

# Transforming Child Services, Improving Lives

*Council of State Governments*



Rita Soronen, President & CEO

*Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting*  
Health and Human Services Committee | 7/21/24



Dave Thomas  
Foundation  
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Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

## **Our Mission:**

Dramatically increase the number of adoptions of children waiting in North America's foster care systems.

## **Our Vision:**

Every child will have a permanent home and a loving family.

**We Believe:** ADOPTABLE.  
Every child is



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# Dave Thomas

Founder of Wendy's® and the  
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

“

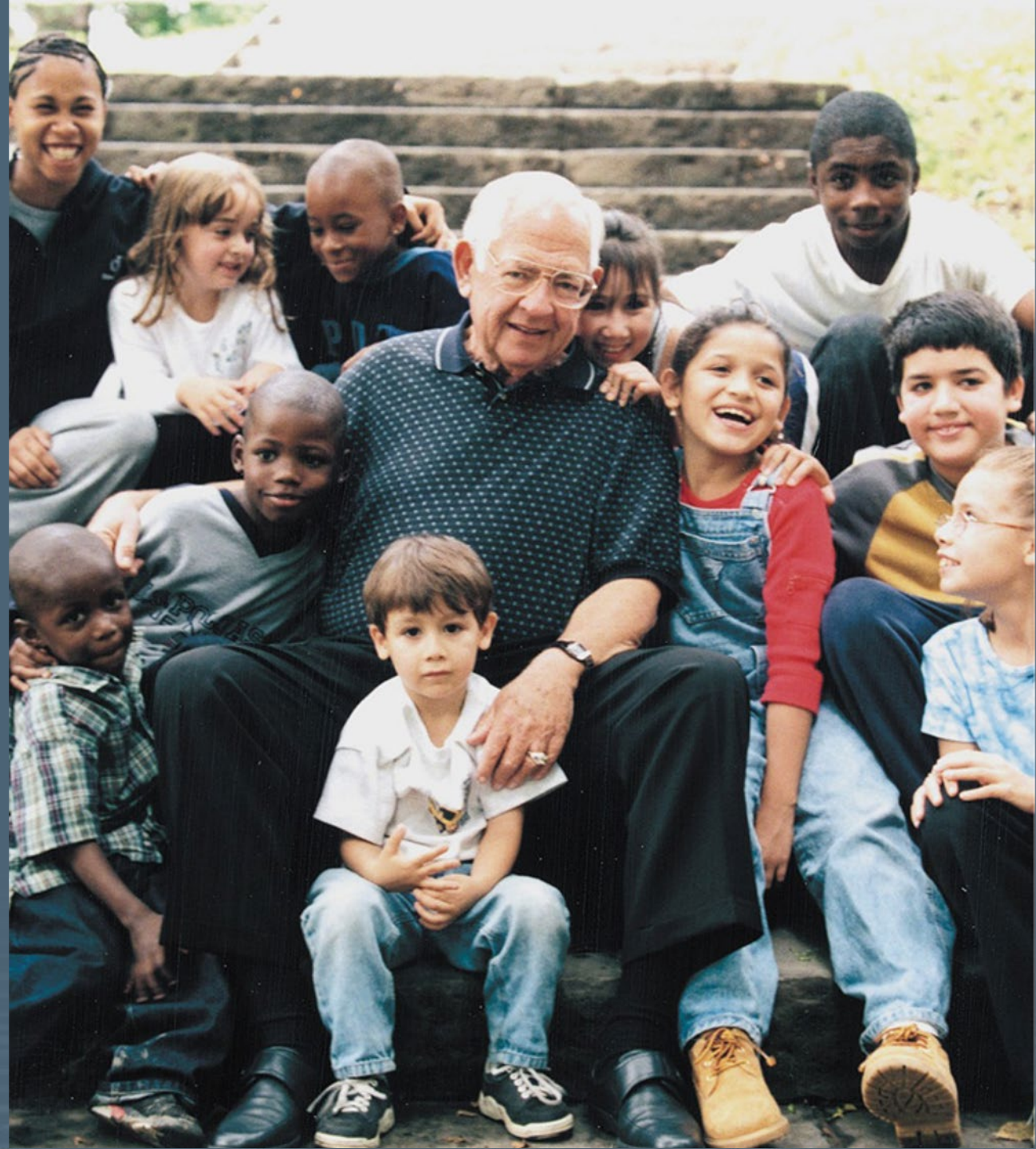
These children are not someone  
else's responsibility.

**They are our responsibility.**

”



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# Champion for Children in Foster Care

- As part of his commitment, Dave:
  - Challenged corporations to include adoption benefits
  - Advocated to pass tax incentives for adoptive parents
  - Encouraged state legislators to examine and rewrite adoption law in their states
  - Raised public awareness of foster care through his appearance in adoption public service announcements
  - Mobilized network of Wendy's restaurants to support adoption





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Our “Why?”

