

# ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

---

## 27TH ANNUAL

*meet the honorees*



**CCCAI**  
CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

# ABOUT CCAI & ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

## About CCAI

Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to eliminating the barriers that prevent children from being part of a safe, nurturing, and permanent family. As an organization uniquely founded "by Congress, for Congress," CCAI has served as a trusted, principal source of the information, expertise, and resources needed by Members of Congress to make informed policy decision about domestic and international child welfare for over twenty years. CCAI believes every child deserves a family and every family deserves a caring community. CCAI is deeply committed to bipartisanship, strengthening families, and permanency.

Knowledge is powerful. CCAI's main purpose and expertise is providing experiential and interactive resources and opportunities for Members of Congress and their staff to stay up to date on child welfare policy information and bringing awareness and education to the U.S. Congress.

## About Angels in Adoption®

Through the Angels in Adoption® Leadership Program, Members of Congress have an opportunity to recognize individuals, families, and organizations from across the country who have made extraordinary contributions to adoption, permanency, and child welfare on behalf of vulnerable children and families. Once selected, Angels travel to Washington, D.C. to personally meet with federal policymakers, receive advocacy training, participate in Hill Day meetings with their Members of Congress, and receive recognition at a celebration held in their honor. Since 1999, thousands of Angels have traveled to Washington, D.C. to take part in this program, and these extraordinary leaders return home better equipped to effect change on behalf of children in need of safe and nurturing families.



# 2025 ANGELS IN ADOPTION<sup>®</sup> HONOREES

Anna’s House Foundation  
Melissa Appleton  
Emily M Barrett  
Heather and Josh Barkley  
Rebekah Beltran  
Kim Bigler  
Sunny Blankinship  
Katharine and Frank Block  
Annette and Matthew Brandt  
Lindsay and Travis Burton  
Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for  
Children of Baltimore  
CASA of Jefferson and Gilpin Counties  
CASA of Johnson and Wyandotte Counties  
CEDARS Youth Services  
The Clifford House of Hope, Charles County  
Department of Social Services  
Jennifer and John Cockman  
The Contingent  
Claire and Joshua Cox  
Carrie and Matthew Damschroder  
Lynn Fraipont  
Family Focus  
Four Oaks Family and Children's Services  
Foster Kinship  
Emily and John Gibson  
Elizabeth and Taylor Harbison  
Becky and Jess Hermann  
Helen's Hope Chest  
House of Grace  
Jackie and Marcus Isakson  
Taryn Jacobus  
Jeremiah Tree Foundation  
Melissa and Daniel Jarvis  
Vershunda Rena Jones

Whitney Lam Johnson  
Kim and Ric Jordan  
Michael A Kalil  
Louise and Lee Kadinger  
Emily and Riley Krause  
J McLane Layton  
Tamara and Jeramy Lawson  
Misti and John Leathers  
Mike McHugh  
A New Beginning Adoption Agency  
Liz Northcutt  
David Perez  
Johnny Peppers  
Ellie Robinson  
Mitch Rosenwald  
Tamara and Joey Rowell  
Amy and William Rush  
Christopher Scott  
Samantha and Dalton Scott  
Jeannie Schafer  
Tim Sexton  
Mary and Bill Singleton  
Ellen and Tony Smith  
Lisa Stockdale  
Kimberly and Donald Swanson  
Nicole Thalken  
Katrina and Rudy Villareal  
Stephanie and Kenneth White  
Kailah and Taylor White  
Beth Wilbur  
Christie and Nathan Winters  
Emily and Bill Wireman  
Jacqueline and Rodd Wohlfeil  
Maggie and Nick Zehring  
Karen Zilberstein



# Anna's House Foundation

## Oklahoma

***Recommended by U.S. Senator James Lankford***

Anna's House Foundation is a faith-based foster care agency dedicated to providing immediate, stable, and nurturing homes for Oklahoma children in state custody. Rooted in Christian values, their mission is to offer children of all ages a future grounded in hope, healing, and belonging. With a strong focus on preserving sibling connections, mental health, and long-term stability, Anna's House Foundation supports foster families through comprehensive wraparound services, professional training, and ongoing relational care. Their innovative foster care community in Luther, Oklahoma — featuring eight single-family homes, a pediatric clinic, playgrounds, and family-centered amenities — serves as a model for what holistic, neighborhood-style foster care can look like. Headquartered in Edmond, Oklahoma, Anna's House Foundation has become a leading voice in child welfare, offering a faith-informed, family-first response to the complex needs of children navigating the foster care system.



*Melissa Appleton*

**Vermont**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Peter Welch***

For the past 19 years, Melissa Appleton has dedicated herself to supporting families formed through adoption and guardianship by providing exceptional post-permanency services in Vermont. She brings a combination of clinical expertise, ethical leadership, and compassionate advocacy to her work. As the Coordinator of Lund's Post-Permanency Program, Melissa assures programming is deeply rooted in strength-based and family-centered practices. She actively engages her team in practice discussions, encourages diverse perspectives, and fosters a culture of collaboration and inclusion. She creates space for her staff to grow, reflect, and lead, while remaining a consistent and trusted resource. Families consistently report feeling supported and empowered through the services they receive under Melissa's leadership. Melissa is highly respected by her colleagues and community partners across Vermont. She engages in state-level discussions that address systematic challenges and help shape post-permanency services. In recent years, Melissa's work has focused on advocacy efforts to assure adoptive families have the support they need to thrive. This includes testifying with the state legislators to secure additional funding and support for state-wide post-permanency programs. Melissa has also led efforts to secure grant funding that allows more families access to adoption-competent therapy across the state. Melissa holds deep gratitude for the many families and colleagues who have helped influence and inspire her work over the years!

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

*2025 Program*

5





*Emily M. Barrett*

**South Carolina**  
***Recommended by U.S. Senator Tim Scott***

Emily Barrett is an accomplished attorney and an adoptive parent dedicated to helping young women in crisis pregnancies. She began her work in adoption in 2009 as an adoption attorney, where she became a member of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (AAAA). As time progressed, Emily found her calling in serving these women more directly by joining Adoption Options, Inc. in 2019, aligning her passion with a community of like-minded individuals. As the executive director, she specializes in assisting young women in making adoption plans to place their children into nurturing homes and providing the support and assurance they need throughout the process.

A graduate of the College of Charleston with degrees in U.S. history and studio art, as well as Cumberland School of Law, Emily is actively involved in her community. As an attorney, she is a member of AdoptMatch, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting ethical adoption practices. Additionally, she is a member of First Baptist Church of Charleston, volunteers with 40 Days for Life, and has previously served on the board of the Charleston Miracle League. Outside of her professional life, Emily enjoys photography, cooking, and spending time on the water. She resides in Charleston with her husband and their adopted son, cherishing the joy of family and service.





# Heather and Josh Barkley

**Indiana**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Jim Banks***

Heather and Josh Barkley’s journey to adoption began through personal heartbreak, marked by an ectopic pregnancy and two miscarriages. These experiences opened their hearts to the idea of building their family through adoption—a calling they believe was placed on their hearts by God. Their early adoption efforts were met with disappointment, as two birth mothers who had initially selected them ultimately chose to parent. Still, the Barkleys pressed forward, led by faith and a determination to provide a loving home to children in need. In 2014, they became licensed foster parents and were placed with three children within three weeks—none of them siblings, but all needing care and stability. Since then, the Barkleys have completed four adoptions. Their commitment to foster care has not only shaped their family, but has also made a lasting impact on their community. They regularly use their voice to raise awareness about the urgent need for foster and adoptive families, especially in smaller counties like theirs.

