization of the adoption.
2. Eligibility for the subsidy program is not related to the income of the adopting family. The amount of the subsidy is based on the special needs demonstrated by the child and the circumstances of the adopting family.
3. A child is eligible for the subsidy until the age of 18. Massachusetts, at the discretion of DSS, will extend the subsidy until age 22 if the child remains in a full-time education program and/or has a documented medical or mental health condition and resides in the adoptive home. Children may reside away at school as long as their permanent address remains the same as the adoptive parent(s).
4. Re-evaluations are typically required on an annual basis. As part of the re-evaluation, the family may be asked to provide documentation from professionals treating your child.
5. The child's adoption worker is required to submit a subsidy application to the DSS Subsidy Unit for every child being adopted through DSS. The family has the right to refuse the subsidy, but the application must be submitted prior to legalization.
6. Based upon the child's birth history, a deferred subsidy with Mass Health (Medicaid) may be offered if the child does not have any current defined special needs at the time of legalization. A subsidy agreement must be signed by all parties prior to legalization. Upon

legalization, if your child is determined to have special needs, related to the birth history, professional documentation should be sent to the DSS Subsidy Unit for review and approval.

### **What other post adoption supports are available?**

There are a variety of post adoption supports available to families in Massachusetts who adopt children from foster care. Two of these include

**Adoptive Child Tuition Waiver Program:** Free undergraduate tuition to many of Massachusetts' state and community colleges and universities is available for children adopted from foster care, if they are admitted. The child must be adopted by a family residing in, or employed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Room, board and other fees are not included in this waiver. Applicants must be full-time students under the age of 25 who are residents of Massachusetts. A FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) must be filed as well. To learn more about the Adoptive Child Tuition Waiver program or to apply, please contact DSS at 617-748-2267.

**Adoption Journeys** provides post adoption support services to families throughout Massachusetts. All adoptive families in the Commonwealth are eligible to receive Adoption Journeys services, which include support groups for parents and children, adoption counseling, respite services, parent liaisons, adoption competency training and regional intensive crisis response teams. To find the agency that serves your area, please contact the lead agency, Child and Family Services, Inc. at 1-800-972-2734.

You can learn more about post adoption services in Massachusetts by accessing the Adoption Resources section of the MARE website at [www.mareinc.org](http://www.mareinc.org).

### **Is there an income requirement for adoptive families?**

There is no income requirement that qualifies you for adoptive parenthood. You can have almost any income level, as long as there is a stable source of income that can support the family. Your social worker will be far more interested in how you make effective use of your income than in the actual size of your bank account.

### **Must an adoptive parent be a homeowner?**

No, nor must you provide a separate room within your home for each child. You can live in your own house, rent an apartment or live in a housing project. Any living situation is acceptable as long as it is safe and suitable for the involved child.

### **Are there certain health requirements for adoptive parents?**

Agencies will require a physical examination report from your doctor. This does not mean that you must be in perfect physical condition. Being blind, deaf or otherwise physically disabled does not automatically disqualify you. Mental health issues and chronic illnesses are not reasons for automatic disqualification either. Disabilities or medical conditions will likely be a consideration when deciding what kind of child you can best parent.

### **Do employers provide benefits to employees who adopt?**

Many employers do provide benefits to employees who adopt. Please contact your employer to find out what is available to you. You can also visit the Dave Thomas Foundation for

Adoption website at [www.davethomasfoundationforadoption.org](http://www.davethomasfoundationforadoption.org) (under the Programs/Events section) for information on adoption benefits in the workplace.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) states that covered employers (those with 50 or more employees) must grant eligible employees up to a total of 12 workweeks of unpaid leave during any 12-month period for one or more of the following reasons:

- For the birth and care of the newborn child of the employee;
- **For placement with the employee of a son or daughter for adoption or foster care;**
- To care for an immediate family member (spouse, child or parent) with a serious health condition; or
- To take medical leave when the employee is unable to work because of a serious health condition.