# In North America

**430,000  
children**

are in  
foster care

**140,000+  
children**

are waiting to  
be adopted

**20,000+  
children**

Age out of care every  
year without a family



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# Foster Care Adoption\*

- Touched by Adoption:  
**US 40% / CA 39%**
- Considered Adoption:  
**US 37% (+12%) / CA 32% (+6%)**
- If considering adoption, considering foster care adoption:  
**US 82% (+3%) / CA 73% (+15%)**
- Society should be doing more to encourage foster care adoption:  
**US 75% (+11%) / CA 74% (+9%)**
- Understand children are in care because they have been harmed  
**US 83% / CA 88%**
- Believe that children are in care because of juvenile delinquency  
**US 51% / CA 51%**
- Believe every child is adoptable  
**US 67% (+9%) / CA 68% (+14%)**

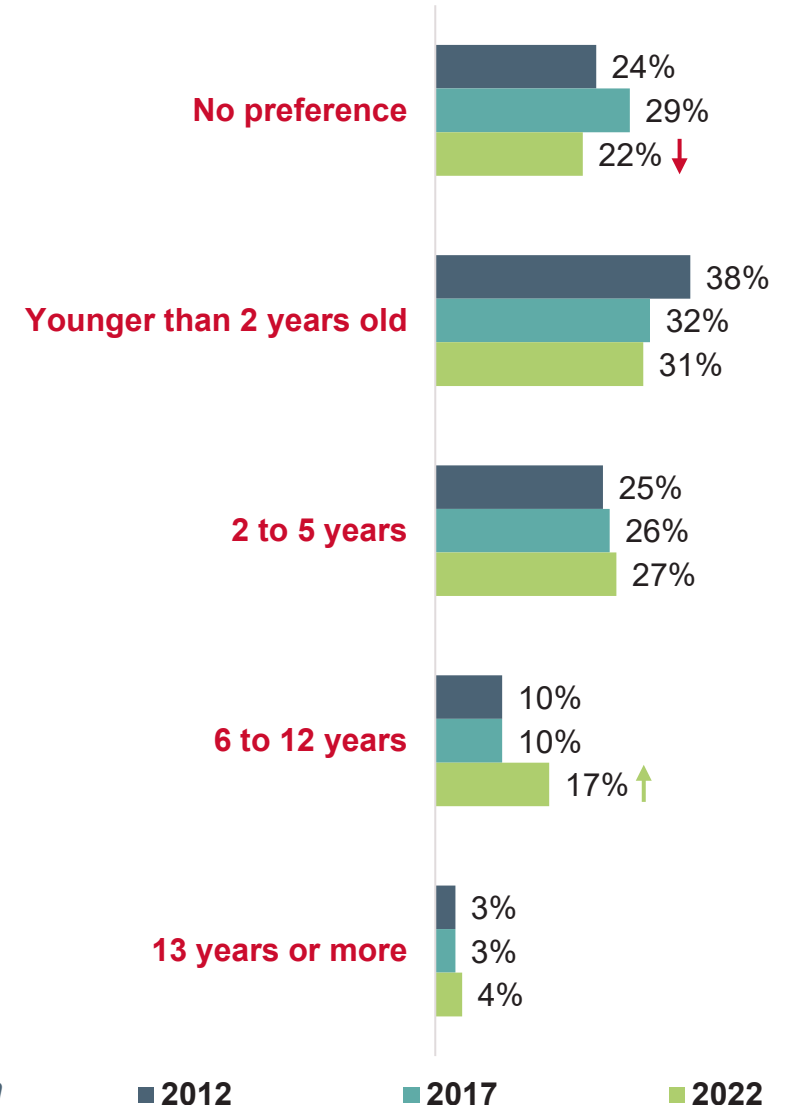


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\*Source: 2022 U.S. and Canada Adoption and Foster Care Attitudes Surveys,  
conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

harris poll

## Age preference when considering adopting



# System Challenges

- Resources / workforce issues
- Data challenges
- Lack of evidence-based practices for the longest-waiting children
- Inconsistent accountability — who takes responsibility for a child aging out of care and their long-term wellbeing?
- Teens, children with special needs, sibling groups and youth opposed to adoption are too often labeled as “unadoptable”
- Negligible mental health and post-permanency supports for children and families
- Overrepresentation based on population



