



Department of
Children & Youth

Ohio Adoption Guide

A Handbook for Prospective Adoptive Families



IT  **TAKES**
100% Heart
TO FOSTER & ADOPT IN OHIO

They don't have to have your
genes to have your heart.

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| Welcome!

Welcome to Ohio's adoption community. This guide is designed to help you learn more about the adoption process. On average more than 1,500 Ohio children are joined with their adoptive families each year, and over 3,000 more are waiting to be adopted. You don't have to be rich, married or under 40 to adopt a child from foster care in Ohio. What you do need is 100% heart. Read on to learn more, visit FosterAndAdopt.ohio.gov to get started.

We wish you all the best as you begin your adoption journey!

| Adoption Basics

What Is Adoption?

Adoption is a legal process that creates a lifelong relationship between a parent and child. Once the adoption of a child is approved by a court, the adoptive parents will receive an adoption decree and birth certificate, acknowledging that the child is a legal family member with all the rights and responsibilities of a birth child.

Who Can Adopt?

There are many kinds of adoptive families. The most important requirement for adoption is that the family must be able to provide a loving, stable and secure family for a growing child. Adoptive parents:

- ▶ Can be married, single, divorced or widowed, and all orientations
- ▶ May or may not have other children
- ▶ Must be at least 18 years old
- ▶ Can be renters or home owners
- ▶ Must have a stable income
- ▶ Can have any level of education

Is Adoption Right for Your Family?

Adoption is a decision for the entire family. It requires all family members to talk about what adoption might be like and how adopting a child or children will affect the family's current structure. Adoption may include adopting a relative or family friend whose parents are no longer able to provide care. Adoption by a kinship caregiver can keep a child out of foster care and in contact with relatives.



| What Prospective Adoptive Families Should Consider

It is recommended that prospective adoptive families examine themselves through a self-assessment process.

Children don't need perfect parents, just one or two individuals willing to meet the unique challenges of parenting and make a lifetime commitment to caring for and nurturing their children. Adoptive parents do not have to be rich, married, straight, under 40, highly educated, or home owners to adopt. What children do need in parents are:

- ▶ The ability to make a life-long commitment to a child;
- ▶ Patience and perseverance;
- ▶ Flexibility;
- ▶ A good sense of humor and talent for keeping life in perspective;
- ▶ A love of children;
- ▶ The ability to handle unexpected changes, stresses, and challenges;
- ▶ The ability to manage rejection without taking it personally;
- ▶ The ability to accept without judging;
- ▶ Tolerance and understanding for your child's conflicting feelings and your own;
- ▶ An awareness that healing doesn't come quickly, all wounds cannot be healed, and your child may not attach to your family;
- ▶ The strength to be consistent and set limits;
- ▶ A desire to parent even if your parenting expectations go unmet;
- ▶ A willingness to learn new parenting techniques and advocate for your children's educational and medical needs; and
- ▶ Resourcefulness.

If you have all or most of those qualities, then ask yourself these questions:

- ▶ Why do I want to adopt?
- ▶ If married or partnered: Do we work together as a team? Are we both committed to adoption?
- ▶ Does my lifestyle allow me the time necessary to meet the needs of a child? Am I willing to change my lifestyle to accommodate the needs of a child?
- ▶ If currently parenting: How will adoption impact my family?
- ▶ Is my home stable and emotionally able to support a child?

Think carefully about your answers to these questions and discuss them with friends, families, and others in your support system. Your answers to these questions may lead you to:

- ▶ Pursue a different type of adoption
- ▶ Investigate foster care
- ▶ Realize that adoption really is not for you
- ▶ Find other ways to advocate for child and support those who do foster or adopt"

Consider your family's ability to care for a child or youth with special needs. "Often special needs include factors such as age, background, and physical, mental, or emotional challenges. Typically, children who have special needs have been separated from their birth families, live in foster care, are school-aged, and may have physical or mental disabilities. Children may also be classified as having special needs if they are part of a sibling group that is being placed for adoption together, or members of a racial or ethnic minority.

Prospective parents must also honestly evaluate their desire and ability to successfully parent children who have experienced trauma. Many of these children are thriving, but many children and youth also have conditions caused by past trauma or prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs. These conditions can affect their physical, mental, or emotional health and can result in behavioral challenges for parents.