Through years of parenting children who’ve experienced trauma and loss, Heather and Josh have remained unwavering in their commitment. They are open about the emotional challenges of foster care and adoption and are strong advocates for trauma-informed parenting. Their deep faith, resilience, and willingness to be transparent about both the beauty and hardship of adoption have inspired others to consider fostering themselves. Heather and Josh are more than parents—they are advocates, encouragers, and leaders in the foster care community. They live their belief that every child deserves a safe, nurturing, and permanent home, and they walk alongside others who share that calling.



Rebekah Beltran

**Texas**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative August Pfluger***

Rebekah Beltran serves as the Director of Operations at The WHIT Program, a San Angelo, Texas-based nonprofit that provides free, volunteer-driven tutoring to children and youth in foster care. As a former foster youth and now foster and adoptive mother, Rebekah brings a unique and deeply personal perspective to her role. Her leadership has been instrumental in the program's growth, expanding its services across the state of Texas and pairing foster youth with trained university student volunteers who support them in reaching grade-level proficiency in reading and math. Rebekah's lived experience, combined with her steadfast dedication, has transformed The WHIT Program into a powerful force for educational equity, empowering foster youth to gain confidence, close academic gaps, and realize their full potential.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program

8





*Kim Bigler*

**Louisiana**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy***

In 2010, Kim Winston Bigler founded what would eventually become James Samaritan, starting out of the trunk of her car in California. After returning to Louisiana five years ago, she has built an organization that has had an incredible impact on the Louisiana foster care community. Her organization connects community members, churches, and businesses to provide meaningful and enriching support for at-risk children, youth, and families in the foster care system. Through strong partnerships with the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), local churches, and an army of dedicated volunteers, Kim has built an organization that is transforming how Louisiana cares for its most vulnerable. Kim has been recognized for her impact on changing how we care for our most vulnerable. Her leadership and impact have been widely recognized across the state. Kim has received honors from numerous organizations, including LFAPA, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation's Angel Award, YMCA St. Tammany West's Hometown Hero Award, the Together We Can Conference, the Linda Christmas Award, the Louisiana Institute of Children and Families' Angel in Adoption Award, First Lady Donna Edwards' Louisiana Fosters initiative, Governor John Bel Edwards, and many others.



Sunny Blankinship

**North Dakota**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Kevin Cramer***

Sunny Blankinship, adoptive mother and adoption advocate, leads by example as she lives out the message, “If you make yourself available, beautiful things can happen.” Sunny and Mike Blankinship of Fargo, North Dakota, are the proud parents of a son and three daughters – two biological and two adopted. Her heart for adoption developed at a young age through the example of her aunt and uncle who had opened their home to foster care for over 40 years. Sunny viewed providing a safe environment for children in need as central to her family’s values and sought to offer these children the opportunity of permanence and stability. The Blankinships’ adoption journey was not immediate. After several years of waiting and experiencing a disrupted adoption in 2017, they finally grew their family of four with two baby girls, one in 2018 and another in 2021. From the beginning, Sunny and Mike have made their family available to their daughters’ birth parents and siblings, allowing them to build long-term relationships. In her professional work as an adoption advocate and former development coordinator at Christian Adoption Services (CAS) in Fargo, Sunny has worked to expand awareness and understanding of adoption. She has networked with external stakeholders to build partnerships, coordinated educational opportunities, sought avenues to increase awareness and understanding of adoption, and expanded the CAS social media presence. Sunny believes everything in life has a purpose and reason. For her, the example set by her aunt and uncle for many years as foster parents is now being manifested in her own life. This is unfolding as a blessing, allowing her to open her home as an adoptive mother and advocate for greater adoption awareness as a respected professional and mother.





*Katharine and Frank Block*

**Missouri**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Josh Hawley***

Kitty and Frank met in college, where their shared Christian faith became the foundation of their lives. After marrying, they had five children and adopted a sixth child, building a family life marked by service and compassion. Frank earned his master's degree in social work and later attended seminary where he was invited to launch an adoption agency serving children in India. In 1982, Love Basket Adoptions was founded, named for the baskets built into orphanage walls in India where mothers could safely and anonymously leave their infants. Frank traveled to India over 50 times, bringing many children to their waiting families in the U.S., often accompanied by Kitty. Love Basket expanded to include offices in Missouri, Kentucky, and Minnesota, and international programs in numerous countries. It also developed humanitarian projects, providing literacy training to indigent women and replacing fishing boats destroyed in the 2004 Indian tsunami. Frank co-founded the National Christian Adoption Fellowship. With Kitty, he ensured that their children experienced service firsthand by taking them overseas to help with their work. Of their 24 grandchildren, seven are adopted. Frank retired in 2016 and Love Basket merged with Nightlight Christian Adoptions. Frank and Kitty live in Blue Springs, Missouri, where Frank serves on several charitable boards and they both serve at their church and in their community.



Annette and Matt Brandt

**South Dakota**  
***Recommended by U.S. Senator John Thune***

Annette and Matt adopted their son, Isaiah, in 2019 and have since been active foster parents in the Sioux Falls area. They are currently fostering a 9-month-old baby girl and remain committed to maintaining connections with the biological families of both Isaiah and the children they foster, believing strongly in the importance of those relationships. Their dedication to the foster care community is evident through their work as foster parents and their active membership at King of Glory Church in Sioux Falls.





*Lindsay and Travis Burton*

**Kentucky**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Andy Barr***

Inspired by the efforts of close friends who had pursued adoption, Lindsay and Travis Burton knew before they were even married that they wanted to make room in their future family for children in need. Aware of the significant number of foster children in Kentucky awaiting families, they completed the required training in late 2018 to open their home as foster parents. This decision led them to their daughter, born prematurely at eight weeks. The Burtons first met her at two weeks old and, nearly four months later, welcomed her home to Garrard County. As Travis was making a career move and Lindsay, a kindergarten teacher, was returning to everyday class post-pandemic, they again received a call to head to the hospital. There, they met their son, sporting a baby mohawk, who would immediately steal their hearts. Both children were later officially adopted into the Burton family. Having experienced both the challenges and joys of foster care, Lindsay and Travis have continued fostering and recently welcomed foster brothers into their home. Adoption days were celebrated by raising funds from friends and family to provide Christmas gifts for foster children in Kentucky and to support charities that help children in foster care. In addition, they share their story with others considering fostering or adopting and have advocated for state legislation aimed at helping schools better support foster children in the classroom.



# *Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children of Baltimore*

**Maryland**  
***Recommended by U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen***

CASA of Baltimore is dedicated to raising awareness about the needs of children without families and advancing child welfare throughout the city. The organization is committed to child advocacy, with trained volunteers ensuring each child's educational, medical, social, and mental health needs are fully understood and effectively represented. These trained volunteers are court appointed special advocates that are appointed by judges to serve as the voices for children involved in Baltimore's juvenile court system. In 2025, CASA of Baltimore served over 90 youth, dedicating more than 10,000 hours of volunteer service. There are approximately 1,400 children in foster care throughout Baltimore City, and the organization is continually striving to increase its reach and capacity to serve more of Baltimore's most vulnerable children. CASA volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, and their advocacy has resulted in higher rates of academic success and a greater likelihood of finding permanent housing for children across Baltimore. Executive Director, Ciara M. Huff, leads the organization, and the board of directors is comprised of professionals from various fields, including law, education, and public policy.





*CASA of Jefferson and Gilpin  
Counties*

## **Colorado**

### ***Recommended by U.S. Representative Brittany Pettersen***

CASA of Jefferson and Gilpin Counties serves as a powerful advocate for children in the child welfare system. With the dedication of hundreds of volunteers throughout Jefferson and Gilpin in Colorado, they serve the 1st Judicial District, which ranks 7th in the state for child abuse and neglect cases. This nonprofit organization recruits, trains, and supports community volunteers to become independent advocates for children who are victims of neglect and physical and/or sexual abuse. These volunteers are ordinary citizens who make an extraordinary commitment to perform a key role in breaking the cycle of child abuse. CASA volunteers offer stability, compassion, and a consistent presence in the lives of the children they serve, often being one of the few constants during times of uncertainty and transition. Their involvement ensures that the child's voice is heard and that no child falls through the cracks of a complex legal and social system.