For more information, please visit the U.S. Department of Labor website at [www.dol.gov/esa](http://www.dol.gov/esa).

# Resources

## POST ADOPTION SERVICES

[Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(MSPCC\)/ Kid's Net](#) is a private, nonprofit society with a legacy of strengthening families and preventing child abuse through essential child welfare and mental health treatment and effective public advocacy. Through the Kid's Net Program, under contract with the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, MSPCC gives support to foster, adoptive and kinship parents who care for children in DSS custody.

[Adoptive Families Together \(AFT\)](#), a program of MSPCC, is a network of adoptive families founded in Massachusetts by parents who understood the benefit of peer support while raising families with complex issues. Their parent support meetings, held in the New England area, provide post-adoptive information, education and support for people touched by adoption. Contact AFT for support group locations.

[Adoption Community of New England, Inc. \(ACONE\)](#) offers events and programs throughout the year for all those touched by adoption, including the Annual New England Adoption Conference (the largest, single-day conference of its kind), a library of adoption-related audio, video and print materials and a directory of therapy providers. Contact ACONE for chapter locations throughout MA and New England.

[Center for Family Connections](#) is an agency whose goal is to serve individuals and families touched by adoption, foster care, kinship, guardianship, as well as other complex blended families, and to serve the people with whom they are connected, by offering clinical treatment, consultation, training, education, and advocacy.

[Single Parents for the Adoption of Children Everywhere \(SPACE\)](#), a chapter of ACONE, began in 1974 and is a support and information organization for single adoptive parents, singles interested in adoption, and the children of families formed through single parent adoption.

## Massachusetts Department of Social Services

- **Subsidy Unit:** Contact the Subsidy Unit and/or your Subsidy Administrator regarding any subsidy related concerns at 1-800-835-0838.
- **Search Unit:** Please contact the Search Unit at 617-748-2240 (if the adoption was done through a private agency and that agency is known, you can contact the agency directly).
- **Tuition Waiver Program:** Free undergraduate tuition to most of Massachusetts' state and community colleges and universities is available for children adopted from foster care, if they are admitted. The child must be adopted by a family residing in, or employed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Room, board and other fees are not included in this waiver. Applicants must be full-time students under the age of 25 who are residents of Massachusetts. A FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) must be filed as well. To learn more about the Adoptive Child Tuition Waiver program or to apply, please contact DSS at 617-748-2267.

**Adoption Journeys** provides post adoption support services to families throughout Massachusetts. All adoptive families in the Commonwealth are eligible to receive Adoption Journeys services, which include support groups for parents and children, adoption counseling, respite services, parent liaisons, adoption competency training and regional intensive crisis response teams. To find the agency that serves your area, please contact the lead agency, Child and Family Services, Inc. at 1-800-972-2734.

[Adoption Connection](#) is one of the oldest search and support organizations for adoptees, birth parents, siblings, adoptive families and anyone who has been separated through adoption. Searches are done with strict confidentiality along with respect and responsibility for all who are involved. The entire staff, led by founder and director Susan Darke, has had a personal experience with adoption, which makes them committed and sensitive to guide and advise on how to make contact along with working through the issues of search and reunion.

## **MASSACHUSETTS ORGANIZATIONS**

[The Center for Adoption Research at UMASS](#) is dedicated to assisting families and professionals by providing independent research, evaluation and education to improve the lives of children in adoptive and foster families.

[The Massachusetts Department of Social Services \(DSS\)](#) is the state child welfare and protection agency. The Department is dedicated to the safety, permanency and well being of children who have been abused and neglected in family settings, or by recognized caretakers. In delivering services to children and families, the Department seeks first to ensure the safety of children. *Please [click here](#) to review the Department of Social Services' Standards for Agency Foster/Pre-Adoptive Parents and the Agreement Between the Department of Social Services and Foster/Pre-Adoptive Parents.*

[Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children \(ICPC\)](#) outlines the process that states have follow to ensure consistent protection and services to children who are placed across state lines. The Massachusetts ICPC office is housed at the Department of Social Services Central Office. They can be reached at:

Department of Social Services  
Attention: Interstate Compact Unit  
24 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, MA 02210  
Local: 617.748.2000  
Toll Free: 1.800.548.4802

## **NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

[Adopt America Network \(AAN\)](#) works to find permanent, loving, adoptive homes for waiting children throughout the U.S. AAN's goal is that no child shall have to wait for adoption regardless of his/her circumstances. Adopt America Network matches only children with special needs, and their network includes field representatives throughout the country.