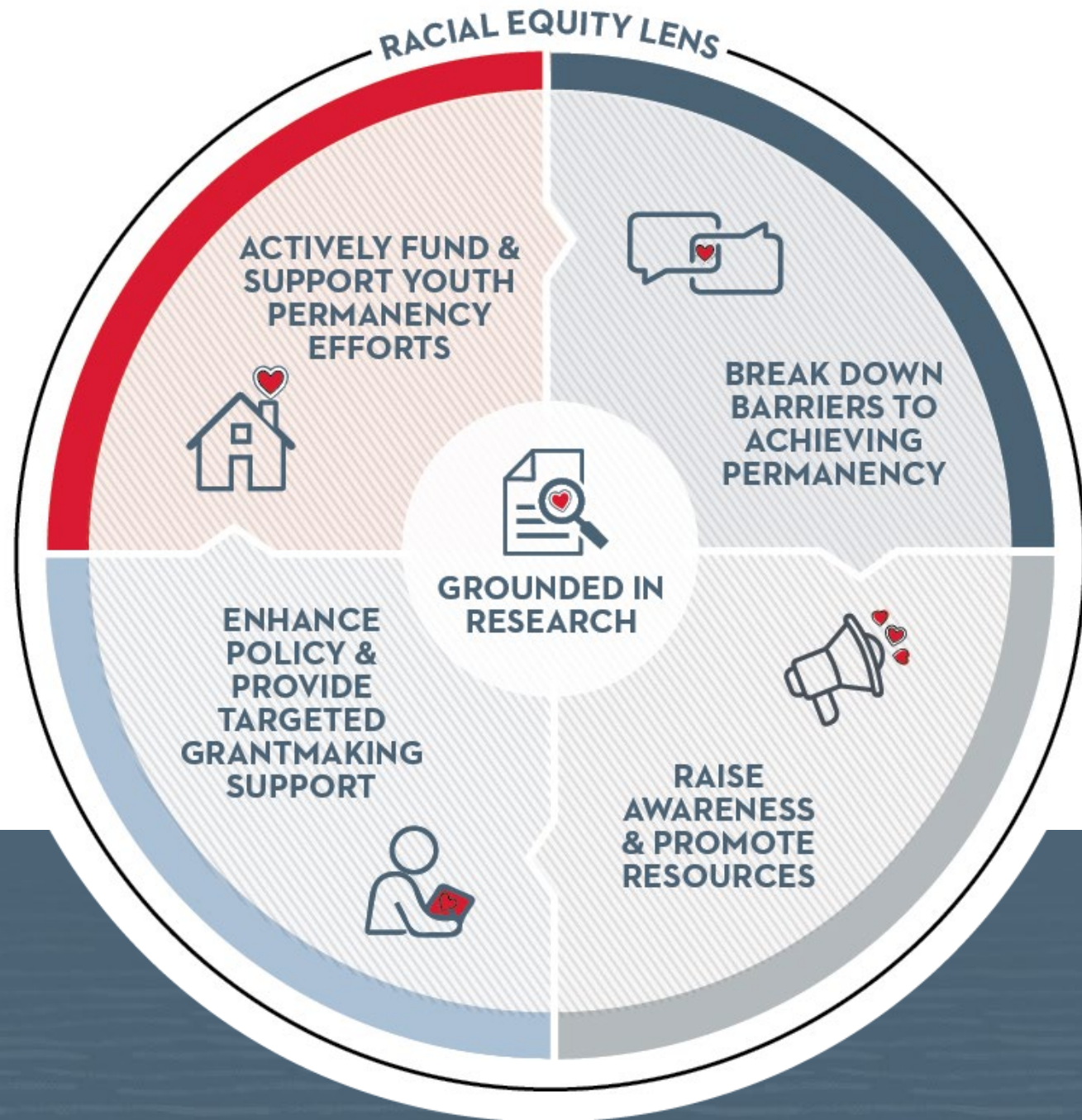




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**Our work in response**

# STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



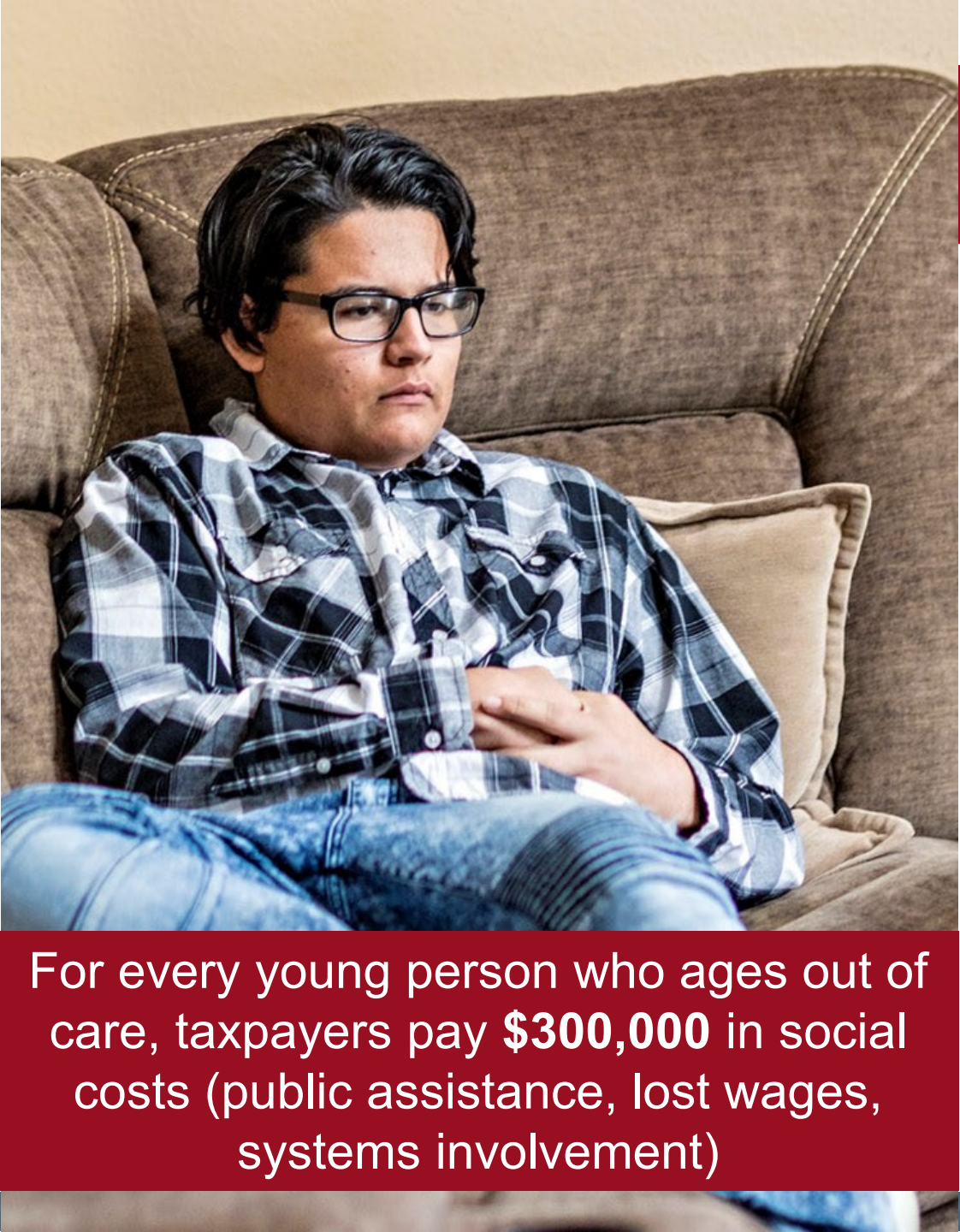


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Wendy's  
**Wonderful Kids**<sup>®</sup>





