

Successful Models for Recruitment and Retention of African American Adoptive Families

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African American children continue to be over-represented in the population of children in out of home care and in the population of children waiting to be adopted in the nation's child welfare system. In 2017, while African American children accounted for 14% of the U.S. child population, 100,607 or 23% of the 442,995 children in care were African American, as were 27,388 (22%) of the 123,437 children waiting to be adopted (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). In addition, while 49% (28,868) of those adopted with public agency assistance were White, only 17% (10,332) were African American (U.S. DHHS, 2018).

Although African American children still wait far too long for agencies to find adoptive families, there are successful models for the recruitment and retention of adoptive families, particularly rural African American adoptive families for African American children. This paper describes two successful models in which African American

families both self-recruited, and were recruited by agencies seeking to place African American children. While the communities are different, and the adoptions occurred during different time periods, there are similarities that describe a model that can be replicated and/or adjusted to increase and stabilize recruitment of African American families in other states.

Bennett Chapel, Possum Trot, Texas

The first model explores adoptions that took place in a very rural area of Texas between 1996 and 2004. This description is based on research that was conducted on 72 adoptions (71 African American and 1 mixed race child), completed in and near Possum Trot, Texas between 1996 and 2004. The adoptive families were either members of Bennett Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, or relatives and/or friends of church members. The Pastor's wife, suffering the loss of her mother, asked God for enlightenment. God inspired her to foster and adopt. With no other information, she contacted Child Protective Service to learn about the process and was invited to an adoption information meeting being held 60 miles from her home. She and her sister attended the meeting (Belanger, 2009a). While in this sense she "self-recruited", she was introduced to a kind, thoughtful and supportive worker who believed in her from the start, corrected misunderstandings,



and guided the process so that not only did the Pastor's wife (the First Lady) and her sister adopt, but eventually 72 children were adopted by 26 families in the church and/or in the community (Belanger, 2009b).

It is important to note that there were a number of challenges for the prospective adoptive families and for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) responsible for placing these children for adoption. Specifically, these African American families who were interested in adoption, lived in Possum Trot, an unincorporated community in Shelby County, TX (pop. 25, 579), which was 60 miles from the closest adoption classes. The county included many families in poverty, was medically underserved with no local psychiatrists, and limited or no access to mental health services, lack of internet/cell phone coverage in much of the county, and multiple school districts, while the rural DFPS workforce was limited also.

On the other hand, these rural families were characterized by many strengths related to rural living, including creativity, flexibility, community connectedness and experience with collaboration. The 26 families who adopted in this community were connected through church, kin relationships, and living in close proximity to one another. Many adopters were older families with grown children who had never before considered parenting again, but were interested when they saw the need, and with support and encouragement of the worker, continued the process, often with the support of their grown birth children. In fact, the worker's support was indicated as a factor in their adoptions, along with their faith, and the current and perceived future support of both their church congregation and their pastor, Bishop W. C. Martin and First Lady Donna Martin. Because of the creativity, flexibility and connectedness of both the families and DFPS staff, the adoptions proceeded over a period of years overcoming all obstacles. For example, the families and worker would collaborate over the "fit" of children in different homes, and when children were having difficulties post adoption, often the worker would suggest that another relative step in and assist in certain situations (Belanger, 2009b). When a child needed more discipline, a relative, such as



"Auntie B", might be more helpful, but when she needed a gentler hand she could go spend time cookie with Auntie D. When adoptive parents of three children became ill and died, another family of the same community who had already adopted a sibling group of 5 girls adopted them also, keeping them in the community.

The children adopted by these families, ranged in age at adoption from newborn to 11 years old, with 75% part of a sibling group, while the parents' age range was 28 to 52 years old at the time of adoption. In 2004, Belanger, based on research related to religious support, conducted an initial study of the adoptive families, and found that their faith and the support of the adoption worker significantly and positively impacted the adoptions, and that both influenced the families' decision to adopt.