The organization also collaborates with local agencies, legal professionals, and service providers to provide support to children, including counseling, educational services, and additional resources. In 2024, 1,834 volunteers positively impacted the lives of over 3,500 children, enabling CASA programs to serve more than 2,000 cases in Colorado. With the support of a CASA, 87% of school-aged children progressed to the next grade between the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 school years. 44% of children not currently with their siblings had a volunteer who supported sibling connections by arranging, observing, and/or providing transportation to visits. Their work is essential to building a stronger, more compassionate community where every child has the opportunity to thrive.



# CASA of Johnson and Wyandotte Counties

## Kansas

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Sharice Davids***

The National CASA/GAL Association, together with its state and local member programs, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy so every child who has experienced abuse or neglect can be safe, have a permanent home, and have the opportunity to thrive. There are over 900 CASA/Guardian ad Litem (GAL) state organizations and local programs in 49 states and the District of Columbia. CASA/GAL volunteers are appointed by judges in judicial proceedings related to abuse and neglect to advocate for children's best interests. This best interest advocacy makes a life-changing difference for children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program

16





# CEDARS Youth Services

## Nebraska

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Mike Flood***

CEDARS Youth Services (CEDARS) has been a vital part of Nebraska's safety net for children and families for nearly 80 years. What began in 1947 as a single act of kindness has grown into one of the state's most trusted and comprehensive youth-serving organizations. Today, CEDARS supports thousands of young people each year through a wide array of nationally accredited services, including foster care, emergency shelter, transitional living, prevention programs, and clinical support. At the heart of its mission is helping children and youth achieve safety, stability, and enduring family relationships. Since launching its Foster Care program in 1996, CEDARS has helped children of all ages across the state of Nebraska find safe and nurturing homes. Foster care staff support youth, biological families, and foster parents as they work toward permanency through reunification, guardianship, or adoption. With 24/7 access to training, case management, and behavioral health services, foster families are never alone, and every child is given the opportunity to grow in a supportive environment. When an immediate safe place is needed, CEDARS stands ready as the only emergency youth shelter in southeast Nebraska. To the more than 2,500 Nebraska children and families it served last year, CEDARS is more than a service provider — it is a path to hope and lasting change.



# Clifford House of Hope

## Maryland

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Steny Hoyer***

The Clifford House of Hope fills a critical gap in support services by providing an authentic setting for families to practice parenting skills and for children to grow personally and academically. Unlike public environments, such as state offices, Clifford House of Hope provides a supportive atmosphere where trained and dedicated social workers and community partners guide families through practical, everyday situations and tasks. Families learn new skills that enhance a parents' ability to provide safe and loving care and help children practice skills needed for independent living.





*Jennifer and John Cockman*

**North Carolina**  
***Recommended by U.S. Senator Thom Tillis***

The Cockman Family began as a family of four—John and Jennifer with their daughters, Arwen and Lorien. Their adoption journey began in 2013 when two-year-old Morgen joined their home as a foster child. They instantly fell in love with her, and by age four, her adoption was finalized. Inspired by that experience, they welcomed ten-month-old Daniel the following year. Two years later, John and Jennifer received a call about newborn twins, Rowan and Elowen, whom they fostered and later adopted in 2022. Today, the Cockmans are a family of ten, with two biological children, four adopted children, and two foster children.

For the past 13 years, John and Jennifer have opened their home and hearts to children in need, creating a haven of love and stability. They live in Western North Carolina, where John recently retired after 24 years as a physics professor at Appalachian State University. John is also a musician and provides free music camps for local children throughout the summer.



# The Contingent

## Oregon

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Ron Wyden***

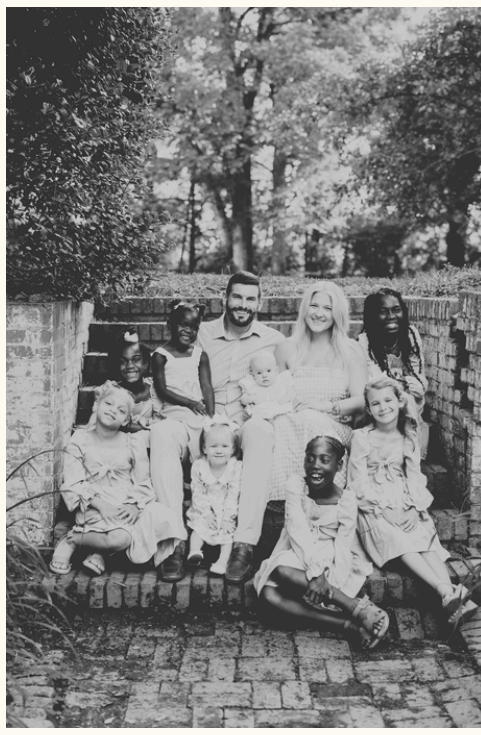
The Contingent is a venture nonprofit dedicated to empowering leaders and mobilizing communities for the common good. Through its Every Child initiative, The Contingent leads community engagement and foster family recruitment efforts in Oregon, Arkansas, and Tennessee. The Every Child Initiative uses the Air Game solution to strategically recruit foster parents where the need is greatest—ensuring not only that there are enough homes for children in care, but that placements keep children connected to their schools, siblings, and cultural identities. This approach helps preserve family bonds, support systems, and children’s emotional well-being. The Contingent utilizes innovative and award-winning data and technology strategies to recruit foster parents and volunteers.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program

20



## Claire and Joshua Cox

**Louisiana**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator John Kennedy***

Claire and Joshua Cox have been foster parents since 2017, opening their home to over 100 children across Louisiana. The Coxes began fostering at just 22 years old, and are now raising eight daughters. With deep faith and a desire to honor Jesus, they chose foster care as their calling—an experience they describe as the greatest blessing of their lives. Claire and Joshua are passionate advocates for children in foster care, particularly those legally available for adoption and still awaiting permanent families. Their efforts have helped raise awareness, recruit foster and adoptive parents, and bring hope to vulnerable children. Their journey is marked by love, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to creating a safe and joyful home for every child who enters it. Whether fostering for a night or a year, the Coxes believe each child deserves dignity, stability, and belonging.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program





# Carrie and Matthew Damschroder

**Ohio**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Jon Husted***

Matt Damschroder serves as Director of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, where he has led numerous initiatives supporting children and families in foster care and adoption. He and his wife, Carrie, are the proud parents of two children whom they first welcomed into their home as foster children and later adopted. Recognized across Ohio as advocates for children in need of safe and loving homes, Matt and Carrie embody the transformative power of foster care and adoption—demonstrating through both their leadership and their family life how these experiences can change lives for children and parents alike.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program

22



*Lynn Fraipoint*

**Delaware**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Lisa Blunt Rochester***

Lynn is the adoptive parent of four now grown young men. She has worked in adoption for over 14 years and is one of the co-authors of the book, "A Kids Book About Foster Families." She was chosen as an AdoptUsKids' Caseworker of the Month, declared one of Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) 100th Anniversary Champions of Children, awarded the Outstanding Colleague Award from Children & Families First, and was a Julie Marks Social Worker Award recipient from the Adoption Center in Philadelphia PA. Lynn has co-authored multiple articles for CWLA's *The Children's Voice*. More importantly, she has been an innovator in child welfare through the way she has utilized evidenced-informed tools to access the ability, resources, and willingness of prospective adoptive families to meet the strengths and needs of the children she serves in her work as a child-specific recruiter. Her creativity and persistence even supported the reinstatement of parental rights for a birth mother whose sons were living in institutional care. Lynn has been featured on podcasts for The National Council for Adoption and CWLA and has taught through Springfield College's Adoption Competency Certification Course. She will retire at the end of 2026, leaving behind a legacy of leadership and advocacy for children and families.





