

ADOPTION EXCHANGE ASSOCIATION

Standards and Ethics for Member Agencies

May 2009



AEA's Standards guide child welfare professionals to commit ourselves, our staff, and our organizations to the highest level of practice. The standards we strive to achieve assume high ethical values as well as fundamental operating principles and practices within our organization and in the ways we communicate with other organizations, children, and families.

Organizations recruiting homes for waiting children hold a deep belief that all children and youth need families and that most adults who want to parent waiting children and youth can become loving parents.

While referred to in this document under the general name of “children,” AEA members find and prepare families for teenagers, young children and infants, youth and children with special medical or emotional needs, those of all races and ethnicities, and youth who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered, or questioning. To meet this challenge, members reach out to and embrace families in all of their forms—single parents, married couples, unmarried couples, grandparents and other kin. Exchanges do not discriminate on the basis of religion, race, culture, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identification.

AEA members also believe that children and youth need families quickly. Federal and state legislation and regulations give timeframes and other requirements for doing this work.² While being cognizant of required timeframes, member organizations move with even greater purpose and speed. No child

² Federal Legislation includes the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89/111 Stat.2115) and the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-382/42 USC 622).

should wait a day longer in foster care because an AEA member did not do what was needed to find a family.

As AEA members, we treat every task with urgency. Research tells us that most families who leave the adoption process do so very early, often before even attending an orientation.³ Members strive to better engage these families early on so that more of them adopt waiting children. Keeping these families engaged requires responsiveness. Being responsive means ensuring that phones are answered by a person during normal business hours, returning telephone calls during the same or following business day, hiring staff that can communicate in the language of the prospective parents, and putting information in the mail on the same or next business day. If laws or regulations in particular jurisdictions allow days or weeks for a response, the Standards challenge members to go beyond what is legally required.

Because of their unique vantage point between families and agencies, AEA members use their voices to advocate for children, families, and for improvements to the child welfare system. As committed advocates, AEA members can use their personal and professional experience with children and families to improve the lives of many.

³ Festinger, T., & Pratt, R. (2003). *Retaining interest: A look at New York City's recruitment of adoptive parents for waiting children*. Geen, R., Malm, K., & Katz, J. (2004). *A study to inform the recruitment and retention of general applicant adoptive parents*. *Adoption Quarterly*, 7(4), 1-28. Wilson, J. B., Katz, J., & Geen, R. (2005). *Listening to parents: Overcoming barriers to the adoption of children from foster care*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Every person who inquires about adoption is treated with respect and sensitivity.

Prospective parents receive the best possible “customer service.” It can take years for a family to make a decision to finally adopt a waiting child. Even if a prospective family never adopts a child from the child welfare system, the positive word-of-mouth generated through these professional interactions is invaluable in advancing the issues and promoting the adoption of waiting children.

AEA members ensure confidentiality.

Recruitment efforts create a constant balancing act: treating the child and his or her birth or foster family with dignity and respect while being open and honest with potential parents. Due to the widespread use of the Internet and other technological advances, organizations have additional methods of informing families about waiting children and, therefore, additional care must be taken to respect privacy and confidentiality issues.⁴

Children are be presented accurately and, at the same time, with great sensitivity.

While it is of the utmost importance to protect privacy, members must advocate for prospective adoptive families to receive the critical background and behavioral information that will help the family decide whether to continue exploring adoption of that child. Information on featured children needs to be accurate, personalized, cognizant of the child’s privacy needs, and based on respect for the child. A child’s last name, residential placement facility, or other such identifying information is never to be used. Information about a child given to inquiring families may include more specific information than was provided during

recruitment, while at the same time continuing to protect the confidentiality of the child and birth family.

When communicating about children and families—whether it is in written materials, on-line, over the telephone, or in person—AEA members communicate in a manner that honors children and families.

The words and tone used should convey respect for children and families as the very foundation of our work.

Organizations recruiting families for waiting children have to remain relevant.

There is a tremendous need to be flexible, creative, and open to working in new and different ways. E-mail, the internet, and video have become powerful tools in the search for families for waiting children. As more new tools become available, AEA members can take them up—exercising caution as needed for the protection of our children and families—and utilize those tools to find more families more quickly. This same creativity must be applied to breaking down the systemic barriers that result in poor outcomes for children.

Accurate and timely data collection, compilation, and review give members an essential tool for improving operations and results.

While data was long collected manually, computers and other electronic devices have made data collection less laborious and more robust. Each AEA member needs to give careful consideration to the way it collects, stores, and uses data to improve practice, outcomes, confidentiality, security, and compatibility with State and Federal systems.

AEA members are strong, vibrant organizations that conduct their business in adherence with the laws of the state

⁴ See also AdoptUsKids publications *Lasting Impressions: A Guide for Photolisting Children* and *Finding a Fit That Will Last a Lifetime: A Guide to Connecting Adoptive Families with Waiting Children*.

where the organization is located and in accordance with generally accepted business practices.

Services are offered free of charge wherever possible. If fees for services are charged by an AEA member, they are reasonable and appropriate.

Adoption Exchange Association
8015 Corporate Drive, Suite C
Baltimore, MD 21236
Ph 410.933.5700 • www.adoptea.org