



ENGAGING INDIVIDUALS WITH LIVED EXPERTISE TO ENHANCE POST-PERMANENCY SERVICES: Lessons from the Illinois Adoption Advisory Council

Effectively engaging adoptive parents, guardians, and individuals who experienced adoption or guardianship as children is critically important for child welfare leaders who are seeking to enhance their post-permanency services. These individuals with lived expertise know what families really need after permanency, and many have used existing services or had needs that services didn't meet.



Finding ways to gather information from community members about the needs of adoptive and guardianship families and the value of existing or proposed services can help ensure that post-permanency services are as effective as possible.

The Illinois Adoption Advisory Council offers an example that sites could employ to gather this expertise as they seek to improve their post-permanency supports.

The Council's Background and Operations


More than 20 years ago, the director of the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) established the [Illinois Adoption Advisory Council](#) as a formal way to receive input from parents, caregivers, people who were adopted or in guardianship as children, and service providers on all issues involving or affecting the provision of adoption and guardianship services. The group's mission statement is: "The Illinois Adoption Advisory Council, in consultation and advisement with the Director of the Department of Children and Family Services, dedicates

itself to building, improving, and sustaining quality lifelong adoptions and subsidized guardianships for children and families in the State of Illinois.”

Among the council’s responsibilities are:

- Providing input on the issues that affect adoption and guardianship services received by children and their families.
- Identifying, analyzing, and recommending solutions to any issues concerning adoption and guardianship services.
- Participating in statewide planning and promoting adoptive and guardianship parent involvement in local planning, including adoption and guardianship services.
- Reviewing and making recommendations on DCFS adoption, guardianship, and child welfare service delivery policies, rules, guidelines, procedures, and practice.
- Developing recommendations concerning adoption and guardianship training to improve the quality of services families receive.
- Reviewing and advising DCFS on pending or enacted legislation, primarily as it concerns adoption and guardianship services, and on the Department’s responses or positions regarding that legislation.

Members, appointed by the DCFS director, include adoptive parents or guardians, adoptees, and professional service providers representing each DCFS administrative region. The council also includes a few at-large positions to allow flexibility. To ensure the council is truly independent and focuses on community input, DCFS staff do not serve as council members. A DCFS staff member serves as an administrator to the group and helps manage logistics and communication with the agency.



At its monthly meetings, the Adoption Advisory Council discusses key issues in adoption and guardianship, engages subject matter experts as needed to provide insights or train council members, and develops recommendations for DCFS. Various committees take the lead in key areas such as post-permanency services, training, and membership. Each year, the council develops a specific set of goals and objectives, often based on the state’s Program Improvement Plan. Current goals include:

- “To ensure that all adoption and guardianship children and families can easily access trauma informed, adoption/guardianship sensitive services to meet their individual unique needs regardless of where they live in the state.
 - » Advocate for the expansion of the range and availability of all post permanency services and reduce waiting lists for these services.
- To ensure that adoption/guardianship policies and practices provide state-of-the art, evidence-based support to our youth and their families as they move to permanency.
 - » Promote the enhancement of casework practices in the field to ensure that adoption/guardianship workers have the skills, abilities and knowledge to fully prepare families to understand and manage the unique issues that are likely to face throughout their lifetime journey.

- » Advocate for the development of greater family preparation options that would allow families to receive thorough and appropriate training opportunities when in-person training is not pragmatic.
- » Advise and assist in development of adoption/guardianship parent trainings.”

The council submits an annual report to DCFS while also providing ongoing feedback and recommendations as needed throughout the year.

The council has been valuable to DCFS and the community. Michelle Grove, DCFS Associate Deputy Director explains, “The Illinois Adoption Advisory Council has brought great benefit to adoptive and guardianship parents and to the Illinois child welfare system during the council’s first 25 years. Supporting this council in ways that will facilitate their continuing that work is a top priority for me and my administration.” DCFS staff member Ray Gates, who is also an adoptive parent of four, agrees: “As the administrator for the Illinois Adoption Advisory Council from its inception in 1999 through 2014, it is gratifying to know that the council is holding true to its mission and having great success for adoption and guardianship parents.”

