

# Good Customer Service: What Public Welfare Workers Should Know About International Adoptions

By Victor Groza, PhD

Currently, many families hold the perception that adoption from a third-world country is more predictable and easier than adopting from the public child welfare system. Adoptions of both types increased from the late 1990s until the early 2000s. Figure 1 shows the number of children adopted from the public system and internationally from 1989 through 2005. During 2006, the latest year we have data, adoptions from the public system involved about 51,000 children and international adoptions involved about 21,000 children.

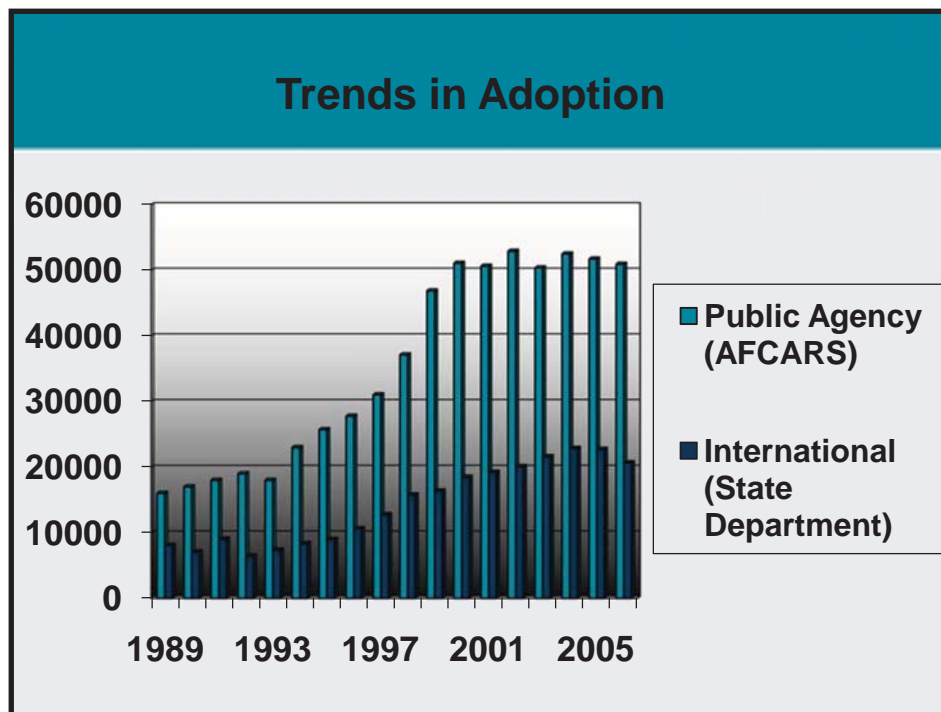
I am in the position of having begun my career doing home studies and supervision of families adopting from the public system and then branching out for the last 15 years to work in different aspects of international adoption. What has become increasingly apparent to me is that there is a need for public child welfare workers to understand issues in international adoption.

There are two major reasons for this. First, we are losing a pool of families who might adopt through the public system. Currently, there are approximately 10 percent of families who adopt internationally (FAI) who are either adopting from Africa, adopting sibling groups, or adopting older children. This translates into more than 2,000 children per year. Second, FAI families often are not prepared for the challenges that their adopted children might bring to their families across the life cycle. Because many international adoption agencies historically have provided little or no post adoption services, and an increasing number of international adoption agencies have closed, FAI families may turn to public agencies for help when difficulties arise.

There are several things public agencies can do to increase the number of families who adopt from the public system rather than internationally. These include:

- friendly and responsive customer service.
- predictability about the adoption process.
- support during the waiting period from home study to placement.

Customer service begins with the initial call from a prospective adoptive family. When a family calls, it is important to return the call in a timely fashion. When a family contacts the agency, it is critical to be welcoming and helpful. If agency staff say that they are going to do something, such as mailing an invitation or information or calling back, the agency must ensure that the action actually happens.



National and local media campaigns about adoption inform the public that there are thousands of foster children waiting to be adopted. When prospective adoptive families realize that adopting is a prolonged process, that some children they have seen on a web site or know about in foster care already have a potential placement resource identified, and/or that there may be a wait for a match with a child, many lose interest or feel disenfranchised.

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chised. It is also discouraging to families if they are told that they will have to wait months until the next cycle of training to begin the adoption process. Clearly it is better to minimize waiting times.

When families do have to wait, another good customer service practice is keeping them engaged. Strategies of engagement might include keeping prospective adoptive parents informed about:

1. How long it will take for a child to be placed in their home.
2. What to expect and what the next steps will be.
3. Defining concurrent planning and options to foster and/or open up their acceptance criteria.
4. Adoption events and local, state, and national web sites where they can view available children, including the AdoptUsKids web site at [www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org).
5. Arranging times to touch base or sponsoring support or “while you wait” groups.
6. Connecting them with mentors who are experienced adoptive parents.
7. Or, in some other way, conveying that your agency values them, understands their anxiety during the process, and that staff are there to support them before, during, and after placement, all of which will collectively result in higher retention rates.

Families need consistent, ongoing support throughout the process. A phone call to offer kind words, an invitation to an event, or an e-mail lets them know that they have value and have not been forgotten.

Good customer service does not end with an adoption; it is essential post adoption. There are unique health issues as well as behavioral, developmental, and psychosocial issues well-known from research with children adopted from the public system and internationally.

In studies of both domestic and international adoption, the service needs of adoptive families who adopt from the public system and internationally are quite similar. Public agencies receive requests for help from families who adopted through them; families adopting internationally

should have the same access to post adoption services supported by a public agency. The consequence in adoption policy and practice for not supporting families who adopt internationally is that when international adoptions fail, those children may enter the public child welfare program. Besides, do we really want to create a system of deserving and undeserving adoptive families?

There is one last thing public child welfare workers should know about international adoption. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children, and Cooperation in Respect of Inter Country Adoption (Hague Adoption Convention) are complementary public policies; they differ only in their scope of emphasis. In ASFA, the emphasis in order of priority is safety, permanency and child well-being. The Hague’s emphasis in order of priority is child well-being, permanency and safety. ASFA regulates the U.S. domestic child welfare system and the Hague affects international adoption for countries who are signatory to it. The Hague also has requirements for states in terms of placing out of country with both relative and nonrelatives. There is worldwide recognition that the principles of safety, permanency and child well-being are important in the welfare of children.

As the United States is now a Hague country, international adoption practice will begin to change. Eventually, adoption workers for children in the public child welfare system and for children adopted internationally will have more similarities in the ways that adoption is practice. There may also be an increase in the number of children placed from the public child welfare system in other countries. There is much that we can learn from and can teach each other. After all, the purpose of both domestic and international adoption is finding a family for a child.

**Victor Groza, PhD**, is Grace F. Brody Professor of Parent-Child Studies in the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. 