Taking the time to make a good decision is crucial. It is a decision you, your family, and your adoptive child will live with for a lifetime.”



| Researching Adoption Agencies

This guidebook does not discuss infant adoptions, adoptions using private attorneys, or international adoptions. It does, however, discuss the process of adoption through a public children services agency (PCSA) or a private agency that works with the PCSA in completing adoptions from foster care.

Choosing an Adoption Agency

The first step in starting the adoption process is to contact your local PCSA or a private adoption agency. Each county has its own PCSA, and there are numerous private adoption agencies throughout the state. Find an agency that completes adoption homestudies in your area at FosterAndAdopt.ohio.gov.

Questions you may want to ask agencies as you decide which one to work with include:

- ▶ How many and what type of children has the agency placed in the past few years?
- ▶ How many children does the agency have legally available for adoption?
- ▶ What are the characteristics of those children?
- ▶ How does the agency work with other public and private agencies both in Ohio and outside Ohio?
- ▶ How long, on average, must one wait for a child?
- ▶ What are the agency's policies concerning adoption paperwork, educational classes, and visits?
- ▶ Are adoption subsidies available, and how do I apply for them?
- ▶ What are the agency's homestudy requirements, and how do I start a homestudy?
- ▶ Have any of the agency's adoptions been disrupted in the past five years?
- ▶ Does the agency offer services to adopted children and families after finalization?
- ▶ What services—including parenting classes, support groups, activities, access to therapy and counseling, and respite care—will the agency provide before and after the child is placed in my home?



| The Adoption Process

Attending Informational Meetings and Orientations

Agencies generally will invite people who have expressed an interest in adopting a child to an informational meeting and/ or orientation. This meeting is designed to provide potential adoptive families with information about the homestudy process, pre-service training, and general information about the pre-placement and the finalization processes. The agency also may discuss supportive services available in the county.

Pre-Service Training

You will be asked to participate in educational sessions to learn more about the children who are available for adoption, as well as to determine your strengths as an adoptive parent. These educational sessions will explore adoption from every point of view and describe the needs of children in the children services system. The training will give the prospective adoptive parent realistic expectations about adoption and confidence in the ability to parent a waiting child. Topics discussed during pre-service include:

- ▶ The adoption process
- ▶ Child development and how it is impacted by abuse, neglect, and trauma
- ▶ Separation and loss that children experience
- ▶ Understanding behaviors and dealing with child behaviors and attachment
- ▶ Defining diversity and cultural issues
- ▶ Adoption issues that relate to the child, birth family, and adoptive family
- ▶ Community resources and the importance of advocating for your child

The Homestudy

The homestudy is a process of education and self-evaluation. It is a time for you and your assessor to look at your readiness to adopt, as well as identify special parenting abilities that you may offer to an adopted child. The process allows the adoptive family to look at its family structure and support system. During the homestudy, adoptive parents also will explore their beliefs, attitudes, and coping skills. Your caseworker will meet with you and everyone living in your home to discuss the adoption process. Through a series of group and individual meetings, you will learn more about the kind of children you might best parent.

Topics discussed during the homestudy include the following:

- ▶ Motivation for wanting to adopt
- ▶ Your life experiences and history
- ▶ Your marriage or relationship with a significant other
- ▶ Your ability to support your family financially
- ▶ Your health
- ▶ Your support system

When you complete the application for adoption, you will be assigned an assessor who will work with your family to complete the homestudy process. The homestudy process can take up to six months to complete. However, many adoptive families may complete the homestudy process sooner.

During the homestudy process, your assessor is required to review certain documents. Such documents include:

- ▶ Medical statements for everyone living in the house
- ▶ Financial statement, including proof of income
- ▶ Verification of marriage or divorce
- ▶ Criminal background checks for household members over the age of 18
- ▶ Safety audit of the home

Families will receive notification when their homestudy has been completed and approved. In some cases, when the agency is not able to approve a homestudy, the family can meet with the assessor and, if needed, the assessor's supervisor or director, to discuss why the family was not approved and possible alternative options.

