

SECTION 1304 – ADOPTION EXCHANGE

CHANGE NOTICE # 03-2010 SEPTEMBER 2010

I. DEFINITION

The Adoption Exchange is a program provided by the Division of Social Services to assist local agencies, both public and private, in finding suitable adoptive families for special needs children in foster care awaiting adoption. An adoption exchange is a system of exchanging information with agencies about children available for adoption and about prospective adoptive parents. This is done through recruitment, the sharing of adoption referrals and information, photo listing, match/referral, and public education.

These functions are carried out with NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network. The activities of NC Kids are intended to supplement, not replace the traditional methods of exchange of summaries among agencies or to replace referral or registration with child placing agencies. The use of NC Kids does not relieve the agency of responsibility of continuing efforts to find placement resources.

II. PURPOSE

The purpose of NC Kids is to help local agencies find permanent families for children with special needs who need adoptive placement, and to assist approved adoptive applicants in their search for waiting children. **NC Kids does not make the decisions regarding placement; rather they identify potential matches between a child and prospective family and notify the agencies involved of placement possibilities.**

NC Kids is organized to facilitate adoption placements through adoption and foster care information and referral, match referrals, recruitment, public education and increased awareness of specific children and families through the photo listing service and other local and national public recruitment efforts.

III. COMPONENTS

A. ADOPTION INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (AIMS) DATABASE FOR ADOPTION

NC Kids uses the Adoption Information Management System (AIMS) database to house information on waiting children with special needs and approved adoptive applicants willing to adopt special needs children. Among the children generally considered to have special needs are older children, children with mental, emotional and/or physical disabilities, and sibling groups. Information is obtained through individual registrations, sent in by local agencies, of children who need adoptive homes and by agencies on behalf of approved adoptive applicants.

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FAMILY SERVICES MANUAL
VOLUME I: FAMILY SUPPORT AND CHILD WELFARE SERVICES
CHAPTER VI: ADOPTION SERVICES**

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The purpose of maintaining a database of waiting children and waiting families is to facilitate the identification of permanent homes for the waiting children. To ensure that NC Kids will provide an effective program in the goal toward permanency planning, all waiting children must be registered within 30 days of becoming legally free for adoption. If an adoptive family has been identified, the adoption agency shall submit a written request for exemption in lieu of registration forms.

Children may be registered with NC Kids and, at the same time, placed on referral to other appropriate resources, depending on the anticipated difficulty in effecting a placement. It is essential that NC Kids be promptly notified of any change in information on the children. In order for NC Kids to make referrals that are appropriate, current information on each child's registration is necessary. The pre-adoptive summaries of the children should always be accurate and up to date.

All approved adoption applicants who are requesting adoption information on special needs children are to be registered with NC Kids upon approval of their pre-placement assessment, unless they are under consideration at that point for a specific child. **NC Kids will accept registrations only of those adoptive applicants who are requesting special needs children.** Adoption applicants should be informed by their social worker about the use of NC Kids in bringing parents and children with special needs together, just as they are informed about other procedures the agency may follow in the study and placement process. It is essential that NC Kids be notified of any change in information on the adoptive applicants. For example, many adoptive applicants will become more flexible regarding the type and number of children acceptable to them as they wait for a placement. Updating of this kind of information in the family's pre-placement assessment can be critical to the consideration of appropriate child matches.

The local agency, having legal custody of the child, registers the child by submitting the appropriate registration forms: the NC Kids Child Registration Form (DSS-1820) or the Request for NC Kids Legal Risk Search (DSS-5225) to NC Kids. Either the agency that approved the adoption applicant or the adoption applicant can submit the NC Kids Family Registration Form (DSS-1821) to NC Kids for family registration. Once a signed copy of the pre-placement assessment and the DSS-1821 are received, families will be considered "active" for matching. By submitting these forms, local agencies authorize the inclusion of their client in the database, authorize public recruitment efforts unless legal-risk, and provide the information necessary for a meaningful referral.

