

Driving Change in Adoption

# ACTION PLAN

Yvonne Fox

Courtney Wayman

Katherine Squires

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Dear Lived Experts,

Gathered at the base of the Rocky Mountains, a team of dedicated young adults with lived experience in foster care convened for a national advocacy gathering. With representation from more than 50 percent of U.S. states, the lived experts were joined in tandem by child welfare professionals committed to reforming adoption practices and policies. Together, we engaged in joint advocacy efforts to identify necessary, evidence-based strategies and criteria to address critical gaps in both federal- and state-level adoption practices and policies. This two day, intensive convening served as a forum designed to co-create informed policy solutions aimed at drastically improving both current and future adoption outcomes.

The National ThinkTank arose from the inherent need for reform due to absence of significant changes to federal legislation affecting adoption since the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed in 1997, (nearly 28 years ago, and the world has changed dramatically since.) While photolisting initiatives and platforms used in adoption recruitment remain in wide-spread use, there is a significant lack of formal guidance and regulation on critical issues, including youth consent and consultation.

Think Tank 2025 did not demand performance from lived experts or ask attendees to compartmentalize their adoption experience. Instead, it created the conditions for a labor of love: lived experts working side by side to explicitly identify gaps and workshop recommendations necessary to address in order to push adoption policy and practice forward. From that labor, clarity emerged. The lived experts navigated professionalism and tenacity while drawing from traumatic lived experiences. Across

state's borders the lived experts examined, compared, shared best practices and unique geographical needs of the states in child welfare. Stories of sibling separation, broken confidentiality, lack of agency, and more were shared in unanimous vulnerability but all in the name of narrowing down what core recommendations would be beneficial for the world to hear. What we ended up carrying out of the room were the 5 gaps in adoption policy and practice: consent, consultation, photolistsings and privacy, adoption recruitment, and post-adoption support.

For those lived experts who were not able to be in attendance, this work was done with you in mind. The insights gathered in this report belong to all of us, and they can be leveraged in our communities through foster youth support groups, youth-led action teams, university research, op-eds and letters to the editor, social media and blog posts, and federal and state lobbying and counter-lobbying. This convening proved what becomes possible when lived experts are not treated as an afterthought, but as the people most qualified to help shape what adoption can and should become.

No child, youth, or young adult in the U.S. child welfare system is guaranteed a positive outcome - adoption disruptions, dissolutions, and estrangement remain real and ongoing risks, both during and after adoption finalization. However, sorrow cannot mend a child's broken heart, but preventing harmful adoption outcomes remains our most powerful intervention yet. As you continue to read this report, please utilize the contents to their full advantage as we progress closer toward solutions to outdated adoption policy and practice.

Sincerely, Katherine H. Squires (*Lived Expert*)

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**Purpose:** This fillable toolkit is designed to assist you in planning to move Think Tank insights and recommendations to early-stage, relevant action. This tool is not intended to be a comprehensive implementation plan, but rather a starting place to identify one or more priority recommendations relevant to your context and supports needed for action.

**Quick Tips:** Start small and intentionally with your reflection on the recommendations and identify your priority areas for action. Feel free to start anywhere with this tool and your dialogue. Making time for reflection, information-gathering and plan adjustment is essential for this tool. Keep in mind that changing your planning decisions over time is a sign of growth and progress, not failure!

**Organization of the Toolkit:** This toolkit is divided into 3 sections: "Planning for Action," "Creating your Action Plan," "Reflecting on and Adjusting your Action Plan." These sections are intended to be completed sequentially, with input from your partners engaged in your improvement work.

## Planning for Action

**How to Use:** This section is designed to assist you in preparing for action, but does not require you to answer every question fully to begin. Use the prompts in the boxes to support your reflection, gain momentum, and create a shared understanding of your goals.

Planning Step	Exploration Questions and Considerations	Notes
Identify partners	Who are the partners you need to gather for input on the recommendations, and what role might they play? <i>(This includes young people with lived experience in adoption, youth advisory boards, child welfare agency professionals, adoption agency professionals, adoption advocacy organizations, etc. and their roles could include decision-making, consulting/advising, conducting the change etc.)</i>	
Vet recommendations	How will you bring together identified partners to discuss and gather input for recommendations? <i>(Examples could include community cafés, existing coalition meetings, focus groups, etc.)</i>	
Identifying shared priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Based on your engagement with partners, identify which recommendations are highest priority for your state.</li></ul>	