Matching Children and Families

Your assessor and agency will take into account the characteristics of children that you can best parent and the characteristics of children your homestudy approves you for when considering placement matches for your family. During a matching conference, adoption professionals consider the strengths, characteristics and needs of a waiting child, and compare those with the strengths and characteristics of waiting families. The length of time it takes to be matched with a child largely depends on the special characteristics of children that you are willing and able to parent. A family who demonstrates the ability to parent a child with many special needs may not wait long for placement.

When Your Agency Matches a Child with Your Family

When your assessor identifies a child who may be a good match for your family, he or she will contact you to share detailed information about the child's background. Such background information will include all known, non-identifying information about the child, including:

- ▶ Birth parents and other relatives
- ▶ Medical, emotional, and psychological history
- ▶ Past and current developmental issues
- ▶ School history if applicable
- ▶ Placement history

Adoptive families also will receive the Child Study Inventory, which documents the child's interests, talents, traits, and history, as well as the known history of the birth parents. Your assessor will give you time to think about the information and will be able to assist you in deciding whether to move forward with the matching process. Your assessor also will recommend that you discuss the child's information with your pediatrician or other professionals from whom you or your child may need services. If you decide to proceed with the match, your assessor will arrange a time for your family and the child to meet.

Prior to this meeting, the assessor may share your Welcome Book with the child, if your agency has requested that your family complete one.

This book, prepared by the prospective adoptive family, includes pictures and information about your family. Many adoptive families choose to include pictures of family members, family pets, the child's room, extended family members and friends. The Welcome Book helps in the preparation for the child's first meeting with his or her potential adoptive family.

Before the first meeting, your assessor also will help prepare you and your family. The assessor will give you and your family suggestions for who should be involved in the first meeting and what types of activities may be most comfortable for the child.

Following the first meeting, your assessor will arrange for a series of additional pre-placement visits in order for you, the child, and the rest of the adoptive family to get to know one another. Pre-placement visits will be discussed with the foster parents or facility where the child resides to ensure the visitation schedule is acceptable to all involved parties. After the pre-placement visits, the child will join your family in your home.

Placement of the Child into an Adoptive Home

Once the child is placed with your family, you become responsible for the child's care. Your assessor will continue to visit with your family monthly after the adoptive placement. These visits are designed to help connect your new family with services and to discuss potential issues that may arise. After a minimum period of six months, your family will be eligible to petition the court to finalize the adoption.

Final Steps to Adoption

Legalizing an Adoption

Legalizing an adoption involves a short hearing at a probate court, during which adoptive parents are granted permanent legal custody of their adopted child. Following the adoption hearing, adoptive parents will work with their assessor and/or attorney to obtain the child's new birth certificate and final decree of adoption.

Post-Finalization Services

A variety of formal and informal services are available to members of the adoptive family, either as a group or as individuals. Support groups, counseling, respite care, medical services, educational resources, and a variety of community resources may be available to help meet the family's ongoing needs. It is important for every family to realize that they will need services and referrals after an adoption is final. Although types and locations of adoption services vary over time, you can always contact your child placement agency, the Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator (OhioKAN) program at 1-844-OhioKAN or <https://ohiokan.ohio.gov/> or by visiting **FosterAndAdopt.ohio.gov** for help locating services in your area.

| Financial Support that May be Available

Title IV-E Adoption Assistance

Title IV-E Adoption Assistance was created by the federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 to encourage the adoption of eligible children with special needs. These programs provide federal financial support for children described as having special needs at the time they are adopted. In addition to a monthly monetary payment, children who are “IV-E eligible” are entitled to Medicaid and certain services under the federal Title XX program.

The concept of “special needs” often seems confusing. Federal law states that when determining a child’s special needs, a state must make several determinations. This includes determining whether a specific factor or condition exists that would prevent the child from being placed with the adoptive parents if not for adoption assistance.

The PCSA in the child’s county is responsible for administering and determining eligibility for this program. If the child is not in the custody of a PCSA, then the PCSA in the adoptive parent’s county determines whether the child meets the eligibility requirement. Contact your PCSA to learn more about Title IV-E Adoption Assistance.