Belanger & McRoy conducted a follow-up study 2015-16, eleven years after the initial study, and 15 years post adoption. The sample size in this cross-sectional study included 44 adopted youth ranging in age from 10 to 26, and 22 adoptive parents from 17 families ranging in age from 42 to 66 years old. Most (82%) families reported that the rural environment had a positive influence on the children's adjustment. The families lived nearby, knew each other, children and family members often attended the same church and school, and provided support to one another.

While there were no college graduates among the adoptive families, 32% had completed some college, and 64% had college aspirations for their adopted children. Since several studies point to education as a means to achieve independence and self-sufficiency (as cited by Bruster &

Coccoma, 2013), it is an accomplishment that of the 37 youth whose parents responded to questions about their adoptive child's college aspirations, 8 (22%) were attending college at the time of the follow up study, while an additional 11 (30%) had college aspirations. None of the youth were married; one was living with a significant other. Six (14%) had one child and 3 (7%) had two children. Most (59%) were employed.

Overall, these families expressed satisfaction with the adoptions and viewed them as successful. They clearly loved and admired their adopted and birth children, and several families mentioned the possibility of adopting again.

Adoption Advocacy of South Carolina

Another successful African American adoption model was implemented by Adoption Advocacy, a private adoption agency in South Carolina. With only 4 staff members, the agency began focusing on international adoptions, but found in 2001 the need for adoptive homes for thousands of US foster children who had been waiting for years. Joe Haynes, Adoption Advocacy, Director, met members of South Carolina's foster and adoption family support group and began making adoptive placements with families who were self-recruited, through friends and relatives. Between 2001 and June, 2018, Adoption Advocacy has placed 902 children for adoption. The majority of the adopted children (74%) (See Table 1) and adoptive families (80%) (See Table 2) are African American. The adopted children were those for whom no family could be found in their state of residence, including Texas (403 children), Ohio (243), Alabama (66), Louisiana (49), California (45) and 19 other states. The counties of residence of the adoptive families are almost entirely rural, with average incomes below the state average (\$45,033), and well below the average for U. S. families (\$53,480).

In order to learn more about this model, in 2016 McRoy and Belanger interviewed 16 adoptive parents who adopted a total of 75 children and collected data on 44 children adopted through Adoption Advocacy. The researchers noted both similarities and differences between Bennett Chapel and Adoption Advocacy.

Similarities between Adoption Models

African American adoptive families in both models self-recruited, after learning about the need for families for African American children. They initially made contact with the state or private agency (The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and Adoption Advocacy) to explore the possibilities of adopting children from the foster care system.

The families. For families in both programs, faith or the belief in God were both part of the decision to adopt, and a major strength in the adoption. The adoptive families tended to be older, had already parented birth children who were now grown, and were ready to parent again. The adoptive parents tended to have relatively low incomes and had completed high school education. Many families were single parent female-headed households.

The workers and agency. Past studies have shown the importance of the agency worker and worker support on foster and adoptive parent recruitment, and on outcomes for both foster care and adoption (North Carolina Division of Social Services, 2009; Belanger, Cheung, & Cordova, 2012). We also know that this is even more important for African American adoptive families (AdoptUSKids (nd); McRoy, Oglesby, & Grape, 1997) and for special needs adoptions (Reilly & Platz, 2004). However, both programs were characterized by strong trusting relationships formed with the state or agency adoption placement worker. In fact, in both programs, the adoption placement worker maintained the relationships before, during and after the adoption, and was considered a friend, and most parents referred to the worker by his/her first name. The worker was available during office hours as well as after hours, ready to give advice on the phone, connect families to resources, or to just listen, and ultimately was trusted to give sound advice and support. Therefore, due to this supportive and trusting relationship, the adoptive families referred other prospective adopters to the worker. In both programs, the agency itself was flexible, adapting staffing to the needs of families vs. agency criteria.