*Family Focus*

**Illinois**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Danny K. Davis***

For over 175 years, Family Focus (formerly the Chicago Childcare Society) has worked tirelessly to ensure that every child and family served in their programs have the love, care, and essentials needed for healthy development and growth. Family Focus has demonstrated commitment to improving family stabilization for reunification and promoting permanency and well-being with kinship caregivers when children cannot remain safely with their parents. Their programs aim to keep families together and out of the foster care system, with kinship care being a particular priority. Family Focus operates a Family Advocacy Center to assist families referred to the Department of Children and Family Services with reunification and maintaining connections between children and parents. In addition, Family Focus operates a highly successful kinship care program called the Extended Family Support Program, which assists kin who suddenly become the primary caregivers, thereby enhancing their ability to meet the child's developmental needs. The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program provides additional support to older caregivers through support groups and trained professionals. Family Focus also helps fathers reconnect with their families by building relationships and parenting skills.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

*2025 Program*

24





# Four Oaks Family and Children's Services

**Iowa**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley***

Four Oaks Family and Children's Services is a statewide organization contracted by the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services to recruit, retain, train, and support foster and adoptive families across the state of Iowa. Their mission is to ensure children experience safety and stability by connecting them with nurturing families who can support their healing and path to permanency. Through comprehensive training, ongoing support, and dedicated advocacy, they help create lasting connections for children in need. Four Oaks' work is rooted in the belief that every child deserves a safe, loving, and permanent home.

Mary Beth O'Neill has served as the President and CEO of Four Oaks since the fall of 2021 and leads a team of more than 700 human services professionals to improve the lives of Iowa's children through a proactive and evidence-based approach. In 2024, together with FosterSquad, Four Oaks expanded Operation Santa to be a state-wide event, providing an opportunity for children in foster care to enjoy a holiday event with both their foster family and biological family.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program

25



*Foster Kinship*

## Nevada

***Recommended by U.S. Senators Catherine Cortez Masto and  
Jacky Rosen***

Foster Kinship was established as a 501(c)(3) organization in 2011 to help the 30,000 children in Nevada living with relative caregivers, also known as kinship care. Foster Kinship was founded with a mission to strengthen kinship caregivers' capacity to provide safe, stable, and nurturing homes for children. Foster Kinship is the only organization in Nevada exclusively serving grandparents and other caregivers of kinship children. Since its inception, Foster Kinship has proudly served thousands of kinship families across Nevada. Foster Kinship provides statewide services and runs kinship resource centers in Las Vegas and Reno.



Emily and John Gibson

**Indiana**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Erin Houchin***

Emily and John Gibson's journey into adoption began not with a plan, but with a calling. In 2016, they opened their hearts and home to a baby girl through the foster care system. In 2017, two young boys joined their home. Emily and John were licensed as foster-to-adopt parents, providing love, stability, and structure while navigating the uncertainties of the foster care system. Then in 2021, a baby girl came into their lives. Despite the hardships, Emily and John never wavered. They became fierce advocates and tireless caregivers of the children entrusted to them. They adopted their son, Grady, and later Millie, giving both children not only a permanent family, but also a future filled with opportunity and unconditional love. Their kids now have a life defined not by where they started, but by the incredible family surrounding them. Emily and John's story is one of perseverance and faith. They didn't seek recognition—they simply saw children in need and stepped up to help. Through the ups and downs of foster care, court hearings, case plans, and medical struggles, they remained focused on what mattered most: the well-being of the children. Today, their home is filled with laughter, love, and second chances. Their example has inspired others to consider fostering and adoption, and their story reminds us all that family is not defined by blood; it's defined by love and commitment.





*Elizabeth and Tyler Harbison*

**Pennsylvania**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Lloyd Smucker***

The Harbisons, a compassionate couple serving as missionaries in Honduras, never expected their lives to change so profoundly. While living abroad and working with local communities, they took temporary custody of a newborn baby boy they named Eli, who had been abandoned just two days after birth. At first, their intent was simply to provide him with safety and care until a more permanent solution could be found. But as the days turned into weeks and then months, their bond with Eli deepened. What started as an act of kindness grew into something much more meaningful.

In their hope to introduce Eli to their extended family in the United States, the Harbisons applied for a B-2 visitor visa. Unfortunately, that request was denied, leaving them heartbroken and unsure of the next steps. After much advocacy, Eli's citizenship was officially finalized in December 2024. What began as a heartbreaking situation ultimately became a story of hope, love, and a family united. Eli is now not only surrounded by the love of the Harbisons, but also officially recognized as a U.S. citizen, with a future full of opportunity ahead of him.



# Becky and Jess Hermann

**Utah**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Mike Lee***

Becky and Jess Hermann became foster parents while raising their seven biological children, motivated by a deep love for children and a commitment to supporting vulnerable children and families in their rural Utah community. During their time as foster parents, they actively participated in reunification efforts, family team meetings, and community programs aimed at strengthening families and ensuring children's well-being. They also provided respite care to fellow foster families when they were able.

Over three years, they cared for eight children, including three newborns, and ultimately adopted two young siblings, both of whom struggle with neurodevelopmental disorders related to trauma and prenatal substance exposure. Becky and Jess have since dedicated themselves to advocating for their children's specialized medical, emotional, and educational needs, drawing on every available resource to help them thrive.

As parents of nine children—now ages 5 to 27—and grandparents to eight, the Hermanns understand the profound joys and unique challenges of parenting children with a spectrum of needs. Their journey has shown them the vital importance of accessible foster family resources and ongoing post-adoption support, especially in rural communities. Becky and Jess continue to share their story to inspire, uplift, and advocate for families navigating the foster and adoption journey with compassion, resilience, and enduring love.



*Helen's Hope Chest*

### **Arizona**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Greg Stanton***

Since 2009, Helen's Hope Chest has been providing clothing, shoes, books, and hygiene items to children in foster and kinship care free of cost. Helen's Hope Chest is a safe, welcoming, and dignified space offering an exciting "shopping experience" where children and youth may pick out their own items, all of which are nearly new and on-trend. In addition, every child's special day is celebrated with a visit to the birthday room, filled with new toys and gifts for personal selection. A committed staff and large volunteer community work together to solicit donations, process items, and stock the boutique with high quality items, serving more than 400 children and youth each month. At this shop-by-appointment storefront, children and teens are treated with respect and are assisted by kind helpers that strive to demonstrate that each child is seen and valued. Understanding that fostering is a family affair, consideration is given by extending a shopping experience to the biological and adopted children in the foster home. Helen's Hope Chest is recognized as a valuable resource for foster and kinship families across Arizona.





## House of Grace

**Louisiana**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Mike Johnson***

House of Grace is a Christ-centered home dedicated to supporting young women ages 18–24 who have aged out of the foster care system. Founded in 2018 by Amy Barton and her husband, David, House of Grace was born out of a calling to provide a nurturing, purposeful environment for girls facing the challenges of transitioning to adulthood without the safety net of a traditional family. Located on five acres in Bossier Parish, House of Grace currently serves as a home and mentoring space for six young women, while also extending support, resources, and relationships to many others in the community. House of Grace NWLA offers each young woman the opportunity to experience unconditional love, hope, and healing.

