

Rethinking Recruitment: How Youth Voice and Kinship-First Culture Are Transforming Placement



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES



History of Recruitment for Prospective Adoptive Homes in Washington State



How Washington found families for children in foster care



Recruitment Tools of Yesteryear

Non-Kin Placements were the norm

Community Based Recruitment
(churches, flyers, etc)

Child-specific photolistings like
Wednesday's Child

Limited Cultural and Tribal Considerations

Growing System pressure in 1980s led to
aggressive changes



Shift Toward Targeted Recruitment (1990s–2000s)

Research and state policy reviews found that targeted recruitment was more effective than general advertising.

Washington State analyses highlighted:

- Negative public perceptions of foster care
- Complex licensing process
- Fragmented coordination between state and private contractors
- High turnover among foster parents
- Need for more families of color and families open to older youth and infants



Digital Transformation & National Recruitment (2000s–Present)

AdoptUSKids & National Photolistings

- Since **2003**, Northwest Resource Associates has operated with **AdoptUSKids**.
- WA children profiles shown on national platforms.

Modern Digital Storytelling

- NWAE became an innovator in:
 - **In-Depth Profiles** using youth voice and digital storytelling
 - Strength-based, youth-driven profiles
 - Online recruitment events and virtual information sessions



Statewide Coordination & Data-Driven Recruitment (2010s–Present)

Washington's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) produces annual reports tracking:

- Recruitment outcomes
- Foster parent turnover
- Home study completion
- Barriers to adoption
- Use of local and national exchanges

These reports guide policy and resource allocation.



Current Recruitment Landscape

**Youth-Centered,
Strength-Based
Recruitment**

Youth voice

Trauma-informed
storytelling

Digital media

Community
engagement

Matching families
based on children's
specific needs



Summary of How Recruitment Happened Over Time

<u>Era</u>	<u>Recruitment Methods</u>	<u>Key Features</u>
1970s–1990s	Photobooks, local exchanges, media features	Basic profiles, limited reach
1990s–2000s	Targeted recruitment, research-driven strategies	Focus on specific child needs, recognition of systemic barriers
2000s–Present	Digital photolistings, national platforms (AdoptUSKids)	Broader reach, online matching
2010s–Present	Data-driven, youth-centered digital storytelling	In-Depth Profiles, coordinated statewide strategies



What is Kinship First Culture

A statewide shift prioritizing **relatives and known adults** as the first placement option

Emphasizes **family connections, cultural identity,** and **youth voice**

Goal: reduce trauma and increase stability for children in foster care



How Kinship First Culture Affected Recruitment

Children placed with kin experience better outcomes

Traditional recruitment often overlooked kin due to bias or system barriers

Kin were historically under-supported and under-licensed

Disproportionate impacts on BIPOC and tribal families

First Question: Who already knows this child?



Traditional Recruitment Happens Less Often

Before:

Recruitment began early

Children listed sooner

Non-relative adoptive families were primary targets

After:

Kinship search happens first

Recruitment begins later in the case

Fewer children need non-relative adoptive homes



Reducing Bias Against Kin

Training addresses harmful assumptions (e.g., “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”)

Kin are now the **default**, not the exception

Kin are considered even if not yet licensed

Licensing support

Financial support



What this Means for Adoption

Recruitment is **relationship-centered**, not system-centered

Fewer children need unrelated adoptive homes

When recruitment happens, it is **more personalized and culturally grounded**

Kin-first culture strengthens permanency outcomes



Youth Voice Matters in Recruitment



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Why Youth Voice?

Youth are experts in their own lives

Better matches = better permanency outcomes

Reduces placement disruption

Supports identity, belonging, and long-term stability

Meaningful youth engagement leads to better outcomes in safety, permanency, and well being

Youth Voice IS...

Youth participates in decisions that affect them

Preferences are heard, respected, and acted on

Meaningful involvement and input of the youth

Ability and opportunity to express opinions, ask questions, voice interests and concerns

Includes verbal and non-verbal communication

Youth Voice is NOT...