**[The Adoption Exchange Association \(AEA\)](#)** connects representatives of state, regional and national adoption exchanges, placement agencies, parents, child welfare professionals and concerned citizens across the United States. The AEA provides a forum that promotes the exchange of ideas and strategies, collaboration on issues of mutual interest, and increased effectiveness in utilizing resources to provide waiting children permanent homes. The Adoption Exchange Association also administers the AdoptUSKids Initiative, which includes a national on-line photolisting of waiting children, parent support groups, a national recruitment campaign, and training and technical assistance.

**[The American Adoption Congress \(AAC\)](#)** is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to truth in adoption and to reform that protects all of those involved from abuse or exploitation. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.

**[The Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)**, formerly the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, Child Welfare Information Gateway, provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families. A service of the **[Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)**.

**[The Child Welfare League of America \(CWLA\)](#)** is the oldest and largest national nonprofit organization developing and promoting policies and programs to protect America's children and strengthen American families. CWLA's 1,000 plus public and private nonprofit member agencies serve 3 million abused and neglected children and their families each year.

**[Children Awaiting Parents \(CAP\)](#)** is a national non-profit organization that recruits foster and adoptive families for special needs children who have been waiting the longest for a "forever" family. CAP publishes the only printed national photolisting of special needs children and also administers a Web site, which includes photos and narratives of waiting children.

**[The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids](#)** is a project of The Children's Bureau, part of the Federal Department of Health and Human Services. In October 2002, The Children's Bureau contracted with The Adoption Exchange Association and its partners (The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids) to devise and implement a national adoptive family recruitment and retention strategy, operate the AdoptUsKids.org website, encourage and enhance adoptive family support organizations and conduct a variety of adoption research projects.

**[The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption](#)** serves as an active voice for the more than 150,000 children in North America's public child welfare system who are waiting for permanent homes and loving families. The Foundation has simplified its vision into one statement, "Every child will have a permanent home and a loving family." By funding various national initiatives that directly impact waiting children and expanding the public's awareness of adoption, the Foundation is focused on making a difference in the lives of waiting children.

[The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute](#) founded in 1996, is a national not-for-profit organization devoted to improving adoption policy and practice. Their mission is to improve the quality of information about adoption, enhance the understanding and perception of adoption and advance adoption policy and practice. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute pursues this mission with a concern for all participants in adoption: birth families, adoptive parents, adopted persons and adoption professionals.

[Global Connections for U.S. Citizens Living Abroad](#) is a collaborative effort of VIDA (Voice of International Development and Adoption) and The Adoption Exchange of Denver, Colorado to promote the adoption of U.S. waiting children by U.S. citizens living abroad. Both military and non-military families are invited to consider this program. For more information about VIDA and The Adoption Exchange's Global Connections program contact The Adoption Exchange by phone 303-333-0845 or [e-mail](#) Global Connections.

[The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption](#) assists states, tribes and other federally funded child welfare agencies in building their capacity to ensure the safety, well being and permanency of abused and neglected children through adoption and post legal adoption services program planning, policy development and practice. The Center provides technical assistance, consultation, training, information and referral, and resource materials to assist states and tribes in improving their adoption and adoption support and preservation services.

[The North American Council on Adoptable Children \(NACAC\)](#) was founded in 1974 by adoptive parents and is committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and the families who adopt them. Since its inception, NACAC's mission has remained essentially unchanged: Every child has the right to a permanent family. The Council advocates the right of every child to a permanent, continuous, nurturing and culturally sensitive family.