Planning Step	Exploration Questions and Considerations	Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine how you will communicate these priorities back to your partners (for example, create and share Theory of Change)</li> </ul>	
Collect evidence of your baseline	<p>What data do you have in your state to support your recommendations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How many youth and children are awaiting adoption?</li> <li>Can you disaggregate this data by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, primary language spoken, disability, mental health status?</li> </ul> <p>How many families and caregivers are awaiting adoption, and can you disaggregate this data by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, primary language spoken, disability and mental health status?</p>	
Identify overarching goal(s) for improvement	Based on your identified priority recommendations, what are your overall goals for implementing each recommendation? <b>Tip:</b> Think about how you will know that you've achieved your intended change by implementing a recommendation? Be specific!	<i>For example, if you plan to incorporate more youth voice into photolisting processes, consider a goal like "all young people and children awaiting adoption will have clear, consistent, age-appropriate decision-making power in the development, review and posting of their photolisting."</i>
Determine a regular cadence for monitoring progress towards improvement goal(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How often will you monitor your progress toward your goal(s)?</li> <li>How will you share progress information and data with your partners?</li> <li>How will you approach adjusting your improvement approach using feedback from your partners?</li> </ul>	
What leadership support do you need for your identified recommendations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who has decision-making power that can champion the recommendation(s) you are seeking to implement?</li> </ul>	
What resources do you need to carry out your identified recommendations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What concrete resources do you need to implement your recommendation(s)? (For example, funding for specific activities, tangible supplies, data infrastructure, technical resources for online photolisting.)</li> </ul>	

## Creating your Action Plan

**How to Use:** This section is designed to assist you in building on your information from “Planning for Action” to inform the development of an action plan. In completing this section, focus on one recommendation at a time, include both what you know already and what you may need to know in order to carry out your action plan, and consider small action steps that can build on one another. As you build out your plan, reflect on the degree of alignment between your priority recommendation, your identified goal, and your potential, small action steps.

Recommendation	Current Federal and State Policy Guiding Practice	Action Step	Roles of Identified Partners
<b>Consent &amp; Consultation</b> <b>Overarching Goal:</b>	<i>Tip: Consider noting what you know about current policy/practice, as well as what questions you need to answer.</i>	<i>Tip: Rather than broad actions, identify a starting place followed by concrete, near-term steps.</i>	
<b>Recommendation Milestone:</b> What will be your progress indicator(s) to demonstrate you are working towards your overarching goal? Be specific! <i>(e.g., We will monitor youth’s reported satisfaction with their involvement and decision-making in their adoption process every 6 months via survey)</i>			
<b>Photolisting</b> <b>Overarching Goal:</b>			
<b>Recommendation Milestone:</b> What will be your progress indicator(s) to demonstrate you are working towards your overarching goal? Be specific!			

Recommendation	Current Federal and State Policy Guiding Practice	Action Step	Roles of Identified Partners
<b>Recruitment</b> <b>Overarching Goal:</b>			
<b>Recommendation Milestone:</b> What will be your progress indicator(s) to demonstrate you are working towards your overarching goal? Be specific!			
<b>Retention/Support for Prospective Families</b> <b>Overarching Goal:</b>			
<b>Recommendation Milestone:</b> What will be your progress indicator(s) to demonstrate you are working towards your overarching goal? Be specific!			
<b>Post-Adoption Support</b> <b>Overarching Goal:</b>			
<b>Recommendation Milestone:</b> What will be your progress indicator(s) to demonstrate you are working towards your overarching goal? Be specific!			

# Reflecting on & Adjusting your Action Plan

**How to Use:** This section is designed to assist you in reflecting on your initial progress of your action plan, and to identify opportunities to adjust your action plan based on the insights from your reflections. The section is most effective when reflection involves a variety of partners and includes both qualitative and quantitative data to assist you in making meaning of your progress. You may opt to use this reflection section at a specific cadence to facilitate continuous dialogue and learning, when you experience a barrier in your action plan progress, or when you and your partners need to make critical decisions about how to proceed with your planned change. Keep in mind, reflection is an important tool in the process of incremental change!

Check-In Questions	Reflection Notes:	What, if any, response/adjustment is needed?
Do you have a diverse group of partners consistently engaged in your improvement process? Do your partners voice that their participation feels meaningful? Explore how you know the answers to these questions, and what information may be missing.	<i>Tip: As you consider what information you use to inform your reflection, be sure to explore both qualitative information and quantitative. Both types of information are valuable as you reflect on your action planning process!</i>	
What milestones from your action plan are being met? If any are not being met, what needs to be changed/adjusted about your action plan?		
What wins/celebrations can you elevate from your improvement process? How will you share this information with your partners?		
What resources, if any, are you using? What additional resources, if any, do you need?		
What new information, if any, have you learned that requires you to adjust your action plan?		