The mission of House of Grace is to walk alongside each resident as they build a stable and fulfilling future, whether through employment, higher education, or personal growth. With emotional support, life skills training, and a community rooted in faith, House of Grace is a place where young women can truly thrive. Alongside caring for the women at House of Grace, Amy and David have five beautiful children of their own – one of whom they adopted from the foster care system. Amy and David continue to welcome foster kids into their home.



## Jackie and Marcus Isakson

**South Dakota**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson***

Jackie and Marcus Isakson have always had a desire to pursue fostering and eventually adoption. The Isaksons had four biological children before they started fostering. Over the years, they have fostered countless children, but more recently, they took on four siblings to foster in their home. When the biological mother passed away, the Isaksons went from fostering to pursuing the path of adoption. On February 7, 2025, the Isakson family expanded from a family of six to a family of 10. The path to adoption did not end the family's desire to keep pursuing foster care. Jackie and Marcus continue to take in emergency foster cases and currently have two foster girls living in their home. The Isaksons demonstrate daily the power of providing a loving and safe family.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program





*Taryn Jacobus*

**Kentucky**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative James Comer***

Taryn Jacobus loves kids and has always wanted a child of her own. She has been an active volunteer for the youth group at her church for over 10 years. She helps with a variety of children's programs throughout the year including being the Chair for Lil' Cherubs where they hold a consignment sale twice a year and give 30% of profits back to children's ministries. When she worked at Hospice, she volunteered at a camp for children who had faced the loss of a loved one teaching them ways to cope with grief. Taryn has always had a passion to help children thrive and feel loved.

Taryn desired to be a parent to a child, so she decided to adopt a child who needed a safe and nurturing family. After facing three failed adoptions, Taryn started taking classes to become a foster parent. It was during this time that she received the news of a baby girl who was to be born within three weeks. She dropped everything and began preparing again for a baby to come into her life. Taryn had prayed hard for this baby and when Piper, her baby girl, was placed in her arms, she knew this was always God's plan.





# Melissa and Dan Jarvis

## Michigan

### ***Recommended by U.S. Representative Tim Walberg***

Pastor Dan Jarvis and his wife, Melissa, parent 10 children, six of whom were adopted. They have fostered more than 40 kids over the years, while also serving needy families through a variety of nonprofits and churches. Today, the Jarvis' share a simple mission: to make room to love one more - by God's grace, and to provide coaching for other families contending with the special mental and relational health needs that often accompany adoptive situations. They reside in Southwest Michigan, and recently celebrated the graduations of their two oldest adopted sons - one who joined the U.S. Army in March, and the other who started college in August.



*Jeremiah Tree Foundation*

**West Virginia**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Carole Miller***

Jeremiah Tree Foundation is based in Cabell County, but serves the entire state of West Virginia, specifically serving families caring for a loved one with a disability or chronic illness. Jeremiah Tree identifies gaps in the current system of care, leveraging their established network of support to resolve issues families routinely face. The group supports families at three targeted areas: at diagnosis in hospital, upon arriving home, and while accessing community. The goal is not to provide another commoditized service, but rather a community driven system of support. Jeremiah Tree Foundation has a presence in every Children's Hospital and Ronald McDonald House in West Virginia, delivering over 600 care packages to children and their caregivers last year alone. They've successfully built an online and printable comprehensive resource guide for the state, organized by where a family is in their journey including resources for kinship and grandfamilies. As funding continues to increase, Jeremiah Tree is offering advocacy and topical trainings, caregiver support evenings, and partnering with other stakeholders to host inclusive community events across the state.



Vershunda Rena Jones

**Mississippi**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith***

Vershunda Jones is a remarkable single mother who has fostered over 10 children, adopting three into her family alongside her biological son. Her unwavering commitment to providing a loving and nurturing home for children in need is truly inspiring. Vershunda has created a stable and supportive environment where her children can thrive, instilling the values of kindness, perseverance, and unconditional love. Her impact goes beyond her family; she serves as an example and inspiration in her community, showing the power of dedication and compassion. Through her example, she demonstrates how one person can transform lives and make a profound difference. Vershunda's exceptional commitment to her children and her community makes her a deserving role model and an inspiration to all.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

2025 Program

36





Whitney Lam Johnson

**Georgia**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Buddy Carter***

Whitney Lam Gilliard entered foster care at the age of 14 and aged out at 21. Her journey from youth in care to nationally recognized advocate has been one of resilience, service, and relentless hope. Determined to rewrite the narrative for teens aging out of foster care, Whitney has dedicated her life to building systems that protect, empower, and uplift young people facing some of life's toughest challenges.

As the Founder and CEO of Gilliard and Company, Georgia's first youth-led, youth-served aging-out program, Whitney has led the organization to provide housing, case management, and life skills to young adults at risk of homelessness. Under her leadership, the organization helped pass critical policies, including Georgia's first Foster Care Awareness and Kinship Caregiver Proclamations in Pooler, GA. A skilled communicator and strategist, Whitney serves on statewide task forces, trains law enforcement on crimes against AAPI and foster youth, and continues to speak across the country on child welfare reform. She is also the Chairwoman of the AAPI Task Force of Savannah and a proud brand ambassador for Chatham Subaru. Whitney's unwavering belief is that young people in foster care are not broken — they are subject matter experts in resilience. Their lived experiences are not deficits, but deep wells of wisdom. She advocates not just for them, but with them — because they deserve to lead the conversation on the systems that shaped them.



*Kim and Ric Jordan*

**Mississippi**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Roger Wicker***

After hearing about the critical need for foster parents along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Kim and Ric Jordan decided to move from Alabama to Mississippi where they both now work as teachers. Since their 2017 move, the Jordans have welcomed nearly 40 children into their home. When opportunity struck again, they moved from their coastal community to the Jackson Metro area to live at Sunnybrook Children's Home. At Sunnybrook, Ric and Kim found the perfect environment to accommodate larger sibling groups, help biological families reunify with their children, advocate for children in care, and better support the foster community. Throughout their eight years as foster parents, they have primarily opened their home to teenagers and sibling groups. They currently live in Ridgeland and have four children – three biological and one adopted. Ric teaches Art and English and Kim teaches the Gifted class and is a dropout prevention GED coordinator. In addition to her day job, Kim has been leading foster parent trainings since 2018, contributing 1,500 training hours to foster parents statewide in 2024 alone.





*Michael A. Khalil*

**Florida**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative John Rutherford***

Judge Michael Kalil of the Fourth Judicial Circuit is recommended for his unwavering commitment to the adoption and welfare of children within the juvenile justice system. In 2020, Judge Kalil was elected to the Circuit Court bench, and in 2021, he assumed the role of administrative judge for juvenile cases. Since assuming this position, Judge Kalil has overseen 722 adoptions and surpassed the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) adoption goal every fiscal year. This remarkable achievement reflects his ability to inspire and mobilize the broader legal community to ensure every child finds a forever home.

Congressman Rutherford wrote, "As a former sheriff with over 41 years of experience in law enforcement, I have come to know and appreciate dedicated public servants, such as Judge Kalil, who have demonstrated a remarkable dedication to transforming the lives of children and families through the legal process." Judge Kalil also hosts holiday mass adoptions on Halloween, Christmas, Spring, and Mother's Day to make adoption a joyful and memorable experience for the families. These innovative events not only celebrate new beginnings but also raise awareness about the importance of adoption and foster care, reflecting Judge Kalil's holistic approach to his judicial responsibilities. Beyond the courtroom, Judge Kalil's contributions to child welfare extend to his leadership in committees and boards dedicated to improving the juvenile justice system and advocating for child-centered practices. His active engagement in professional development, including completing the executive certificate in Florida Girl-Centered Practice with Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and active work towards the Certificate in Trauma and Resilience from Florida State University, further demonstrates his commitment to addressing the complex needs of children.