**Voice for Adoption (VFA)** speaks out to insure permanent, nurturing families for our nation's most vulnerable children and to strengthen support for families who adopt. Voice for Adoption is a national coalition that has been established to actively encourage and advocate for national policies that address barriers to the adoption of waiting children and increase the understanding among the public, the media, and decision-makers of the needs of these children and the families who adopt. They can be reached at 703-430-7600 or by [e-mail](#).

## LITERATURE

[Adopting on Your Own: The Complete Guide to Adopting as a Single Parent](#), written by Lee Varon, is a guide for decision-making. It addresses the questions and concerns of the growing number of prospective single parents. The book covers all stages of the adoption process, from deciding whether it's right for you, to orchestrating the adoption itself, to raising an adopted child as a single parent.

[Adopting the Older Child](#), written by Claudia Jewett, is a classic that has withstood the test of time. This book describes the children who are waiting and the adoption process, and gives vignettes of children's issues as they move into adoption.

[Adoption is](#), . . . written by D. A. Royster, tells the story of one boy's adoption. This book makes it easy for parents, children, and teachers to talk about adoption. This illustrated children's book will touch the hearts of parents, educators and children as they gain a clear understanding of one family's adoption process.

[Adoption Nation](#), written by Adam Pertman, an award-winning journalist and adoptive father, provides valuable insights into the pleasures and perils of adoption and how it affects almost all of our lives, whether we realize it or not. Pertman also lays out the ways in which policymakers should revise laws to improve the process of adoption, stop treating members of the adoption triad as second-class citizens, and remove the obstacles that keep the children who most need permanent homes from getting them.

[Adoption-Works](#) offers a priceless “gift” for the adopted child - a personalized adoption LifeBook. A LifeBook is a record of an adoptee’s or foster child’s life that uses words, photos, the child’s artwork and memorabilia to promote trust and attachment. Through author Beth O’Malley’s Web site, you can purchase *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child* and *For When I’m Famous: A Teen Foster/Adoption Lifebook* as well as guides to help you create LifeBooks with your children. Formats are specific to children who have spent time in foster care and children who have been adopted (suitable for adoptions from foster care, domestic infant adoptions and international adoptions).

[Adoptive Families](#) is an award-winning national adoption magazine and an adoption information source for families before, during, and after adoption.

[EMK](#) Press is a publisher of adoption themed materials for Infants to Young Adults from the perspective of the child. They also believe that information is power and have developed a series of useful guides to help parents on the journey of raising an adoptive family. These are wonderfully informative guides that will help families navigate the journey of adoption parenting. They are free to download.

[Fostering Families TODAY and Adoption TODAY](#) are magazines about you: the parents, children and dedicated professionals of foster care and domestic adoption.

[Parents Wanted](#) is a novel by adoptive father George Harrar that portrays the challenges and rewards of adoption through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy who has been in multiple foster homes. It is the humorous and thoughtful story of Andy, who desperately needs and wants a loving home yet who struggles with his past and the emotions evoked by his new life.

[Perspective Press](#) has been, since 1982, providing award-winning books, articles, and workshops for consumers and for medical, mental health, counseling and allied professionals on infertility, reproductive health and alternative family building.

[Tapestry Books](#) is the largest company specializing in adoption, infertility and parenting challenges books. Their on-line catalog lists over 300 books and can be browsed by topic, title or author. Their catalog includes books written for both adults and children.

## Definitions

**Abuse:** Any action that creates a substantial injury or a risk of injury to a child. Abuse can be physical, sexual or emotional. Physical abuse happens when a child is hurt through beating, shaking, kicking, burning or other types of bodily harm. A child can end up suffering from bruises, fractured or broken bones, internal injuries or even death. When children are denied the basic necessities they need to thrive, it is also considered physical abuse. Infants born addicted to drugs are physically abused, as well.