# Impact of Aging Out of Foster Care

Without the support and safety net of a permanent family\*:

- **1 in 5** youth will be homeless after age 18
- Only **50%** will be employed at age 24
- Less than **3%** will earn a college degree
- **70%** of former female foster youth will be pregnant by age 21
- **1 in 4** youth will experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), equal to or higher than U.S. military veterans

*\*Source: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Cost Avoidance: The Business Case for Investing In Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, 2013*



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For every young person who ages out of care, taxpayers pay **\$300,000** in social costs (public assistance, lost wages, systems involvement)



## Focus Population

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- Children aged 9 and older (or younger and one of the below)
- Sibling groups
- Children with special needs
- Children opposed to adoption
- Children in long-term foster care
- Children without an identified adoptive resource

Last year, more than 20,000 aged out of foster care without a permanent family

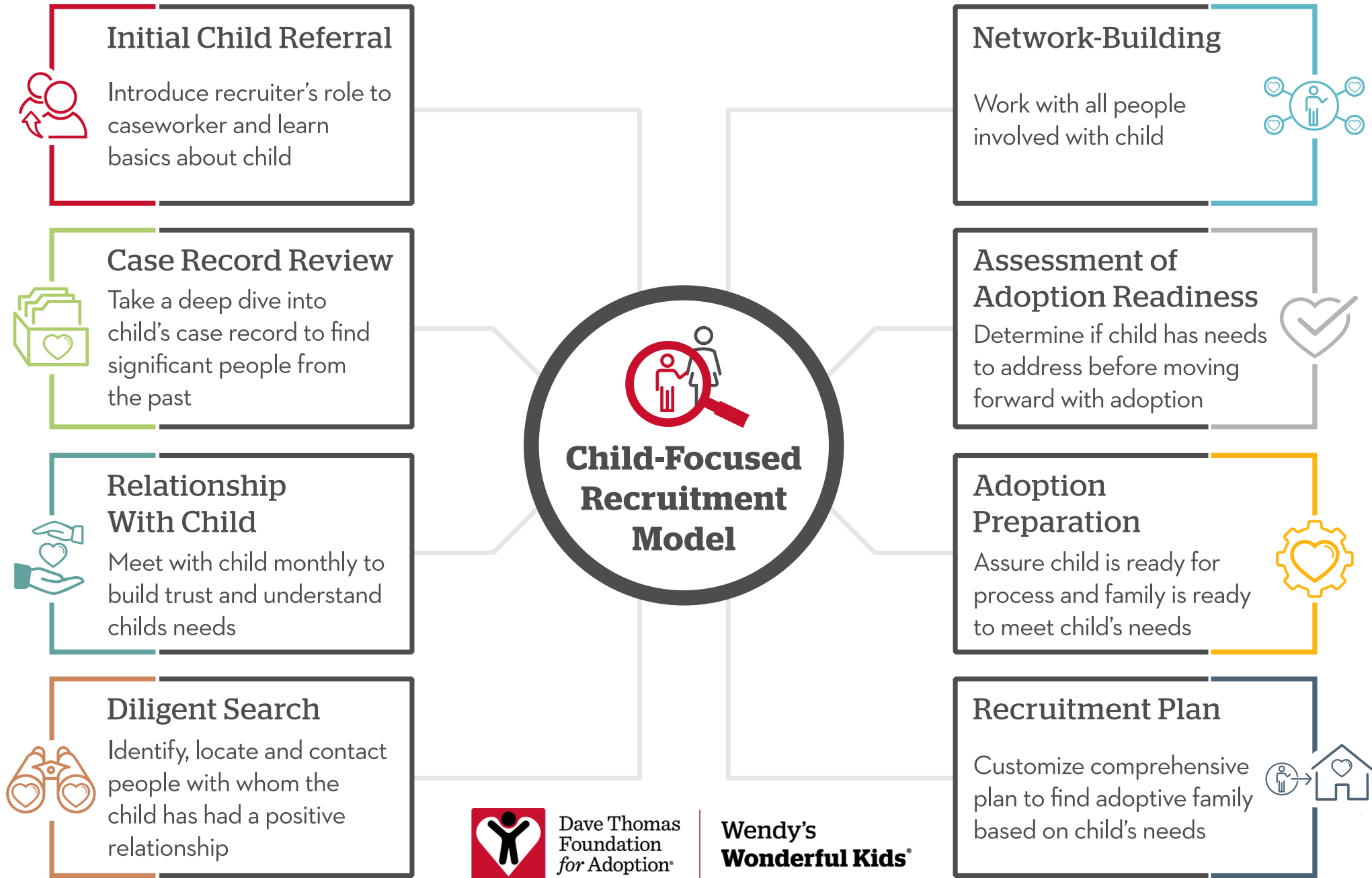


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# Child-Focused Recruitment

- Explores a child's history and pre-existing relationships to find placement: relatives, former foster parents, neighbors, mentors, teachers, pastors, etc.
- Seeks the **right adoptive family for the child**, not the right child for the adoptive family
- Does not utilize public displays of youth
- Involves the youth in the process





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# Rigorous National Evaluation