All NC Kids forms (DSS-1820, DSS-1821, DSS-5225 and the DSS-5303) may be obtained downloading the necessary forms from the NC DSS website at: <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/forms/forms.aspx?dc=dss>.

1. **LEGALLY-FREE CHILD**

All children for whom adoption is the plan shall be registered with NC Kids within 30 days of becoming legally free by the agency having placement authority unless an exemption is granted by the North Carolina Division of Social Services.

Requests for exemption of registering a child legally free for adoption should be forwarded to NC Kids for approval via the Request for Child Registration Exemption (DSS-5303). Agencies are required to submit updates on exemptions within the frames indicated. Reasons for registration exemptions include:

- a. identification of an adoptive family for the child (approved for a period not to exceed six (6) months);
- b. a child that needs diagnostic evaluation (approval for a period not to exceed six (6) months);
- c. a child that is receiving mental health, medical treatment and has been determined by a qualified professional that it is not in the child's best interest to pursue adoption at this time (approval for a period not to exceed six (6) months and documentation by the child's provider must accompany the exemption request).

When submitting the Request for Child Registration Exemption (DSS-5303) the agency is not required to submit either an adoption summary or a photograph of the child being considered for exemption. Once an exemption is received, NC Kids will respond to the submitting agency informing the agency of the child's exemption status.

NC Kids will refer all registered children to regional and national exchanges, media outlets, websites and other publicity campaigns, as appropriate.

Agencies will submit a completed Child Registration form, a pre-adoptive summary and one current quality photograph of the child. Due to the sensitive nature of the information obtained on the Child Registration Form (DSS-1820) and the child's pre-adoptive summary these documents, if submitted electronically, must be submitted in a secure (password protected) manner. Digital photos and the child's pre-adoptive summary that identify the child by name may be submitted electronically to NC Kids provided they are submitted in a secure (password protected) manner. A copy of the registration materials should be retained in the agency's file. Registration forms that do not contain current information and/or a recent quality photograph for public recruitment efforts will not be processed and the sending agency will be notified.

The Child Registration Form (DSS-1820) is valid for one year. Agencies are required to submit an updated Child Registration Form, an updated pre-adoptive summary and a current photograph each year for as long as adoption is the plan and no home has been identified for the child.

2. LEGAL RISK CHILD

Children for whom adoption is the plan that are not yet legally cleared for adoption and for whom no permanent home has yet been identified may be submitted to NC Kids for a preliminary internal search for a legal risk adoptive home. These children will not receive public recruitment efforts and will not be listed on the Adoption Exchange website (<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/adopt/NCKids/index1.htm>). These situations apply when the termination process has not been completed and the child is not yet legally free for adoption, or the termination of parental rights is on appeal. When children are not legally free for adoption, the agency's Director or designee must sign the registration form.

The Request for Legal Risk Search form (DSS-5225) is completed for the legal risk children for whom the agency wishes NC Kids to do a preliminary search.

To request a Legal Risk Search, the child's agency will submit the Legal Risk Search form (DSS-5225) and a pre-adoptive summary for the legal risk child to NC Kids. Once the Legal Risk Search form and summary are received, NC Kids will conduct a search of the database for families that match the child's criteria and have an approved pre-placement assessment. NC Kids will forward the child's profile to potential adoptive families and/or their agencies for review. If a family expresses an interest in a child, NC Kids will forward the family's information to that child's social worker for consideration.

Digital photos that identify the child by first name may be submitted electronically to NC Kids provided they are submitted in a secure (password protected) manner. A copy of the registration materials should be retained in the agency's file. Incomplete registration packets will not be processed and the agency will be notified.

3. ADOPTION APPLICANTS

Agencies should register adoptive applicants with NC Kids after they have conducted an adoptive study, have assessed the applicants as being potentially suitable adoptive parents for children with special needs, and where no child is readily available to be placed with the family. Registrations should be limited to those applicants who have requested special needs children.

