

Half of the children waiting to be adopted entered foster care at ages 0-3.

failing

rights revoked

complicated oregon

problem

crisis

foster

capacity

investigation

state offices

care

hotel room

welfare

abuse

overload

no time

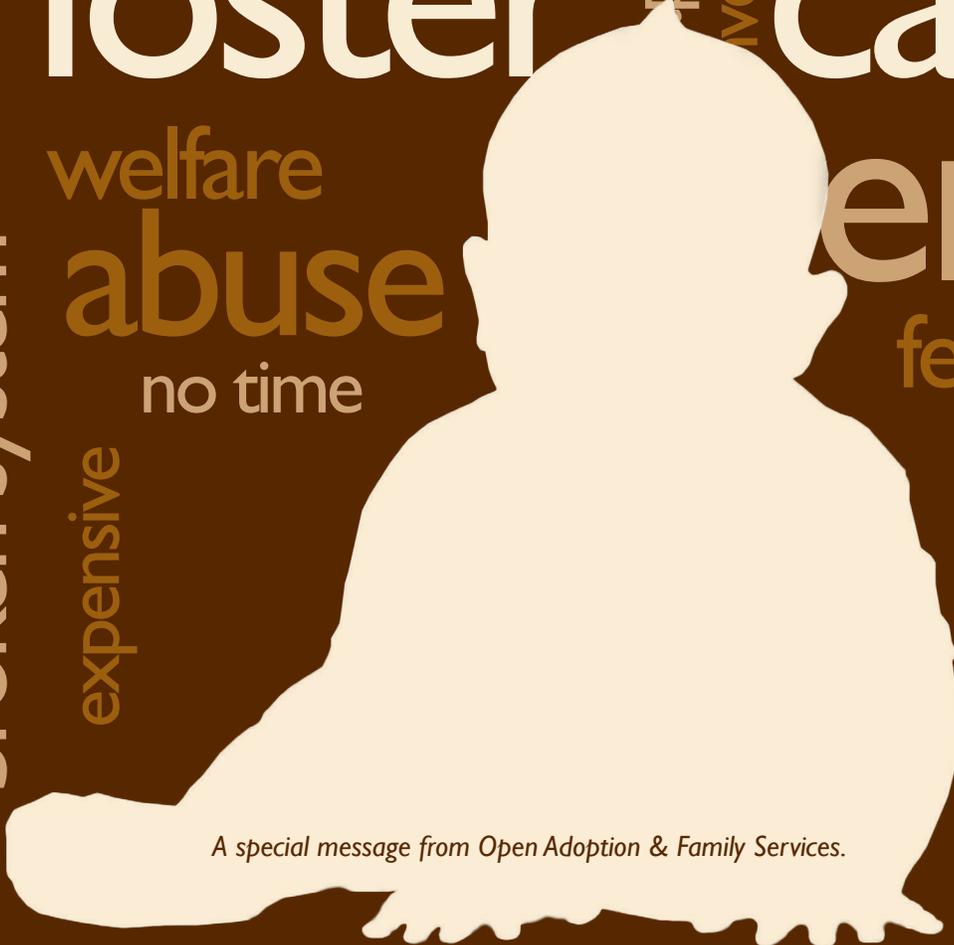
federal report

DHS

broken system

expensive

neglect



A special message from Open Adoption & Family Services.

Word collage compiled from news stories on state foster care system.

# Foster care is not the only answer. There is another path.

The foster care system locally, and nationally, is in crisis. The number of kids in care is rising, and their outcomes are increasingly dismal. Here in Oregon, a long-standing residential foster care facility that housed some of Oregon's most vulnerable children was recently investigated and closed after over 10 years of accusations of severe abuse and neglect. The director was fired when it was uncovered that she had siphoned over \$2 million in state foster care payments, intended for the children's care, for her personal use. The Child Welfare Director of the Department of Human Services was also fired for not addressing the ongoing allegations. Governor Kate Brown signed SB 1515 into law, which tightens regulations for foster care homes and residential facilities. Unfortunately, that has resulted in far fewer homes for kids, and consequently, there have been over 60 incidents since May 2016 of children being housed in hotels or sleeping on cots in DHS offices. Some kids even sit on the laps of their DHS caseworkers as they desperately make calls to find them a foster home.