State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy Program

The State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy (SAMS) is a state-funded program designed to help adoptive families with expenses related to their adoptive child’s ongoing therapy or treatment needs. SAMS provides monthly subsidy payments to families adopting children who (1) meet the criteria for “special needs” as defined by the Ohio Administrative Code and (2) are not eligible for Title IV-E Adoption Assistance.

SAMS is negotiated on a case-by-case basis and is frequently granted if a child with special needs

is ineligible for the federal Adoption Assistance program. The family’s income is taken into consideration when determining eligibility for SAMS. The child may also be eligible for medical coverage under Medicaid.

The PCSA in your county administers and determines eligibility for SAMS. Contact your adoption assessor to learn more about the program and to obtain an application.

Non-Recurring Adoption Expense Subsidy

Nonrecurring adoption expenses are one-time expenses directly related to the legal adoption of a child with special needs. This program provides payment or reimbursement for expenses such as supervision of the adoption prior to the adoption finalization, attorney’s fees, court costs, reasonable costs of transportation, and food for the child and/or adoptive parent(s) when necessary to complete the placement or adoption process. Payment or reimbursement may also be available for costs associated with the adoption homestudy, health and psychological examinations related to the homestudy, and reasonable and necessary adoption fees. Family income is not taken into consideration.

Post Adoption Special Services Subsidy

The Post Adoption Special Services Subsidy (PASSS) program is for all adoptive families (except stepparent adoptions) in Ohio whose children may be experiencing adoption-related difficulties or issues that were preexisting but were not apparent at the time of adoption. Such services are available to prevent the dissolution of an adoption.

PASSS services may include:

- ▶ Medical services
- ▶ Psychological services
- ▶ Psychiatric services
- ▶ Residential treatment
- ▶ Respite care

For more information regarding the PASSS program, please contact your OhioKAN at (1-844-OhioKAN) or visit **ohiokan.ohio.gov/passs**

Family Forward

Family Forward is a linked deposit program in the Ohio Treasurer's office aimed at alleviating some of the financial stress families may face during the adoption process.

- ▶ Prospective parents work with a lending institution to apply for a loan through Family Forward.
- ▶ If all eligibility criteria are met, the application is approved and notifications are sent to the applicant and the financial institution.
- ▶ Upon request from the financial institution, the Ohio Treasurer's office will purchase an investment at a below-market rate.
- ▶ The financial institution uses the interest generated from the investment to offset the interest rate reduction to pass savings onto the borrower.

For more information on Family Forward and eligibility, please contact the Treasurer's office by phone at 1-800-228-1102 or by email at **FamilyForward@tos.ohio.gov**.

Federal Adoption Tax Benefit

The Federal Adoption Tax Credit can be used for qualifying expenses paid to adopt an eligible child. Families have five years to use the entire credit. For more information, talk to your tax professional, visit [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov) or call the IRS at 800-829-1040.

Ohio Adoption Grant Program

The Ohio Adoption Grant Program (OAGP) is open to all parents in Ohio who adopt a child on or after January 1, 2023 and provides a one-time payment for all types of adoptions, excluding stepparent adoptions. Applicants may be eligible for \$10,000, \$15,000 if the parent was a foster caregiver to the child prior to adoption, or \$20,000 if a qualified professional diagnosed the child as having one or more special needs (as defined by law) prior to the adoption finalization.

The grant application can be completed online by going to [Ohio Adoption Grant Program | Foster Care and Adoption in Ohio](#). Applicants should be prepared to provide two forms of identification and documentation related to the finalization of the adoption, as well as proof of foster and special needs, if applicable. For questions about the program: **OFC-Ohioadoptiongrant@childrenandyouth.ohio.gov**.

Adoption Assistance Connections (AAC)

Adoption Assistance Connections provides financial assistance to eligible families who adopt children at ages 16 and 17 and then continue to support them as they transition to adulthood. Families may receive a monthly payment and/or Medicaid coverage and that support may continue until the young adult reaches age 21, if other eligibility criteria are met.

Unlike the other subsidies, which are administered by the counties, AAC is administered by the state. It was developed to help families who adopt older youth but that are not eligible for continued Title IV-E Adoption Assistance when their child reaches age 18.