Table 1. Race and Ethnicity of Adopted Children, Adoption Advocacy

Race of Child	Number Placed	%
African American	665	74%
White	92	10%
Hispanic/Latino	115	13%
Bi or Multiracial	24	3%
Native American	2	-0-
Asian	4	-0-
TOTAL	902	

Table 2. Race and Ethnicity of Adoptive Families, Adoption Advocacy

Race of Adoptive Family	Number/% of Families	Number of children adopted
African American	229 (79.8%)	590 (80.2%)
White	49 (17.1%)	114 (15.5%)
Hispanic/Latino	6 (2.1%)	25 (3.4%)
Multiracial or unknown	3 (1%)	7 (1%)
Total # Families	287	

While both workers were White, they were culturally competent and sensitive to the needs and strengths of the African American adoptive families. They realized the importance of informal resources that would support the adoptions, and displayed willingness to suggest modifications to structures to meet licensing standards rather than eliminating families from consideration because of their rural locations. Both workers assured families of the availability of sufficient subsidies to care for the children placed. It is important to note that all foster and adoptive families, regardless of race, just need a worker who will help them through the maze of paperwork and help them obtain all the services that their child may need.

The communities. Both programs primarily placed children in largely rural areas, with connected communities and families who referred their friends and relatives to the adoption agencies, and then supported each other post adoption. Faith can be a motivator for both foster care and adoption (Belanger, Copeland, and Cheung, 2008) and religious support can impact health and mental health outcomes (Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001). However, both programs provided demonstrations of that support, both emotionally and in concrete terms. Churches and church related activities provided opportunities for children to belong to the community immediately, to adapt to their new homes, and to hold positions of leadership or other positions (choir, altar service, ushering, etc.). In addition, the small rural communities provided other kinds of support, including multiple intersecting and close relationships in both the community and with extended kin, with small geographical spaces, with activities within small systems (Belanger, 2004). In other words, the rural placements provided stability and social capital vs. economic or human capital.

Differences between Adoption Models

There were also differences in the experiences of families in the two programs. While Bennett Chapel had few supportive resources within a close driving distance, South Carolina communities are not as resource-poor or as distant from

one another. Mental health and health services are available within a reasonable distance. Bennett Chapel included families with whom the state agency (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services) had placed children, while Adoption Advocacy is a private agency and placed children from many different states. While Bennett Chapel is one community of families connected by the church, by kinship relationships, or by community proximity, Adoption Advocacy adoptions took place in multiple communities, generally with a strong family/church at the center of each of the many communities, and the connections from kinship or friendships between communities.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of these unique approaches to adoptions of African American children in rural areas.
- Since pre and post placement worker support was a factor which seems to have influenced the positive outcomes in these two settings, more research is needed to further explore this in other settings.
- Future research should be designed to compare the use of a team of workers to support families from inquiry through post adoption (at least 2 years) with services provided by a single worker identified for the family to provide support from inquiry through post adoption, or other variations. Also, it is important for future research to test the model of flexible continuous support for both retention and for cost effectiveness.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- As mentioned earlier, there are disproportionately high numbers of African American children waiting for adoption in the U. S. It is important to note that children in the child welfare system who are not adopted or reunified are "more vulnerable to homelessness, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system" (McRoy, 2008, p. 336). Innovative approaches are needed for the recruitment and retention of adoptive families for these children.
- Many agencies seeking to place African American children often struggle with overcoming the belief that African American families are not interested in

adopting, because they may not have long waiting lists of these families. However, both adoption models described above demonstrated the importance of first recognizing that African American families do have the desire to adopt, even if they are not responsive to standard recruitment techniques.

- Both models demonstrated the importance of establishing a trusting and ongoing relationship with the adoption worker, a relationship founded on the worker's appreciation and care for the adoptive family and the family's understanding that this worker would "be there" for them in the future. It is important to note that for both examples of outstanding success with recruiting and supporting African American families, neither worker was African American. However, both adoption workers understood the families, were willing to take calls at any time, and appreciated the skills and commitment the families brought to the children.
- Finally, both models demonstrated the importance of worker continuity, stability and accessibility. Worker support in both models demonstrates that a dedicated staff person who assists throughout the placement as well as post adoption can actually be far more effective in "recruiting" and retaining families, without recruiting at all.
- Support should include parent training, assessment, foster care placement, continuing assessment, and adoption and post-adoption support which is adapted to the community's needs, taking the time necessary to establish rapport and trust, being available, providing guidance and information, positive feedback, encouragement, and creative problem

solving. This helps the families to feel confident about the process of adoption, and often become active recruiters and supporters of other adoptive families. For example, instead of churches being viewed primarily as a "market" to recruit families, churches could instead be viewed as an additional community that the worker can support, which is in keeping with the church's mission to "love one's neighbor". This establishes mutually supporting relationships, and provides the opportunity for the church to know and trust a worker, and the worker to share information as needed and opportunities to support children in need. ***We need to change our perspective from a "sales" approach to a "mutual support" approach.***