According to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 404,878 children are in foster care nationwide. The 108,746 children in foster care waiting to be adopted nationally is the highest since 2010. More than 8,202 Oregon children are in foster care and 1,854 of them are available for adoption and waiting for adoptive families. Of the 10,068 children in foster care in Washington, 2,167 are waiting for adoptive families. The message to these children is clear: There's no one to take care of them.

Every time a child is removed from one home and placed in another, even if it's back and forth between their birthparents and foster parents, their ability to trust and form attachments diminishes. This leaves them potentially unable to engage in loving relationships throughout their lives. Every time a child ages out of the foster care system, she's faced with forging a life on her own knowing that no family wanted her. These kids don't have a family to join for Thanksgiving. Children that have been in foster care are significantly more likely to struggle with bonding and attachment issues, learning disabilities, mental illness, teen pregnancy, addiction, and criminal involvement. Our system has ultimately failed the very children it's intended to protect.

The foster care system is broken. Its scope is too vast, its goal unreachable.

Its mission is often to reunite the family, but too frequently and despite the best of intentions, it sets birthparents and their children up for defeat. Maybe the birthparents struggle with addiction, domestic violence, incarceration, homelessness or mental illness. Whatever the reason, they simply cannot parent at this time. We need a more realistic, smarter approach.

There is another path. What if our culture embraces open adoption? What if the birthparents aren't vilified and punished for their limitations? What if adoption doesn't mean losing their child forever? What if birthparents who are facing potential termination of their parental rights receive advocacy and counseling that includes an honest and realistic discussion about their options? What if the child welfare system isn't their adversary, but instead their supportive partner in creating a plan for their child?

If a child never enters  
the foster care system, their  
outcomes change dramatically.

Then the child would never enter the foster care system — and the outcomes would improve dramatically. Their birthparents could access our open adoption process that honors and empowers them, and treats them with dignity and respect. When expectant parents have the option of proactively planning an open adoption while they're pregnant or their child is young, they can avoid the child welfare system.

They can choose the adoptive family and form a lifelong friendship with them.

They can have an ongoing relationship with their child, in which they're present to watch them grow and thrive. Their child is surrounded by the love and support of all of the people who are dear to him.

OA&FS has been providing this smart, creative solution for over 30 years. When birthparents and adoptive parents

... Continued on Page 4.



*OA&FS adoptee  
Henry with birthmother Jamie and  
adoptive parents Deb and Corey.*

*Our* alternative to state adoption gives these kids a way out.

child centered

relationship  
birthparent  
dignity  
bright future  
safety  
respect  
open adoption  
stability  
compassion  
solution



unique

innovative

options  
transparent

trust

attachment

... Continued from Page 2.

compassion and respect, they come together to meet the needs of the child. The child's identity and ability to trust and love remain intact. When birthparents who are struggling are given the option to plan an open adoption, the child never has to face foster care. Maybe their birthparents can't succeed at being full-time parents at this point in their lives, but they can succeed in their role as birthparents, and that means everything to them and their child.

In 2010, OA&FS presented this solution to DHS and forged a collaborative relationship that has thrived. When high-risk moms learn about our pre-emptive alternative to state adoption, they see it as a favorable choice. Maybe they have had previous children removed by the state and they're pregnant again; this time they want to plan an open adoption instead. Maybe due to the chronic nature of the challenges they face, open adoption becomes a viable choice

for them. Maybe they know that adoption will be in their future and they want an adoption through which they'll have a voice in the planning process and an active role in their child's life. OA&FS makes this empowering model available to them.

Now, DHS workers and service providers, who work with high-risk moms throughout the state, routinely refer expectant parents to us. They've seen the process unfold and are pleased by how well it meets the ongoing needs of birthparents and their kids. Yet, access to this alternative open adoption track needs to be more widespread.

OA&FS has been providing this smart, creative solution for over 30 years.

## There are significant differences between OA&FS and state adoptions.

OA&FS

DHS

### TIMELINE

OA&FS can plan an adoption within a few days with trained families who are ready to adopt.



DHS adoption process takes approximately three years.