**Approved Families:** Families that have completed MAPP training, the homestudy process and have been licensed to adopt.

**Birth or Biological Family:** Biological mother or father (those who conceived the child) and their extended family; “blood” relatives.

**Children of Color:** Children of color are all non-Caucasian children, including biracial children.

**Child Welfare System:** All agencies that operate to ensure the safety and well being of children. Areas of child welfare include adoption, child protection, and foster care.

**Closed Adoption:** An adoption that involves total confidentiality and no contact with birth family. The birth family and the adoptive family do not share any identifying information about themselves, and do not communicate with each other, either before or after the placement of the child.

**Contracted Agencies:** Those agencies that have a contract with the DSS (public adoption agency) to provide adoption services to DSS clients.

**Developmental Delays:** Delays in motor skills, speech and/or learning.

**Department of Social Services (DSS):** The Massachusetts State Child Welfare Agency. The agency focuses on the safety, permanency and well being of children who have been abused and neglected in family settings or by caretakers.

**Domestic Infant Adoption:** The adoption of infants born in the United States and generally refers to children who are voluntarily relinquished by their birthparent/s.

**Emotional Disabilities:** A disturbance of mood not due to any physical or mental disorder. Children with emotional disabilities may exhibit lack of respect for authority, behavior problems in school, inability to cope with change and difficulty getting along with other children. They might also have trouble sleeping, have mood swings, be impulsive and appear to be unaware or unconcerned about the consequences of their actions. Children with emotional disabilities may need therapy or counseling.

**Emotional Injury:** Also referred to as emotional abuse, hurts a child's emotional development. It occurs when attitudes or actions repeatedly happen in a family that negatively effect the way a child feels about him/herself. This can impair a youngster's behavior and ability to function. Emotional abuse happens in all kinds of ways. A lack of love and support can be devastating. This can take the form of emotional detachment or a severe lack of affection. Extremely harsh, critical treatment of a child can cause emotional injury, too. This can include severe punishment, rejection and verbal assaults that may include belittling, or scapegoating.

**Foster Care:** Foster Care is the substitute family and care that children receive when they have been removed from a situation where either abuse and/or neglect has occurred and neither biological parents nor other extended family members can meet a child's needs. The State agency has placement and care responsibility during this time.

**Foster Care Adoption:** Foster care adoption, also referred to as special needs adoption, is the adoption of children from state care. These children are typically harder to place based on their race, ethnicity, age, disability, or part of a sibling group.

**Homestudy:** The homestudy is a process as well as a final written document. After the family's completion of MAPP training, the family's social worker conducts visits to the home in order to become acquainted with the household and the community to ensure they can provide a safe environment for a child. It also allows the social worker to gain a better understanding of how the family functions within the home. The write-up at the end of the process is the family's homestudy, which is either approved or denied by the agency.

**International Adoption:** The adoption of a child who is a citizen of a different country than the adoptive parents.

**Learning Disabilities:** Children with learning disabilities may have average intelligence, but they have difficulty sorting and storing information. They may have visual or auditory perception problems that make it difficult for them to learn by reading directions or by listening. They learn best by seeing and doing. More than 40 percent of special needs children have learning disabilities. Special classes can help the child with school and learning.

**Loss Issues:** When children lose loved ones through separation, divorce or death, some feel immediate grief but others may deny their loss. Long-term denial or avoidance of grief can

result in severe problems. Signs that indicate professional help might be needed include extended depression, loss of interest in daily activities, inability to sleep, loss of appetite, a drop in school performance, hyperactivity, aggression and inability to concentrate.

**Legally Free:** Legally free children are those whose birthparents have voluntarily surrendered their parental rights, or have had them terminated through a court process. These birthparents have no legal recourse or claim to the involved children.