*Louise and Lee Kadinger*

**Alaska**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski***

Louise and Lee Kadinger have seven children, have fostered 10 Alaska Native children, and adopted three. Lee has been adopted into Wooshkeetaan Clan and was given the Tlingit name Nagootk'i. Louise's Tlingi name is Duksa.aat' Tláa. She is Raven of the L'uknax.ádi clan and grew up in Hoonah, Alaska. Lee moved to Alaska from Wisconsin in 2002. In addition to being a devoted father and grandfather, Lee enjoys teaching his children and many nieces and nephews how to hunt, fish, and preserve and prepare our traditional foods. Lee is also the wrestling coach for the Douglas Dynamites Wrestling Club. He has been the Chief Operating Officer for Sealaska Heritage for 18 years, focusing on preserving and perpetuating Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people. Louise loves spending time with her husband, children, grandchildren, and many nieces and nephews. She will often be found on her boat fishing, hunting, or gathering cockles, berries, crabs, and shrimp. Louise loves to sew and specializes in sewing with seal and sea otter which she learned from her grandmother.



*Emily and Riley Krause*

**South Dakota**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Mike Rounds***

Emily and Riley Krause live on a farm near Brandt, SD where Riley works as a farmer and Emily works as an elementary school teacher. After experiencing two miscarriages and two years of infertility, they longed to hear the sound of children filling their home. That dream led them to become foster parents. Following training classes and home visits, the Krauses opened their home to several children before welcoming their daughter.

On November 4, 2020, Emily received a call asking if they would take in a baby girl born just two days earlier in Huron. They were told she was premature, but soon learned she was very premature and had faced significant challenges before and during birth. Riley and Emily were given the honor of naming her and chose Livia Catherine—with Catherine being Emily's middle name. At the time, they didn't know if they would be able to keep Livia forever, but they wanted her to carry a part of their family with her. Just over a year later, Livia's adoption was finalized, and she officially became a Krause. Now 4 years old, she is thriving and deeply loved. Emily keeps in touch with Livia's birth mother from time to time, and the Krauses cannot imagine life without their daughter. The Krause family has continued their foster care journey and are currently working towards adoption #2.





*J. McLane Layton*

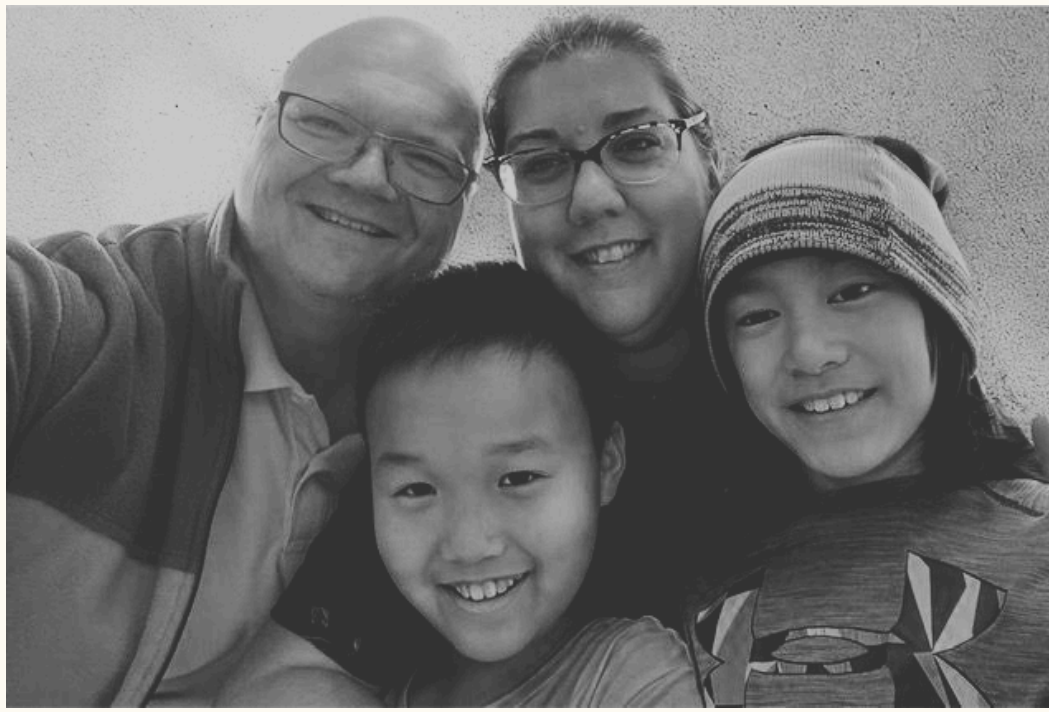
**Virginia**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Mark Warner***

In 1995, McLane Layton and her husband adopted three siblings from Latvia, ages 2, 4, and 6. At the time, she was working as a Legislative Counsel for Senator Don Nickles. During the adoption process, she discovered that even though she and her husband were both U.S. citizens, their foreign-born adopted children would not become automatic U.S. citizens and would have to go through a naturalization process. This did not make rational sense to her since adopted children are to be treated the same as if they were born to their adoptive parents. Had she given birth to her children in Latvia, they would have been considered American citizens from birth and been given an American passport and a Consular Report of Birth. Instead, even though they had a final adoption decree, they had to go through an immigration process in order to bring their children home. As a result of this experience and inequity, she drafted the first iteration of a bill that became known as the Child Citizenship Act of 2000 (CCA). Senator Nickles and Senator Landrieu introduced the bill on August 4, 1999. The CCA amended the Immigration and Nationality Act to confer United States citizenship automatically on foreign-born children adopted by American citizens. The CCA passed the House and Senate unanimously and was signed into law on October 30, 2000, taking effect on February 27, 2001. On that day, it is estimated that more than 75,000 foreign-born adopted children across the nation were given the gift of American citizenship.

Because of various other inequities that McLane encountered through being the parent of adopted children, she founded the organization known as Equality for Adopted Children (EACH). EACH advocates for adoption policies and legislative changes that will ensure that adopted children of American families have the very same rights and opportunities granted to children born into American families. In addition to working on legislation and adoption policy, EACH has helped numerous families navigate the international adoption process when issues have arisen in a foreign country.





*Tamara and Jeremy Lawson*

**Minnesota**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar***

The Lawsons' adoption journey reflects their steadfast commitment to building a loving family. Initially matched with a 5-year-old boy from China, their plans were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. After years of waiting, they began pursuing foster care adoption when they unexpectedly received approval to complete the international adoption. With only two weeks to prepare and travel, the Lawsons quickly adapted, finalizing the adoption of their then 9-year-old son.

Back home in Minnesota, the Lawsons sought ways to help their son grow in independence and accessed a grant through the Children's Home Adoption Support Fund to obtain adaptive equipment. Today, he and his brother (also adopted from China) are thriving—enjoying small-town adventures, camping, and growing up in a home full of love and connection.