### FOSTER CARE

The agency places the child directly with the adoptive family.



DHS children often have prolonged stays in foster care prior to adoption.

### ADOPTION CONSENTS

Voluntary relinquishment.



Involuntary relinquishment in a combative, expensive court process.

### CHOOSING A FAMILY

Birthparents select a family after reading extensive information about them.



A family is chosen on a child's behalf behind closed doors.

### ONGOING VISITS CONTRACT

Birthparents have a legally enforceable contract for ongoing visits, averaging 3-4 per year.



Few birthparents have an agreement for visits, which isn't enforceable.

OA&FS

DHS

### ONGOING RELATIONSHIP

Birthparents meet and form a lifelong relationship with the adoptive family.



Adoptive parents have no open adoption training; and no incentive to include the birthparents, who fade away unless the caseworker supports openness.

### ONGOING AGENCY SERVICES

Provides lifelong relationship guidance and adoption-related counseling



No ongoing counseling or relationship support.

### BIRTHPARENT OUTCOMES

They feel heard and valued. They have a lifelong relationship with their child and the family.



An adversarial and humiliating process leaves them without their child.

### OUTCOMES FOR CHILD

Value that their birthparents stayed in their lives. Have high self-esteem and strong sense of identity.



Struggle with lifelong issues and feel abandoned by birthparents.

### ADOPTIVE FAMILY OUTCOMES

Welcome the birthparents, include them as a part of their extended family.



Feel unsupported, fear the birthparents, and struggle with how to help their child.

### COST TO TAXPAYERS

No cost to taxpayers.



Rising costs for foster care, court process, and preventative and treatment services for traumatized kids.

# We can make a positive impact on Oregon's child welfare system. Here's how.

The state child welfare system's mission of family reunification is a noble goal in theory, but can be misguided in practice, especially when it repeatedly returns kids to foster care. **In our open adoptions, there's no need for reunification, because the birth family is never separated from the child.** In our family unification model, the birth family becomes a part of the extended family. Everyone is included.

There's also a belief among state child welfare workers that it's a form of coercion to have a transparent and honest conversation with the birthparents after the baby is born about all their options: reunification, a DHS adoption or proactively planning an open adoption. In fact, the true infringement of birthmothers' dignity and human rights lies in not having access to this open discussion before the child is taken into state care. This results in battling through an adversarial relationship with DHS that ultimately results in losing their parental rights in a closed adoption. **When birthparents are aware of all of their options, they can make an informed and empowering choice for their child's future.**

This paradigm shift calls for a new perception of birthparents. True, they've struggled tremendously in life and aren't able



*OA&FS adoptee Ariel with adoptive parents Brian and Andy and birthparents Meagan and Kendall.*

to parent at this time. But that doesn't justify vilifying and punishing them in a harsh and contentious termination process and severing their relationship with their child. In our open adoption model, birthparents are treated with dignity and respect. They have a voice in their child's adoption as they create a lifelong friendship with the family. They hold a position of honor throughout their child's life.



## This innovative change begins with an honest conversation.

Our collaborative relationship with DHS is possibly the only one of its kind in the country. In October 2016, Shari Levine met with Oregon Governor Kate Brown's policy advisor to bring our successful model to the governor's attention. Since it's been six years since the 2010 memo that opened so many doors for us, we requested a letter of endorsement from the governor.

This will enable us to set up trainings with DHS supervisors for their caseworkers on how to have honest, respectful conversations with high-risk moms. They deserve to know about all of their options (reunification, DHS adoption and open adoption) before their baby is removed at the hospital and placed into foster care. Then they can truly make an informed and empowering choice regarding their child's future, and potentially avoid foster care. By strengthening our collaboration with DHS we can save the state money and give these children a permanent home early in life with a caring family that will honor and include their birth family.