**“Wendy’s Wonderful Kids® substantially and significantly increases adoptions from foster care.”**  
**~ Child Trends\***

- Children served by WWK are 1.7x more likely to be adopted
- Older children are up to 3x more likely to get adopted
- Children with specific mental health needs are more than 3x more likely to get adopted
- Older youth opposed to adoption were more likely to consider adoption when working with a WWK recruiter



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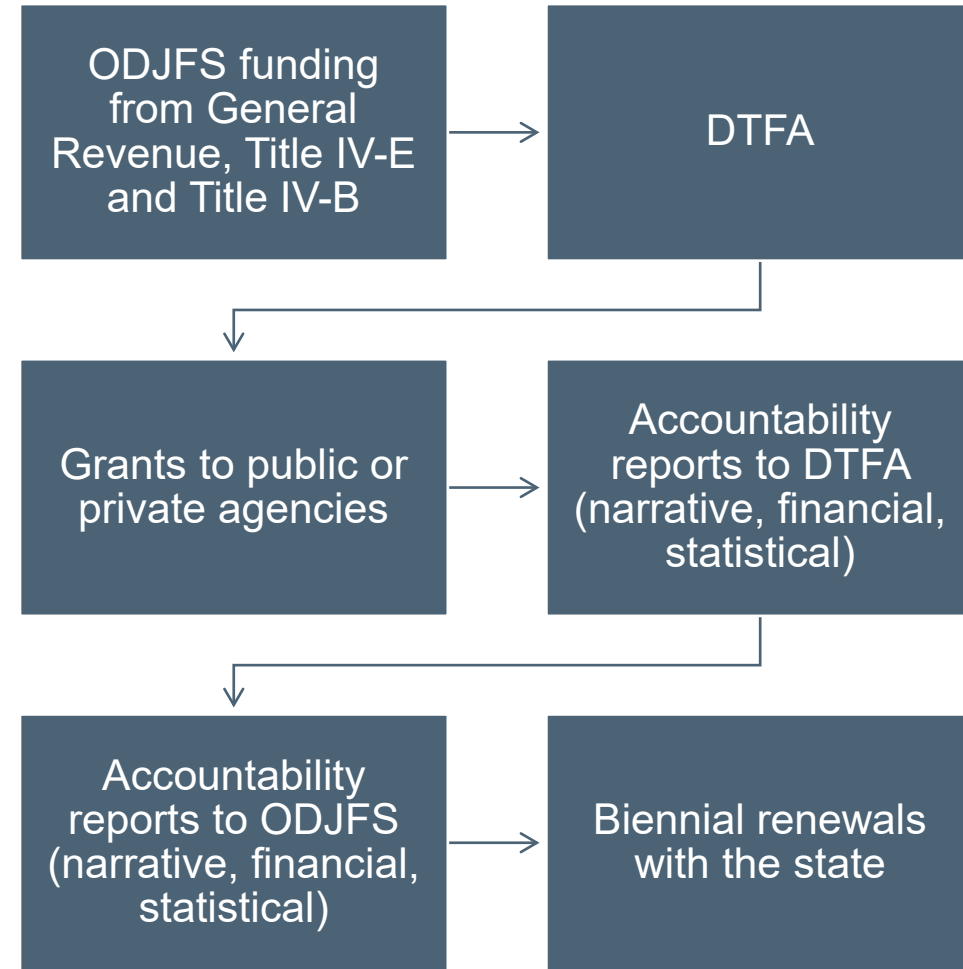


**\*A National Evaluation of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids**  
The Impact of Child-Focused Recruitment on Foster Care Adoption: A Five-Year Evaluation of Wendy’s Wonderful Kids. Malm, K., et al; October 2011



# Ohio and Wendy's Wonderful Kids

- 2011: Approached ODJFS to launch a co-investment, public-private partnership to scale program
- 2012: Initial one-year commitment to DTFA to scale up to 40 recruiters + cost for supervisors
- FY24/25: commitment allows for up to 112 recruiters across 88 counties
- Established template for other states to scale & ROI\* strategy



# Ohio WWK Today



**3,679**  
children waiting

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS Reports (FY 2022)



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**85**

adoption recruiters

**1,177**

children currently on caseloads

Average age: 14  
Sibling groups 80%  
Special needs: 77%  
# of placements prior to WWK: 4

**1,693**

children adopted

Funded through Ohio General Revenue,  
Title IV-E, Title IV-B

# Samantha's Story



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# National Scaling Strategy

# Expanding Our Impact | Multiyear Business Plan

WWK scaled in all 50 states and D.C. by 2028

Co-investment strategy driving growth (DTFA, Blue Meridian Partners, states, counties, agencies)

[ 2017 – 2020 ]

## Phase I (launch)

- **11 states scaled** through co-investment public / private partnerships
- Supportive infrastructure, partnerships and fundraising strategies developed

[ 2021 – 2026 ]

## Phase II (expand, sustain)

- Deepen and sustain impact in Phase I scaling states
- Pursue expansion in at least **10 more states** in the near-term
- More deeply pursue commitment to racial equity/social justice



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# Expansion to Date

(as of 6/30/24)