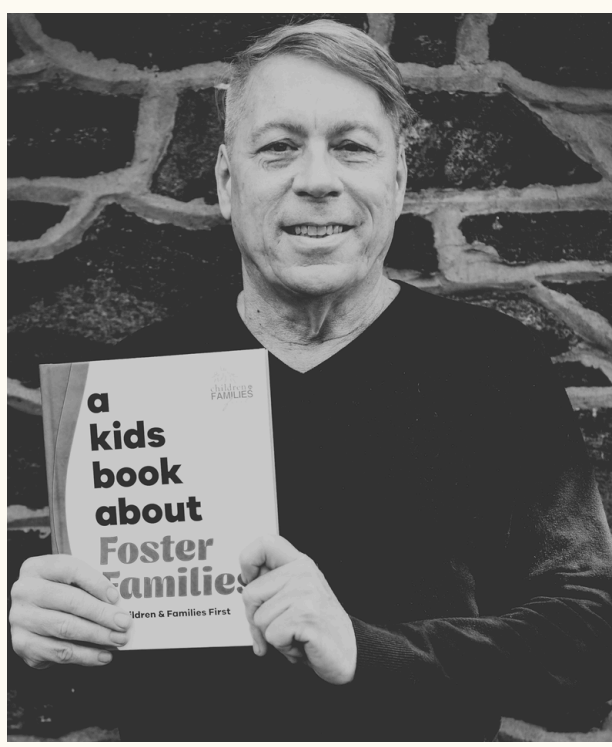


## Misti and John Leathers

**Maine**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Susan Collins***

Misti and John Leathers of Hermon, Maine, have been foster parents for nine years. They are the parents of four adult biological children, four adopted children, and are in the process of adopting a special needs sibling group of four. Their children range in age from 1 to 24 years old. Misti has been a strong advocate for ensuring that the siblings remain together while meeting all their needs. Misti and John are a very active family, providing their children with non-stop community activities and are always present at the foster and adoptive events. The Leathers Family are also very involved in their church and faith life. Misti has actively volunteered with her children at a women's and children's shelter with a focus on preventing these at-risk families from becoming involved in the child welfare system. Misti works as an occupational therapist during the day while her husband works a night job so that they are able to be available to their children. Misti and John also maintain relationships with all their children's biological parents. They are truly "Angels in Adoption" and so deserving of this award.



Mike McHugh

**Delaware**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Sarah McBride***

Mike McHugh is a supervisor in the Foster Care/Adoption Unit at Children & Families First, a Delaware state-wide non-profit, where he has dedicated over 20 years to championing children and families. He facilitates pre-service trainings and network meetings for resource families, preparing them to parent children who have experienced trauma and loss. Mike supervises staff who provide case management and direct services to families, including post-adoption support that helps adoptive parents access resources and prevent disruptions. He is known for his unwavering support, compassion, and deep expertise. Mike also helped create and facilitate a national adoption competency course. His professional work is deeply informed by personal experience—he is a foster and adoptive father of two sons, adopted in 1998 and 2000 after their birth parents' rights were terminated. In 2001, his partner became the first same-sex second adoptive parent in a committed relationship through a Delaware family court decision. Mike later worked to change the law, allowing unmarried couples to adopt children they were fostering, ensuring children could remain with families they were bonded to. Though his sons are now adults, Mike spent years advocating for their needs and celebrating their strengths. He lives the experience of adoption and has supported countless families and professionals with wisdom, empathy, and dedication. While he is often recognized for his professional contributions, he has also been a personal source of guidance and support to adoptive parents for over 30 years. Mike truly deserves this recognition.





# *A New Beginning Adoption Agency*

## **Idaho**

### ***Recommended by U.S. Senator James Risch***

Attributed to its founder and executive director, Stephanie Pearl, whose vision and tireless efforts transformed the lives of countless children and families. Stephanie established A New Beginning with the mission of providing safe and nurturing families for children in need of family permanency. Since A New Beginning's incorporation, thousands of families have been created through their programs. Her leadership and passion for adoption were evident in every aspect of the agency's operations. Under her guidance, A New Beginning developed a comprehensive range of services, including domestic and international adoption, foster care, and post-adoption support. Stephanie's commitment to preparing adoptive families through thorough training and resources ensured that they were equipped to embrace the challenges and joys of adoption, facilitating smoother transitions for children and their new families. A New Beginning is committed to raising awareness about the importance of adoption and the needs of children in foster care. The agency actively engages with the local community through outreach programs, education workshops, and events that highlight the significance of providing stable, loving homes for children. These initiatives not only inform potential adoptive families, but also encourage community involvement, thereby creating a network of support for both children and their families. Additionally, A New Beginning recognizes the importance of post-adoption services. The agency provides counseling, support, groups, and resources to help families navigate the complexities of adoption. Stephanie Pearl established a program called YANA – You Are Not Alone, which helps adoptees and youth from foster care navigate their emotions and build connections with peers. This program is soon to be expanded nationally on a virtual platform. This focus on lifelong support significantly enhances the well-being of adopted children and their families, ensuring prosperous and healthy family dynamics. In light of her recent passing, it is fitting to recognize the legacy of Stephanie Pearl and her dedication to A New Beginning, as well as the profound impact she had on the lives of countless children and families in Idaho and beyond. Stephanie would always say, “A New Beginning is where hope begins!”



*Liz Northcutt*

**New York**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand***

After years of experience in social work and serving as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, Liz recognized a critical gap in services for youth aging out of the foster care system. She observed that while some of these young individuals were fortunate enough to have housing, many still lacked basic necessities. This gap in support led Liz to establish City Living NY, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing essential items and in-depth support to youth transitioning out of foster care. City Living NY goes beyond just providing material support; it also offers mentorship, emotional guidance, and educational resources to help youth navigate their path to independence. Liz's passion for ensuring young people aging out of foster care are not left to fend for themselves has been a driving force behind the organization's success. Her work has been recognized nationally, and in 2017, Liz was honored as a Presidential Leadership Scholar, a prestigious recognition of her impact and dedication to improving the lives of vulnerable youth. Her unwavering commitment to this cause continues to inspire others to support youth aging out of the foster care system and ensure they have the resources to succeed.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

*2025 Program*

47



David Perez

**Florida**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick***

David Perez is the Director of Development for Arc Broward where he is responsible for fundraising, marketing, public relations, social media, and legislative matters, among many other duties. Prior to joining Arc Broward in 2025, David served as the Chief Development & Divisional Officer for Broward Children's Center, Director of Marketing & Community Relations for United Community Options of South Florida (an affiliate of United Cerebral Palsy), and Regional Development Manager for the National Kidney Foundation of Florida. In addition, David has held positions in marketing, promotions and events with Sony Ericsson Open (Now Miami Open), Florida Panthers, Miami Dolphins, and the Orange Bowl Committee. David earned a BBA and MBA in Sports Administration from St. Thomas University. He enjoys spending time with his wife, 5-year-old son, and newborn daughter.





Johnny Peppers

**Tennessee**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Bill Hagerty***

Johnny Peppers and his wife, Kandace, were approved to be foster parents in 2015. Their first placement was a sibling group of five children, ranging from 9 weeks to 5 years old. Initially meant to be an emergency weekend placement, it soon became permanent instead. Johnny and Kandace adopted these five children in 2016. After closing their home, they continued to support local nonprofits, such as Love on Wheels, and advocate for foster parents whenever possible. Love on Wheels provides suitcases and essentials for children entering the foster care system. Recognizing the challenges foster parents face, Johnny sought other ways to support children and families. He decided to return to school in his fifties to pursue a law degree so that he could advocate for children in the foster system as a legal professional.



Ellie Robinson

**Rhode Island**  
***Recommended by U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse***

Ellie Robinson of Rhode Island is an adoptee with an unwavering personal and professional commitment to advocating for adoptees and expanding access to meaningful support. She facilitates Adoptees Connect Providence, a peer-led group for adult adoptees that meets monthly – since 2019 – to gather and share their experiences regarding their individual journeys as adoptees.

Ellie directs the Children’s Behavioral Health System of Care grant in her role at the RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services, and has previously managed school partnerships for an education nonprofit and provided direct behavioral healthcare to children and youth. Ellie received her undergraduate degree from the University of Rhode Island, and MPA from Northeastern University.