In registering approved adoptive families, agencies should submit a current, certified copy of the family's pre-placement assessment to NC Kids. The Family Registration Form (DSS-1821) is also completed for the adoption applicants the agency wishes to register. The Family Registration Form (DSS-1821) and the family's pre-placement assessment will assist NC Kids in identifying any potential child matches for the family. Approved adoptive applicants registered with NC Kids will be able to make child-specific inquiries, receive referrals and be included in the NC Kids matching program. NC Kids will notify the family's agency of any potential matches and completed family referrals.

The completed Family Registration Form (DSS-1821), and the family's current pre-placement assessment should be mailed to NC Kids.

B. NC KIDS INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICE

NC Kids Information and Referral provides callers without pre-placement assessments detailed information on the adoption and foster care process and refers them to their local county department of social services or licensed private agencies for services. Counties are encouraged to keep NC Kids informed of the specific county representative they wish families to contact. NC Kids is able to provide support for agencies during recruitment campaigns or help publicize local foster care/adoption events on the website: <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/adopt/index.htm>.

NC Kids provides callers who have approved pre-placement assessments on file with NC Kids specific information on the waiting children. If families meet the preferences and the family would like to be considered as a potential placement resource, a referral is made to the child's social worker. NC Kids also assists social workers by identifying appropriate prospective adoptive families based on the information provided on the pre-placement assessment and the Family Registration form.

NC Kids is able to provide services to the Hearing-Impaired and non-English speaking individuals.

C. WEBSITES

Legally free children registered with NC Kids will be submitted to North Carolina's section of the AdoptUsKids website located at: <http://www.adoptuskids.org/states/nc/>. Inquiries from the website are directed to NC Kids. The NC Kids Program Consultants provide general information to prospective families or a family's social worker. Families with pre-placement assessments on file with NC Kids will be given more specific information and may be referred to the child's social worker for consideration.

Because legally free registered children will be featured on the National Adoption Exchange, AdoptUsKids, and receive national exposure, the child will receive interest from families across the nation. All families, regardless of location, should be considered as a potential placement for the child unless an exception has been approved by the local county department of social services.

D. MEDIA CAMPAIGN

The media is another recruitment tool for children who are currently waiting for permanent homes. NC Kids partners with television stations, newspapers, associations and organizations to feature specific children and/or run public service announcements.

The purpose of featuring the waiting North Carolina children in print and broadcast media is to increase their chance of finding a permanent home. Each child has the opportunity to be seen by potential families watching television, reading the newspaper or viewing media websites.

NC Kids coordinates child specific media features and is responsible for working with the media outlet and the child's worker to schedule the media event. Counties can request additional media exposure at any time.

Families interested in children featured in the media can call the toll-free NC Kids Hotline. The NC Kids Program Consultants provide general information to callers and sends the referral to the child's social worker for consideration.

E. MATCH REFERRAL

Match Referral is a staff-assisted program that links waiting children for whom adoption is the plan with families seeking to adopt them. A match is identified by comparing the characteristics of a child or sibling group with the characteristics requested by families. Matching services are designed to bring together waiting children and prospective adoptive parents. This match criterion is based on the information contained on each registration form and for families with a current certified pre-placement assessment on file with NC Kids.

Upon receipt of the Child Registration Form (DSS-1820), NC Kids will search the database for potential family matches for the child. The potential matched family and their social worker(s) will be notified. The child's social worker will receive a list of these possible matches. Upon confirmation of the family's interest, the family's pre-placement assessment will be submitted to the child's social worker.

Upon receipt of the Family Registration Form (DSS-1821) and a family's pre-placement assessment, NC Kids will search the database for potential matches of children for adoptive families when requested. The family's social worker and family will be notified of the potential matched children. Upon confirmation of the family's interest, the family's pre-placement assessment will be submitted to the child's social worker.

F. PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

NC Kids provides education and outreach efforts statewide to the general public and community agencies and partners on foster care and adoption. Outreach efforts increase awareness and assist with the recruitment of prospective families to serve waiting children.