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

- African American children are disproportionately represented in the nation's foster care system, and currently over 27,000 are waiting to be adopted. Therefore, innovative practices and policies are needed to increase the likelihood of finding permanency for these children. Based upon this research, it is clear that African American families in rural areas can and will adopt. Policies which call for the provision of both culturally competent pre and post adoption services are needed to increase the likelihood of finding and supporting (both before and after the adoption) rural as well as urban families for the thousands of waiting African American children.

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Kathleen Belanger

Kathleen Belanger, MSW, PhD, began her career in child welfare as director of purchased services in public child welfare, coordinated a collaborative design of a management information system for use by direct service staff and regional administration, and evaluated numerous programs for public child welfare and other human service organizations. She is currently the Director of the Social Work Program at Franciscan University of Steubenville, OH and Professor Emeritus of Social Work at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches TX, teaching for more than 25 years. She assisted in the development of the MSW program at the university, and initiated and directed the Title IV-E program, a collaborative partnership among public child welfare, the university and the regional foster/adoptive parent association. Her publications, presentations, research and evaluation include books, articles, book chapters, reports and editorials related to racial disproportionality in child welfare, rural child welfare and human services, working with communities of faith, building sustainable programs in and with communities, demystifying data, analyzing and addressing foster and adoptive parent recruitment and retention challenges, and building evidence in practice. She has consulted with the Child Welfare Gateway and numerous other organizations, and is a member of the Rural Human Services Panel of the Rural Policy Research Institute. She serves on the National Advisory Committee for Rural Health and Human Services and continues to work with communities and agencies to create sustainable solutions with limited resources.



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Ruth G. McRoy

In 2009, Ruth G. McRoy became the first holder of the Donahue and DiFelice Endowed Professorship at Boston College School of Social Work. Prior to joining the Boston College faculty, McRoy was a member of the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work faculty for 25 years and held the Ruby Lee Piester Centennial Professorship. She received her BA and MSW degrees from the University of Kansas and her PhD degree in Social Work from the University of Texas at Austin. A practitioner, academician, researcher, and trainer, in the field for over 30 years, her work has focused on such topics as culturally competent service delivery, social work practice with African American families, racial disproportionality, open adoptions, kinship care, adoptive family recruitment, racial identity development, transracial adoptions, older child adoptions, family preservation, adolescent pregnancy, and post-adoption services. McRoy has served on the Board of the Society for Social Work and Research and as Co-Chair of the Council on Social Work Education's Commission on Diversity and Social and Economic Justice. She is a founding member and fellow in the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. In 2010, she was named the recipient of the 2010 St. John's Outstanding Scholar in Adoption Award. She received the 2013 U.S. Children's Bureau's Adoption Excellence Award and the 2014 North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) Child Advocate of the Year Award.



Joe Haynes

Joe has frequently spoken at national adoption conferences for the last 10 years on behalf of Adoption Advocacy. Adoption Advocacy is a licensed non-profit adoption agency with a primary focus on helping South Carolina families adopt children from foster care. Although originally organized to complete international adoptions, the agency concluded that there was a need for a private agency to help South Carolina families adopt children from foster care. To date, 867 foster children from 25 states have been placed for adoption with South Carolina families. Approximately 77% of the children have been African American and almost all have been older children. Adoption Advocacy has been recognized nationally as an example of a successful rural and African American adoption agency and has been profiled by Dr. Ruth McRoy (Boston College) and Dr. Kathleen Belanger (Stephen F Austin.) Adoption Advocacy recently received the 2016 Adoptions Across Boundaries Award from Voice for Adoption.