**20**

states & provinces  
scaled/scaling



**14**

states with  
discussions pending

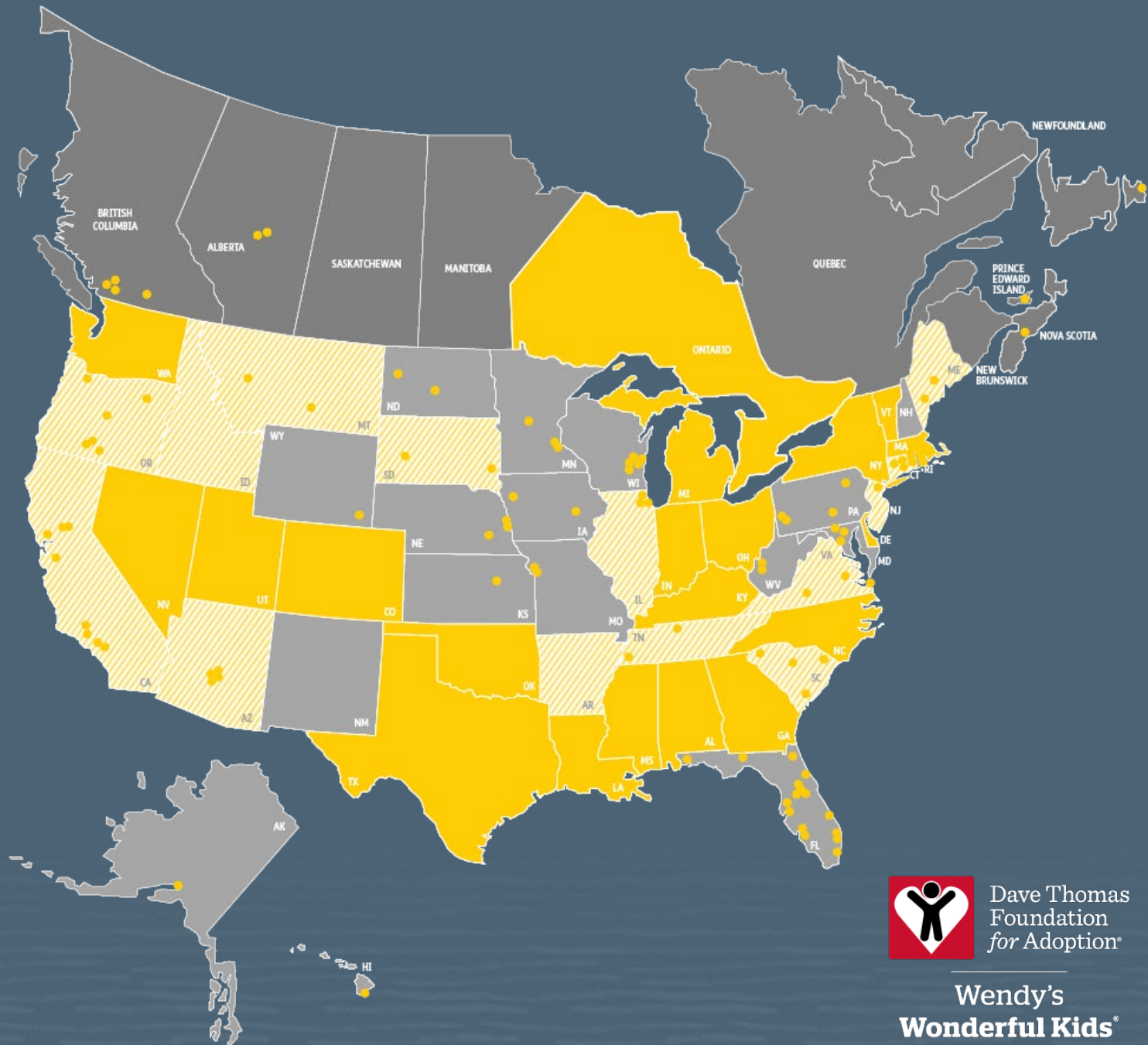


**563**

adoption recruiters  
serving **7,284** children

**14,439**

adoptions



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# Youth Currently Served in North America: 7,319

Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters are dedicated to finding adoptive families for **youth who are most often overlooked**, including **teenagers, children with special needs** and **siblings**.

[ 14 ]

average  
age

[ 76% ]

at least one  
special need

[ 77% ]

part of a  
sibling group

[ 58% ]

part of a  
minority group

Many of these youth have **lingered in care for years**, moving from house to house, with no one to turn to for support.

[ 5.7 ]

average number  
of placements  
prior to WWK

[ 3.1 ]

average years  
spent in care  
prior to WWK

Prior to being referred to  
Wendy's Wonderful Kids:

[ 21% ]

had failed  
adoptions

[ 87% ]

had minimal or  
no adoption  
recruitment efforts



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# Program Growth & Sustainability

- Public/private partnerships
  - Critical co-investment strategies
    - Understanding the appetite for and variety of funding options across states
  - Return on investment attitude
  - Relationship-based
    - Governors' offices
    - Legislatures
    - Departments of Families & Children Services
    - Implementing Agencies
    - Media and general public
  - Accountability-focused
    - Consistent training, detailed data management, aggressive goals accountability and rigorous reporting
  - Unwavering commitment to legal permanency (adoption, guardianship, reunification)







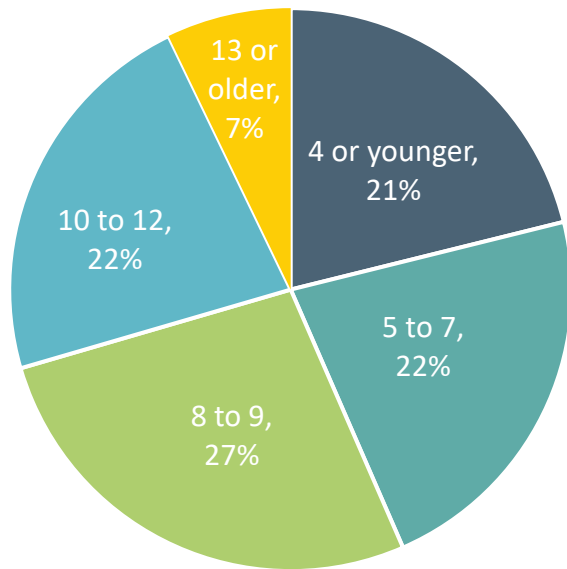
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# Outcomes and Well Being