**Legal Risk:** Children at legal risk are those for whom the process to terminate birthparents' rights has not yet concluded. DSS has determined that adoption is in the child's best interest and does not want to delay recruitment of a family while the court pursues termination of the birthparents' rights. The court case can last as long as two years or more until the final decision is made. In some cases, the birthparents retain the right to visit their child during the time the case is technically in foster care status. The majority of legal risk placements result in the foster child being adopted by the pre-adoptive family.

**Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE):** A private, non-profit organization that works in collaboration with the child welfare system, specifically adoption agencies, to find adoptive families for children in foster care.

**Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP):** A training course required of all prospective adoptive families and foster families in Massachusetts. The trainings usually are in groups of 8-20 individuals, for 3 hours one day a week for 8 weeks. Its purpose is to help families prepare for adoption or foster care through understanding the losses that waiting children have suffered and the birth family issues that can exist.

**Neglect:** Situation that occurs when a child's basic needs are not provided for. Every youngster needs food, shelter, medical care, supervision, emotional stability and a chance to grow. When a caregiver withholds these things, a child is neglected. This may happen deliberately, through negligence or due to an inability to parent. The environmental circumstances that some parents may face, such as disability, homelessness or inadequate financial resources, are not seen as sources of neglect.

**Open Adoption:** An adoption that involves ongoing contact between birth and adoptive families, sometimes including visits. Each adoption varies in terms of who remains involved and visitations. Open adoption does not mean shared parenting.

**Physical Abuse:** Characterized by the infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to hurt the child; rather, the injury may have resulted from over-discipline or physical punishment.

**Prospective Adoptive Family:** A family that is interested in adoption and is either in the midst of the adoption process and/or waiting for a match with a child.

**Public Adoption Agency:** The public adoption agency is usually the state child welfare agency. For Massachusetts, this is the Department of Social Services. Within the state child

welfare agency is the adoption unit, which is dedicated to the adoption of all the children who have a goal of adoption. Services are free of charge through public adoption agencies.

**Sexual Abuse:** Occurs when a child has any sexual contact with an adult. This can happen through intercourse, which is considered rape under Massachusetts law. It includes any oral, genital or anal penetration. Sexual exploitation and molestation are also considered abuse. They are defined as contacts or interactions with a child that are used to satisfy an adult's sexual needs and desires. This includes any verbally enticing language as well as fondling, masturbating or exposure of sexual organs by the adult. Sex between an adult and child is never consensual.

**School-Aged Children:** Children age 6 and older, and are generally at an age when they are enrolled in school.

**Sibling Groups:** Children with one or more biological brother or sister.

**Special Needs Adoption:** Special needs adoption, also referred to as adoption through foster care, is the adoption of children who are in state care. These children are typically harder to place based on their race, ethnicity, age, disability, or being part of a sibling group.

**Waiting Child(ren):** A child who is waiting to be adopted.

**Waiting Family:** A family who has completed MAPP training and the homestudy process, has been approved to adopt and is waiting for an appropriate match to be found.

We hope you have found this handbook beneficial and that you now have a better understanding of MARE, its services, volunteer opportunities, the children who are waiting and the foster care adoption process. We anticipate that the resources provided will help you during your time with MARE and assist in your understanding of the child welfare system, as well as, services available statewide and nationally. We recommend you keep this booklet as a resource throughout your time at MARE. If you have any further questions or would like to discuss possible volunteer opportunities, please contact MARE. If you have made the decision that volunteering at MARE is right for you, please complete the appropriate volunteer materials: volunteer application, CORI form and confidentiality form and return them to MARE.

Thank you for interest in MARE and anticipated involvement in helping find children “a place to call HOME.”

## Contact Information

website: [www.mareinc.org](http://www.mareinc.org)

### MARE Main Office

45 Franklin Street, 5th Floor  
Boston, MA 02110  
617-54-ADOPT (617-542-3678)  
1-800-882-1176  
Fax: 617-542-1006  
TTY: 617-542-7772

### MARE Western MA Office

c/o Department of Children and Families  
140 High Street, 5th Floor  
Springfield, MA 01105  
413-452-3431 or 413-452-3365

## The MARE Staff

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