Doing whatever a youth wants without discussing the short- and long-term consequences, pros and cons, resources, etc.

Never revisiting the conversation

Never saying “no” to the youth

Tokenism – substituting meaningful engagement with another “token” youth’s voice

Example

I am a single parent of a 14 year-old daughter. We live in Seattle, and she is finishing her first year of high school. My job is taking us to Spokane, but my daughter wants to stay in Seattle.

Do I still move to Spokane?

How can I incorporate my daughter's voice even if I can't give her what she says she wants?

Putting It into Practice

You work with a 13yo boy in foster care. He's been in a community foster home for four months, but his paternal great aunt was recently identified as a placement resource. He is moving to her home this month. He says he's happy he gets to go with family.

- How can we include youth voice in this transition?
- What questions should we be asking?



Legal & Policy Foundations

Federal emphasis on child-centered permanency

ICWA and cultural identity protections

State policies requiring youth involvement in case planning

Youth Bill of Rights

DS Settlement Goals (WA state)

Some Ways Washington Requires Youth Voice

- Family Team Planning: Youth and Family Meetings (YFM) policies and practices prioritize youth's attendance and input
- Referrals and Transitions Program
 - Youth age 12+ can review their referral (CIPR) that's shared with potential caregivers
 - Youth can provide info and context that they feel more accurately reflects their experience

Concurrent Planning: Injecting Youth Voice into Recruitment

Backup (concurrent) plans are necessary for placement and permanency. This may look like:

- Being prepared for emergency moves
- Having plans in place for if a kinship placement fails or if a new kinship resource is identified
- Planning ahead for stepping down youth from QRTP settings



Northwest
ADOPTION
exchange



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Who Are We

- Historically we have functioned primarily as a “non kinship” adoption recruitment tool
- Have become known nationally for our In-Depth Profiles
- Use youth engagement practices to expand beyond traditional adoption recruitment
- Recognize all permanency paths, concurrent planning needs, centering youth voice



In-Depth Profiles

Youth engagement specialists: Work with youth to create multimedia projects for their “photolisting” recruitment profiles

Multimedia: IDPs are podcasts, magazine layouts, drawings, stop-motion films -- anything a youth dreams up

Youth driven: Created by the youth, approved by the youth -- they choose what and how that information is shared. This results in authentic profiles that families love and that youth feel proud to share.

Professionally supported: Specialists have expertise in digital media and working with youth in foster care

One of a kind: Every IDP is unique because every youth has their own vision and story to share

Youth Engagement Toolkit

We recognized the need to support caseworkers in their engagement efforts.

- Tough permanency conversations
- Family finding

How to start the permanency conversation

Starting off on the right foot matters. Let the youth know they have a say in their own permanency. Give them a chance to think about what they want and let them know what to expect from the process and from you.

Get to know the youth

Give a youth the chance to introduce themselves to you, even if you have already seen their case file. Youth want to be known for who they are right now, not just their past. Spend time getting to know them before the conversation turns to permanency topics. Be genuinely interested in the things they're into or ask them to teach you something. The time you spend here will build a foundation of trust and understanding.

Youth Engagement Toolkit

- Problems and solutions
- Start the permanency conversation
- Continue the permanency conversation
- Partner on family finding
- Overcome barriers
- Get the team involved
- Strategies to give youth a voice
- Support BIPOC youth
- Support LGBTQ+ youth
- Support neurodivergent youth

Youth-Led Permanency Consultations (YLPC)

Version of youth-driven matching

Talk to youth individually about their understanding of permanency, answer questions, encourage further exploration

Invite youth to share what they want and need in a family (recruitment)

Show family profiles or videos to youth (as examples) and reach out to any families that might interest the youth

Meet Kailee and Tally

We are a two-mom family living in Northeast Seattle near lots of parks and a library branch. Our home is fairly quiet, until our cat, Aspen, is ready for dinner time!