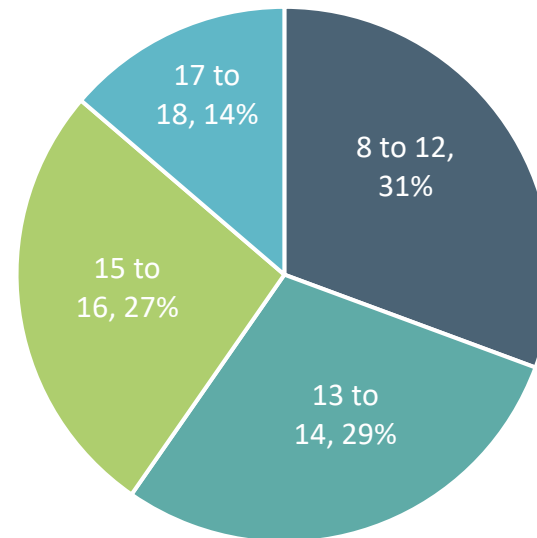
# Post-WWK: Survey of Youth Adopted

129 youth, ages 18 – 21, adopted through Wendy's Wonderful Kids  
*Child Trends, Washington, D.C., January 2021*

Age at first foster care entry



Age at adoption



- 28% had experienced 10 or more foster care placements
- 14% had experienced a failed adoption prior to WWK
- 80% had been in care more than 3 yrs. prior to WWK
- 23% had been removed from their home and placed in foster care more than once
- 56% had spent time in a group home or institution



# Post-WWK: Survey of Youth Adopted

## Key Findings

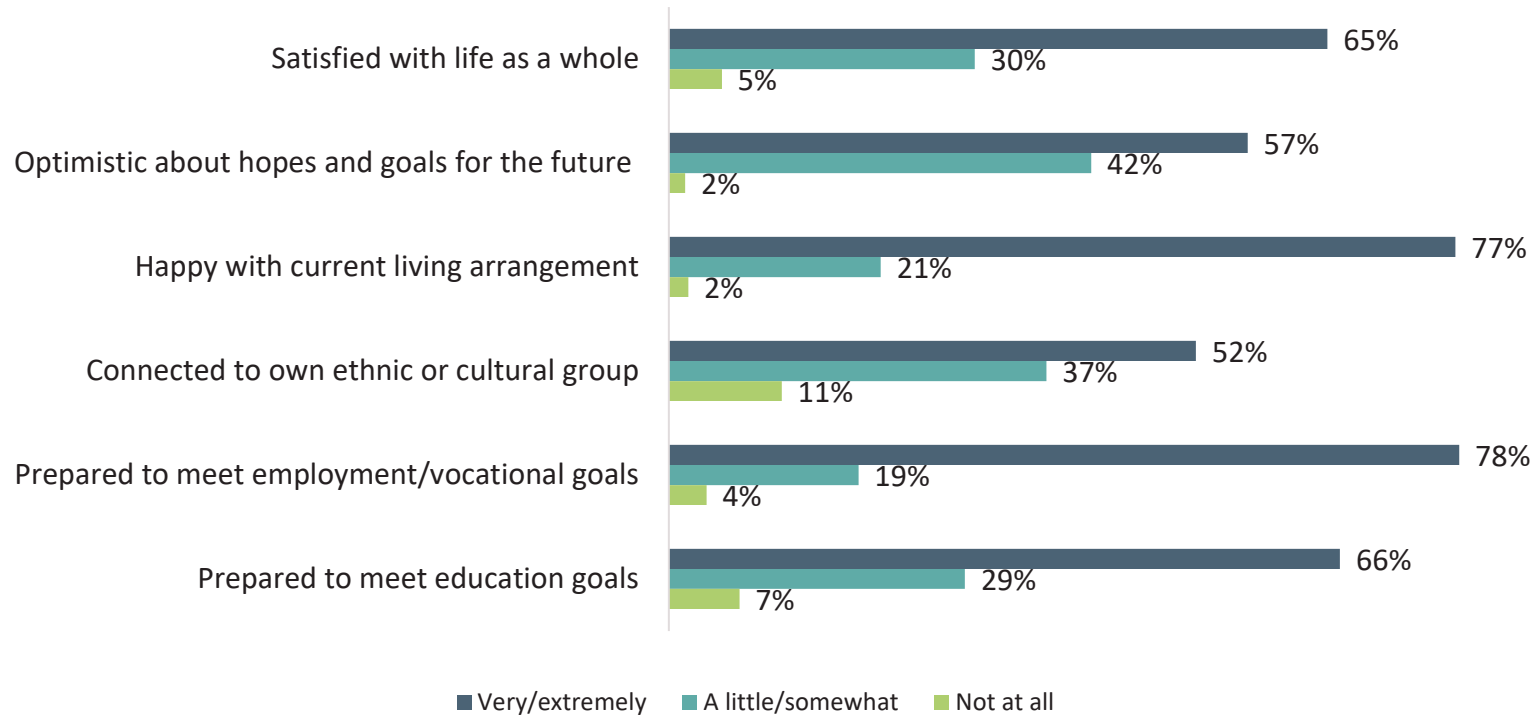
- Most (82%) of the young people feel very or extremely glad to have been adopted by their family. Two-thirds believe that being adopted affected their life very positively (66%).
- Most (80%) of the young people feel very or extremely close with at least one adoptive parent and 76% say it's very or extremely likely they can turn to parents when they need help.
- Many of the young people maintain connections with birth family members, particularly siblings. About four in ten (41%) connected with siblings daily or several times a week. Many of the young people want more contact with their siblings.
- Most (79%) of the young people experienced adoption challenges such as anger, conflict with siblings, or managing relationships with birth families.