# Meet Open Adoptee Christine

Christine and her siblings were given a way out of the state system. They grew up with the security of caring families. Christine was adopted through OA&FS at age 3; she is now 25, an engaging and thoughtful young woman. Before her placement she lived with her birthparents, who struggled with addiction, and then in a foster home for 10 months. The first time she met her adoptive parents, Susan and Erik, she ran to them with arms wide open saying, "New mommy dad!" As Erik says, from that point forward, they never let go. Within a year Christine's sister, Jamie, then six months old, joined them. Christine deeply appreciates how open, nonjudgmental and unconditionally loving her parents have always been as they guided the girls through the placement of two more birth siblings in other OA&FS families, the

death of their birthmom, and the ongoing relationship with their birthfather. This has spanned joyous times when their extended birth and adoptive families celebrated holidays together, and tender times as Christine has navigated her sibling relationships as an adult. Christine says that open adoption has taught her "there are no limits to how much love you can give and receive."

Christine completed an internship with OA&FS for her Child and Family Studies program at Portland State University. We are honored to have Christine join us on her path to becoming a social worker. She'd like to volunteer for CASA someday so she can advocate for kids who are vulnerable and in transition, like she once was.

## Christine's family album.



*OA&FS adoptee Christine with adoptive parents Erik and Susan, sister Jamie (top left, center, bottom right), Jamie and birth siblings Spencer and Aurora (top right, bottom left).*



Watch Christine's Story

<http://bit.ly/2e83Qmj>

## Meet Birthmother Sharene



Sharene had been in 40 different foster homes as a child. She contacted Open Adoption & Family Services after her two daughters had been removed and placed in a foster home. Sharene had a strained relationship with the foster mom and hadn't seen her daughters in quite a while. She called OA&FS because she was pregnant again. This time she wanted to plan an open adoption. She chose a gay couple from our pool and formed a close friendship with them. She placed her newborn son with them and has a great open adoption relationship. The dads also visited with her daughters in foster care, so the siblings would grow up knowing each other. So when her daughters were removed from foster care

due to neglect, the dads stepped up and adopted them too. Now her three children live together and she visits often. She's extremely pleased with the way things turned out.



Watch Sharene's Story  
<http://bit.ly/2e1SR4K>



## Meet Birthfather Chris

"My name is Chris and I am a birthfather. I was 24 years old when I found out that I was going to be a father. The news had me so excited that I began to forget who I was. I was quickly falling into the world of drugs and ending up in and out of jail for reasons I wish not to explain. I was overjoyed when I found out that we were going to be expecting a son. Shortly after finding out our baby's sex, his mother informed me that she wanted to place him for adoption.

Growing up in the foster system, I was scared because of everything that I went through. When I then found out that it was going to be open adoption through Open Adoption & Family Services, I felt somewhat relieved. During the pregnancy I always promised my child that he would have a better life than I had. I didn't want to lose my son so I convinced his mom to try and co-parent, but would keep an open mind about adoption if we were unable to.

Everything was going wonderful for the most part. We chose approximately eight families that we were comfortable with if

we decided to go through with the open adoption, but out of these only two families were willing adopt our son, due to us having mental disabilities. Then one day I got a call no father wanted to hear. My son's mother had pre-eclampsia and they were going to have to induce labor about 27 days early. I was scared beyond belief. On November 23, 2009, she gave birth to a very healthy baby boy. It was love at first sight.

The next day was the worst day that ever happened to me. Child Protective Services came to the hospital. They began to use every mistake we had ever made in our past against us. So we made the decision to call our adoption counselor at Open Adoption & Family Services and let her know everything that was going on with CPS.

We made the decision to go with the open adoption and gave her the name of the family we were most comfortable with. The next day we met the wonderful parents. We were overjoyed when they agreed to work with us on naming our son. We named him Tristen. Today he is a thriving 6-year-old big brother to a beautiful baby sister. I have never regretted our decision to give our son a better life."



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## Support our alternative to state adoption.

Oregon can position itself as the country's leader in providing open adoption as an alternative to state adoption. Join us in making a difference in the lives of these children here in Oregon and across the country. Let them know you care about their welfare. **Give them the hope of a place at the table for Thanksgiving, the support of a loving family and a bright future ahead.**

**\$50** 

*Print* educational materials for DHS staff.

**\$100** 

*Produce* video presentation for webinar.

**\$250** 

*Staff* time for child welfare worker trainings.

**\$1,000** 

*Travel* to present program to other states.

*Thank you* for your donation!

[www.openadopt.org/about-us/support](http://www.openadopt.org/about-us/support)



**1-800-772-1115**

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