As a family, we love to read, go for long walks throughout the neighborhood, and travel to the beach for tide pooling. We're also a very creative family, and love writing, crafting, and knitting. During the week, family time often looks like a board game over dinner (especially Sorry!), or a movie night with popcorn and ice cream.

We are very close with our extended family both in the Tacoma area and in Arizona, and spend lots of time together over the holidays.

What classes or trainings have you taken to prepare to parent someone who has experienced trauma and loss?

Kailee has completed two major trainings: Youth Mental Health First Aid, and the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative that have well-equipped her to understand trauma and loss in children experiencing foster care. Tally spent three years as a Court Appointed Special Advocate. She also previously worked as a visitation specialist for families in the child welfare system with children who have medical complexities.

What experiences have you had that will help you parent a child that needs educational, developmental or behavioral supports?

Tally has her Masters degree in Social Work and is currently employed as an inpatient pediatric social worker. Kailee has a background in teaching and has experience with educational support and mentoring. We are both signed up to attend Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) trainings as well.

What have you done to identify local services and supports for children who may have trauma as well as educational, developmental or behavioral needs?

In our neighborhood, we are aware of several parenting groups that meet regularly. While not necessarily focused on trauma or development/behavioral needs, the support of other parents is great. Additionally, we are aware of several trauma-informed therapists in our area, as well as other support-services nearby. We are very familiar with organizations like Treehouse that offer supports to youth in care.

Each family has different strengths and capacities. Are there certain ages, backgrounds, or needs that you feel may not be the best fit for your home?

At this time, we are not able to take on infants or younger children, or any youth that would require a parent to be stay-at-home or require 24/7 supervision.



Preferred child characteristics

Maximum number of children: 1
Age range: 12 to 18
Gender identity: Any

Kailee and Tally Ellis
WA access number: Y0000
Region: 4
Foster licensed: Yes
Agency: DCYF

[View worker information](#)

Youth Narratives

To give youth a chance to **contribute their voice** to their file, we now create a video with them so they can share their own story.

- Give context to their CIPR, and include their interests, strengths, and hopes
- Gets sent to prospective placements alongside the CIPR, helping to give a more holistic picture of a youth prior to accepting placement
- Shares the youth's direct POV - no game of telephone for information
- Increases the odds of a successful placement

Youth Narratives: How it works

NWAE staff + caseworker meet to discuss youth, walk through steps of the process.

NWAE staff pitch to youth, then schedule and meet 1-on-1 to create their narrative video.

NWAE staff edit video, review with youth, obtain their approval, and share with caseworker for final approval.

NWAE provides a password-protected, unique link to DCYF along with a one-page PDF explaining the project.

When a youth is ready to move placements, DCYF will ensure the PDF (with video link) is sent out alongside the youth's file (CIPR / 15-300) to receiving placements.

Youth Narrative



Centering Youth Voice Benefits Everyone

- All youth (ages 11-17) offered the opportunity for a narrative have participated
- All participating youth would recommend to others
- 100% of families agreed the video was helpful
- 100% of families said they'd be more likely to call the placement desk about the youth



Family Feedback

“She talked about things that were super important to her that didn’t really come through in the CIPR.... I have more of an understanding of her maturity and how she views herself.”

“It allows the family to see a lot more about the child and who they are, and not just one caseworker’s perspective of the child.”

“It makes the CIPR more than just a document--there is a face behind it. This person is a real person, and she actually needs help.”

Youth Voice and Your Own Practice

We need to re-think traditional recruitment methods and maximize every opportunity to inject the youth's voice and experience into the process.

NWAE youth engagement means:

- Youth have an ongoing say in their file and recruitment, even with case worker changes, new placement searches, etc. Youth have opportunities to “speak” directly to prospective families
- Youth have some say/control in what is shared about them
- Digging deeper with a youth, not only taking what kids say at face value

Incorporating these values in your role:

- How could incorporating youth voice improve your work?
- Where can you fit this into your own practice in new ways?

Thank you!

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