# Post-WWK: Survey of Youth Adopted

## Key Findings: Well-being

How the young people are feeling about life



Rating of physical health



Rating of mental health



# Post-Permanency Strategy



*Develop and implement approach to identify possible expanded role in providing and/or funding post-adoption supports, e.g., needs assessment, potential offering(s), operational model, partnerships/staffing, pilot testing, evaluation*

- Extending our commitment to well-being outcomes
- Threading permanency with post-permanency efforts
- Funding and testing 13 post-permanency initiatives in WWK sites in 12 states (7 scaling states)

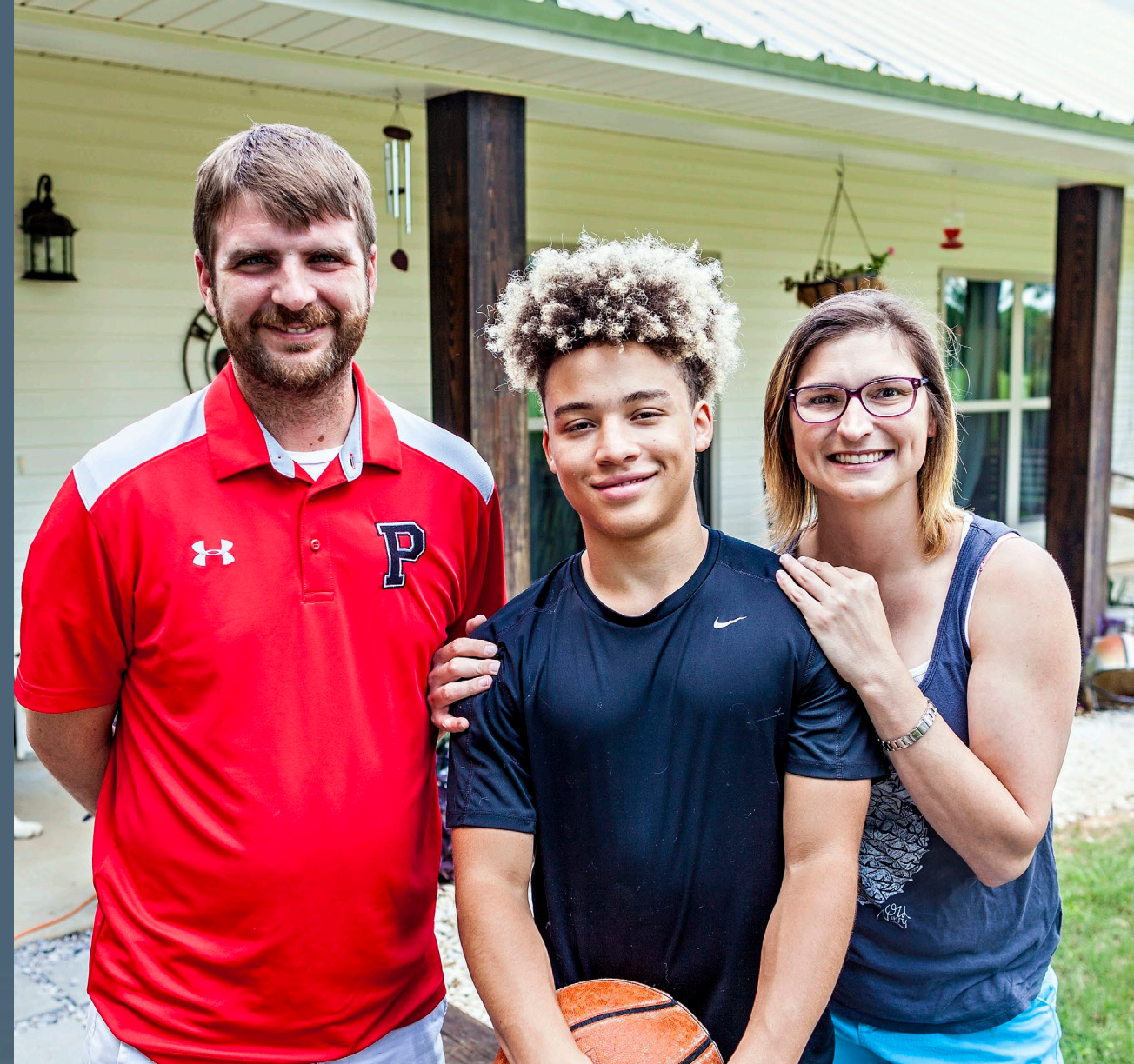
# Nationwide Impact

**Significant** long-term financial and social benefits from reduced homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, early parenting and substance abuse

**Infrastructure** in place to generate increasing social and financial benefits in subsequent years



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*Every child deserves a permanent,  
loving family.*

AND EACH YEAR MORE THAN **20,000**  
CHILDREN AGE OUT OF THE SYSTEM

# Thank you!



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