To be eligible, the young adults must meet all the following criteria:

- ▶ Have been in the permanent custody of an Ohio PCSA
- ▶ Were 16 or 17 when the Adoption Assistance Agreement was signed
- ▶ Had adoption finalized before they turned 18
- ▶ Not be married
- ▶ Not be in the military
- ▶ Have adoptive parent(s) who are continuing their parental responsibility

Participating young adults also must meet at least ONE of the following five requirements:

- ▶ Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential
- ▶ Enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education
- ▶ Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment
- ▶ Employed for at least 80 hours a month
- ▶ Incapable of doing any of the above activities due to a medical condition, as documented by a qualified practitioner

College Support Programs

Children and youth who are adopted may be eligible for one or more of the following to assist in covering the cost of attendance.

The Ohio College Adoption Grant provides a one-time award of \$2,500 to students who were adopted on/ after January 1, 2023 and choose to attend a qualifying college or university in the state of Ohio. For more information, go to: highered.ohio.gov/educators/financial-aid/sgs/adoption-grant.

Any youth/young adult that spent at least one day in foster care when they were at least the age of thirteen are considered an independent student for federal student aid purposes. Independent students do not have to provide information about their parents on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA form). When completing the FAFSA form the youth/young adult needs to indicate they spent at least one day in foster care after the age of thirteen.

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program is a federally-funded, state-administered program that provides financial, academic, and human support for young adults who've left the foster care system and are enrolled in qualified colleges, universities, or vocational education programs. Young adults who were adopted at the ages of sixteen or seventeen are able to apply to ETV for up to \$5,000 per school year. For more information go to: <https://fosteredservices.org/ohio-etv/>.

| Building Families through Adoption

Being in a family offers all of us a chance to grow as humans and reach our greatest potential. Parenting can bring out the best in us. The need to care for and nurture another human, especially a child, is a strong human emotion and impulse.

On any given day, nearly 15,000 children in Ohio are living with foster families or in other out-of-home placements. Over 3,000 children have had their biological parents' rights terminated. Most of those children are residing with foster families while they wait for their forever families. These children, who are in the custody of local children service agencies, may be dealing with issues of trauma from past abuse, neglect and/or dependency. They need permanent families.

Each year in Ohio, more children become legally available for adoption than Ohio agencies can place. If you are ready to get started, you can find an agency that completes adoption homestudies in your area at FosterAndAdopt.ohio.gov.

We hope that you want to become an adoptive parent. However, if you decide that adoption is not right for your family, you still can help support children and families. For instance, you could:

- Become a CASA (Court appointed Special Advocate) for a child
- Become a mentor to a child
- Talk with other people about adoption and Ohio's waiting children
- Distribute adoption recruitment materials within your church and community



| Common Adoption Terms

Adoption: The creation, by a court of competent jurisdiction, of parental rights and responsibilities between a child and an adult, along with the termination of all parental rights and responsibilities to the child held by any other persons, which have not been previously surrendered or terminated by court order.

Adoption agency: An entity that provides one or more of the following services: homestudy services for potential adoptive parents, counseling for birth parents, placement services for children in need of adoption, post- placement/pre-legalization services and post- legalization/finalization services.

Adoption Profiles: Also at times called Waiting Child Listings are descriptions of children available for adoption that are used by agencies and individuals to recruit potential families. Ohio's Adoption Profile can be viewed at <https://fosterandadopt.ohio.gov/adoption/adoption-photolist>.

Attachment: An emotional bond between two people that lasts over a long period of time and helps each person reach his or her potential and feel secure and connected.

Birth parent: A biological parent of an adopted person.

Closed adoption: An adoption in which birth and adoptive families have no legal connection to each other.

Finalization: See "Legalization."

Foster-adopt placement: The term used to describe "legal risk placements" (see definition) and/or the adoption by foster parents of a child who is currently placed in their home with an initial plan of reunification with birth parents, but whose plan has been changed to the goal of adoption, after diligent attempts at reunification have failed. In Ohio, many agencies offer a combined homestudy process, so the applicant becomes a licensed foster parent and is approved to adopt at the end of the process.

Guardian ad litem: A guardian appointed by the juvenile court to represent and protect the best interest of a child who is alleged or adjudicated to be abused, neglected or dependent.