1. HEART GALLERY

The Heart Gallery is a collaborative effort between NC Kids, local departments of social services, businesses and photographers from across North Carolina that volunteer their time and talent in capturing children's personalities in portraits to raise awareness and support for adoption. Heart Gallery photos are displayed statewide in a variety of venues. All legally freed children registered with NC Kids are eligible to participate within this recruitment event. Consent to participate within the Heart Gallery must be secured from the local agency who has legal custody of the child. If your agency would like additional information on businesses or photographers participating in the Heart Gallery or to find out more about the venues in which these photos are displayed, please contact the NC Kids staff.

IV. PROCEDURE AFTER REFERRAL IS RECEIVED FROM NC KIDS

A. PROMPT EVALUATION OF REFERRAL AND EXCHANGE OF SUMMARIES

When NC Kids receives an inquiry regarding a child appearing in a public recruitment effort or confirms interest from their internal match service, a notification will be sent to the child's agency and also to the agency representing the inquiring party. It is the responsibility of those agencies identified through the match process to explore any placement possibilities.

After receiving the referral from NC Kids, the social worker should contact the family immediately to acknowledge their interest and obtain additional information. The social worker should determine if an approved family with a current pre-placement assessment could be selected. If an approved family cannot be selected and there are families without pre-placement assessments who are interested in the child, it is suggested that the child's social worker make contact with these families to assess their appropriateness as a placement resource. If a family without a pre-placement assessment is identified, the child's social worker should negotiate with the family's county department of social services or a private adoption agency to complete the pre-placement assessment.

In regard to cases referred from NC Kids, the respective local agencies must notify NC Kids of any placement that results from or of any decision regarding the referral. This may be done verbally or in writing. Remember, if identifying information is submitted electronically, it must be submitted in a secure (password protected) manner.

In every case where placement seems a possibility, each agency should submit a Child Pre-Adoptive summary and the family's pre-placement assessments to the other agency without delay. It is strongly recommended that the summaries be exchanged within two weeks after the referral is received. A decision to proceed with placement planning will ultimately be made from information contained in the summaries.

B. JOINT DECISION ON SUITABILITY OF PLACEMENT

Those agencies identified through the match process must share the responsibility for the decision about placement, with the major consideration being the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child. Applicants should never be selected for a child's placement until those agencies identified through the match process have agreed to move ahead with placement. Questions about the suitability of a placement are usually resolved in a joint conference among staff of all agencies involved.

System of Care (SOC) and good social work practice must be taken into account at all times. An adoptive placement should not be delayed to explore every possible source when a resource has been found and there is enough information to make a placement decision that is in the best interest of the child.

Applicants should be given the opportunity to consider whether, from their point of view, the child might be suitable for them. This will not be possible if the agency refuses to share a child's study based on the applicant's pre-placement assessment information. However, an agency may be justified in rejecting matches for some children on the basis of the pre-placement assessment-information alone.

C. PLACEMENT

Adoption applicants should not be pressured to accept any particular child Instead, they should be helped to evaluate for themselves the extent of their capabilities as potential parents of a child with special needs. Those agencies identified through the match process should decide on procedures for the pre-placement and placement process. These procedures will vary from case-to-case and will need to be clearly understood before plans are put into action. Post-placement supervision will be the responsibility of the agency in which county the family resides, with periodic reports to the agency responsible for the child. For additional information on placement and post-placement processes please refer to refer to Chapter VI – Adoption Services. Additionally, please refer to Section 1303 - Special Adoption Procedures for information regarding inter-county and interstate placements.

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V. WITHDRAWAL OF REGISTRATION

When waiting children or adoptive applicants who have been registered with NC Kids are no longer available for placement, this should be reported promptly to NC Kids by the responsible agency or family. This can be done by written or verbal communication to the hotline.

Remember, if identifying information is submitted electronically, it must be submitted in a secure (password protected) manner.