Improving Post-Permanency Services

Post-permanency services have been a key focus of the council since its inception and it has had a significant impact on policy and practice. Key accomplishments in this area include:

- The council has been instrumental in the expansion of post-permanency services funding over the years. Last fiscal year, for example, the council’s support helped DCFS increase the budget for post-permanency services, enabling the addition of new services and staff.

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**Michelle Grove,
DCFS Associate Deputy Director**

- The council advocated for the creation of adoptive parent support specialist positions at DCFS to help families before and after finalization. The council drafted a proposal with a program plan which is now funded as a pilot. DCFS has hired four part-time regional staff—adoptive parents or guardians who share their lived expertise, offer emotional support, and help parents access services. During the pilot, DCFS will evaluate the program and use the results to move the program forward in the future.
- The council was actively involved in creating the statewide toll-free number and [Path Beyond Adoption](#) website, both of which make it easier for parents and caregivers to find and access post-permanency services. Council members regularly work to enhance the website. In addition, the council reviews and makes recommendations for the [Post Adoption/Guardianship Services handbook](#) every time DCFS is proposing a change.
- As a result of the council’s work, there has been a change in communication about when families should use post-permanency services. Driven by research that showed that families often sought support after they were already in crisis, the council helped the state normalize the need for services and encourage families to seek help early.

Messages such as “You are going to need help sometime. Come forward soon.” and “Let us help while problems are small. Don’t wait for a crisis.” are conveyed in staff and prospective parent training, in the handbook, and on the website.

- Council members advocated for changes in paperwork that documented the information professionals were providing to families about post-permanency services. Now, the professional and parent have to sign a form acknowledging that the professional provided information about services and that the parent knows whom to call for help and has received the post-permanency handbook. As a result, families are much more aware of the toll-free number and website to use when they need support after adoption or guardianship.
- With support from the Quality Improvement Center on Adoption and Guardianship Support, the council redeveloped the training for parents transitioning from foster care to adoption or guardianship. One of the most significant changes was the addition of a one-hour unit devoted to post-permanency services, including information about the value of reaching out for help early.

Lessons for Replication

As other states consider replicating the idea of the Illinois Adoption Advisory Council, there are several key aspects child welfare leaders need to implement:

- **Maintain a true commitment to hearing from the community** — The Illinois Adoption Advisory Council was created by a DCFS director who had a deep commitment to hearing from those most affected by the agency’s practices. DCFS adopted an agency policy that outlines the council’s purpose and goals, which helps ensure that commitment remains strong during leadership transitions.
- **Provide a dedicated staff administrator or liaison and access to key agency staff** — The DCFS staff administrator to the council plays a crucial role in supporting the volunteers on the council and ensuring effective communication between the agency and the council. The administrator also helps connect council members with others at DCFS, such as IT or communications staff, when the council is working on specific issues such as website or handbook revisions. A DCFS legislative liaison works with council members on specific language to use in DCFS-supported bills related to adoption and guardianship.
- **Establish partnerships with post-permanency service providers** — The council includes representatives from some of the state’s contracted post-permanency service providers, which allows parents and people who experienced adoption or guardianship as children to provide direct feedback to the providers. Providers can also share what they are hearing from the families they serve, ensuring input from even more individuals with lived experience.



- **Ensure feedback loops are established** — The council submits an annual report to the DCFS director with findings and recommendations from its work during the year. Council members find it particularly helpful if the agency provides information about which recommendations will be moving forward and reasons others cannot.
- **Provide a budget for the council** — Each year, the council submits a budget request to their DCFS administrator. The budget, which has grown each year, includes support for travel to the meetings, child care reimbursement for parent participants, stipends for expert trainers, and a public Adoption Month celebration.

Agencies seeking to enhance post-permanency services should consider multiple ways to learn from parents, caregivers, and those who were adopted or in guardianship as children. They can conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups; ensure evaluation or [continuous quality improvement efforts](#) include input from those with lived expertise; and create entities like the Illinois Adoption Advisory Council to guide and support the agency’s efforts.

To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library: www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library



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