Homestudy: A process by which potential foster and adoptive parents educate themselves about the challenges and rewards offered through caring for foster and adopted children, and assess their own skills, life experiences, and strengths to determine the type of children they could best parent.

Identifying information: Information such as name, address, place of employment, or Social Security number, which could significantly help one individual locate another individual.

Independent adoption: An adoption facilitated by an attorney.

Interstate adoption: The adoptive placement of a child (or children) who is a resident of one state with an adoptive family who resides in a different state.

The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC): A uniform law enacted by states and jurisdictions of the United States, establishing orderly procedures for the interstate placement of children across state lines and assigning responsibilities for those involved in placing children.

Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance (ICAMA): An interstate compact which formalizes cooperation among party states and provides the standardized procedures for arranging for medical assistance and services for adopted special needs children and their families when there is a state adoption assistance agreement or a federal adoption assistance agreement in effect.

Legalization: Also called “finalization,” the legal act that establishes a legal family connection between the adopting person and the adopted person. Usually done in a courtroom setting, it grants rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parent and child equal to those rights and responsibilities granted to families created by birth.

Legally free for adoption: A child is legally free when the parental rights of birth or legal parents have been terminated.

Legal risk placement: A placement of a child with a family who is interested in adopting the child, even though the child placed is not legally free. The placement family usually is both a certified foster family and an approved adoptive home. The risk is that the parents’ rights may not be terminated, and the court may order the child to be returned to the parent(s) or a suitable relative. The benefit is that this type of placement decreases the number of placements a child may have.

Lifecook: A record of the child’s life, which helps identify events in the child’s past, including what happened while in agency care. It includes a chronological listing of important events and relationships in the child’s life and may include photographs.

Loss: The emotional and psychological state experienced when someone temporarily or permanently is separated from someone or something to which they have an emotional attachment or need. All loss causes emotional trauma, though the degree varies.

Medicaid: A type of medical insurance provided through the state, using combined federal and state funds, that most children who are considered to have special needs are entitled to receive. This can be used in conjunction with the adoptive family’s medical insurance.

Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA): A federal law enacted in 1994 and amended in 1996 that prohibits an adoption agency from delaying or denying the placement of any child on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

Non-recurring costs: One-time expenses incurred by a person adopting a child, such as travel, legal, and homestudy-related costs. These are frequently reimbursable through federal and local funds when adopting a waiting child.

Open adoption/Openness: A wide continuum of adoption options that recognize the child’s connection to both the birth family and adoptive family; usually involves an agreement made by the birth and adoptive parents to share information, or to have ongoing contact. In Ohio, these agreements are legal but non-binding.

Parent support groups: Formal or informal groups of adoptive parents and potential adoptive parents coming together to share information and resources. They often offer friendship, emotional support, and recreational activities for adoptive family members. Support groups form for a variety of reasons, usually based on a shared interest or characteristic.

Post Adoption Special Services Subsidy (PASSS): A unique subsidy program designed to assist Ohio families whose children may be experiencing adoption-related difficulties or issues after the finalization of their adoption.

Post-finalization services: Services provided or arranged by a local agency to support, maintain, and assist an adopted child, adoptive family, or birth parent any time after an adoption is finalized.

Respite care: Services designed to provide temporary relief of child-caring functions.

Special needs: A need or circumstance that may be a barrier to placement or adoption, such as physical or mental disability or medical condition, age, race, inclusion in a sibling group, or other factors.

Stepparent Adoption: A stepmother or stepfather becomes the legal parent of their stepchild. The stepparent assumes all parental rights and responsibilities over the child of their spouse, just like a biological parent. The court typically grants this type of adoption when it is in the child's best interests.

Surrender: Also known as "relinquishment," the voluntary termination of parental rights by a legal parent.

Termination of parental rights: The legal severing of ties between a parent and his or her child. These parental rights and responsibilities may be voluntarily surrendered by the parent or, if the parent is proven unable to meet the child's long-term needs, may be severed involuntarily through the court system.

Trauma: Adverse experiences that can have lasting negative effects on a person's social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being.

Mike DeWine, Governor
State of Ohio

Kara B. Wentz, Director
Ohio Department of Children and Youth

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