In March 2024, Ellie shared part of her story and lived experience at Senator Whitehouse and Senator Reed’s press event, highlighting the funding they secured for Adoption RI’s Adoption and Foster Care Certificate Program. She also recently supported the expansion of a state website, kids.ri.gov, ensuring it now includes resources for parents and caregivers of children with behavioral health challenges. In 2024, Ellie joined forces with a fellow adoptee, Zoe Hansen-DiBello, Founder/CEO, as the Co-Founder/COO of Adoptee Identity. Together, they lead Adoptee Identity, partnering with higher education institutions and healthcare organizations to improve well-being for the adoptee community.



*Mitch Rosenwald*

**Florida**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Jared Moskowitz***

Dr. Mitch Rosenwald was adopted at a young age and had a reunion with his birth family in his twenties. As an adult, he has been an advocate for children's welfare. He worked as a child protective services investigator in Maryland and volunteered as a Guardian ad Litem in Florida. Dr. Rosenwald has published both a book and numerous journal articles on foster care. Currently, Dr. Rosenwald is Professor of Social Work at Barry University and was elected as a Representative to the Florida House of Representatives in 2024.





*Tamara and Joey Rowell*

**Alabama**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Robert Aderholt***

Tamara and Joey Rowell are proud foster and adoptive parents to five children. Their family grew first through foster care, when they welcomed a sibling group of three and later a child whose birth sister had also been in their home. They also adopted through a Safe Haven baby box placement via a private adoption. The Rowells are grateful for the many paths that led their children to them and are committed to encouraging other families who are exploring foster care and adoption.



## Amy and William Rush

### Tennessee

#### ***Recommended by U.S. Representative Diana Harshbarger***

Missy and Joey Rush have always helped those in need. The couple began as a blended family, bringing together Amy's two children and Joey's two children and niece, whom he had adopted when she was 10 months old. As a law enforcement officer, Joey always sought to help his community. In 2013, when he heard that a 15-year-old girl was being kicked out of her house, the couple immediately agreed that they needed to give her a home. It was this event that initiated their journey to provide a loving, welcoming home to children in the foster system.

During home study, Missy and Joey were asked if they had ever considered fostering. At first, they said no, but after careful consideration and prayer, they revised their decision and decided to help foster families in need of respite. For six months, Missy and Joey provided a home to more than fifty children, including three little girls they fostered for nine months. The little girls were able to return to their biological father, but the Rushes and the family have remained close ever since. When Missy and Joey heard that the family of their first foster child needed help with four children, they immediately took them in and soon adopted all four of them. They then fostered a sibling group of five before they were able to return to their family. Like the three little girls, the Rushes and their family remain close. After seeing how difficult it was for their children to meet and say goodbye to their foster siblings, they decided to stop foster care for the time being. Missy and Joey will always keep a special place in their heart for being foster parents and thank the Lord every day for their children. They now have ten children (four biological and six adopted) and seven beautiful grandchildren.





Christopher Scott

## Connecticut

### ***Recommended by U.S. Representative John Larson***

After entering foster care at age eight, Christopher became all too familiar with the hardships that youth in the child welfare system face. He wanted to lessen these hardships for other foster and adopted youth. He first recognized the power of education as the “great equalizer” as a recently aged-out youth at Tunxis Community College. Today, as a recent Harvard graduate, he remembers this lesson as clearly as ever. Christopher founded SUN Scholars Inc. to remove some of the barriers to entry that former foster and adopted youth face during post-secondary education. SUN Scholars Inc. began as a small program operating out of a single university and, since receiving funding from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, has grown to serve students around the entire state. Christopher has raised \$1.2 million to fund SUN Scholars Inc.’s mission, grown the organization's staff to over 7 professionals who all have lived experience in foster care. He has helped hundreds of young adults in the foster care system through direct service. He goes beyond academic support to help his students tackle issues, such as housing and food insecurity, and his organization has a proven track record of increased enrollment and retention. Christopher and his organization are committed to improving educational equity and college graduation rates by using a student-first mentality. Through all of his work and advocacy, Christopher is breaking down the hardships faced by those going through the child welfare system. Christopher is also a 2019 alumnus of the Foster Youth Intern Program, was recognized as one of Connecticut Magazine's "40 under 40" in 2022, and holds a Governor's appointment to the Department of Children and Families State Advisory Council. Christopher now resides in Manchester with his wife, foster daughter, and pets Puchakaya (rabbit) and Fig Newton (cat).





*Samantha and Dalton Scott*

**Kansas**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Ron Estes***

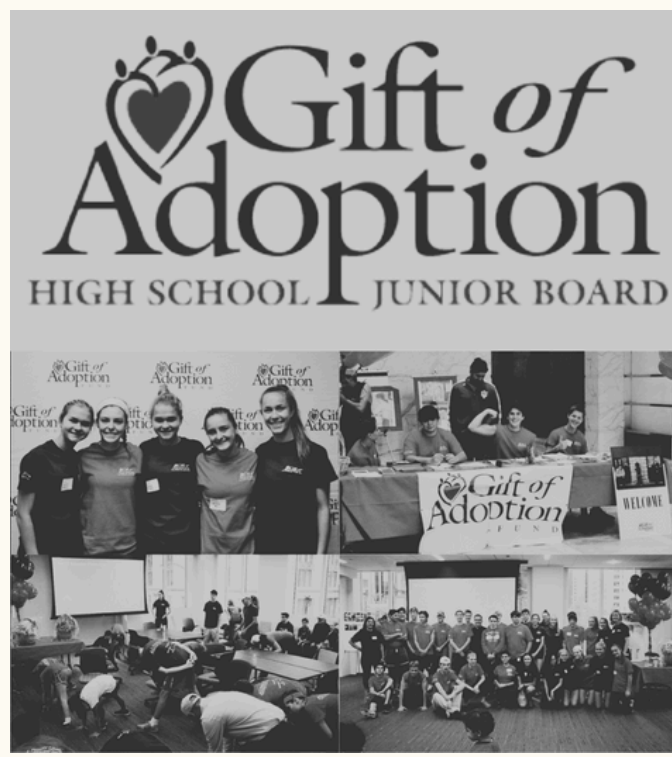
Samantha and Dalton Scott are passionate advocates for both foster care and adoption. They believe that every child should have the right to live and thrive in a safe and nurturing family environment. Over the last seven years, they have been involved with both adoption and foster care, adopting five children and fostering numerous more. They are currently caring for one foster child in addition to their five adopted children, all under the age of 6. Whether a child is placed with them temporarily or long-term, they provide the same love and attention, hoping each child who enters their home will have the opportunity to flourish. Just entering their 30s, they have made caring for vulnerable children a central priority of their marriage. Samantha stays home full-time to care for their kids, and Dalton provides for their family by working as a firefighter. Dalton and Samantha never hesitate to help a child in need, giving from a place of sincere conviction and selflessness.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

*2025 Program*

55



*Jeannie Schafer*

**Illinois**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth***

Jeannie Schafer supports adoptive families, advocates for adoption and permanency of vulnerable children, mentors, and creates fundraising opportunities for high school students. Jeannie and her husband, Brian, raised their family in Winnetka, Illinois. Their family's connection to adoption began when they welcomed their youngest child through adoption. That experience sparked Jeannie's lifelong commitment to helping children find loving homes.

In 2014, inspired by her sons' desire to raise awareness and support adoptive families, Jeannie founded the Illinois High School Jr. Board for Gift of Adoption. Her vision supported GOA's mission through fundraising and educating young leaders on nonprofit board governance and the adoption process. Their first major fundraiser involved sponsoring "Welcome Home Baskets" for newly adopted children joining their forever family. The event raised funds supporting two adoptions through GOA grants its first year. Since then, 400 baskets have been made, hundreds of students have participated in GOA and grants have united more than 35 children with their adoptive families. Jeannie continues to fundraise, promoting awareness of adoption through creative and unique events, such as the annual Chicago (GOA) Stair-Climb, where hundreds have ascended a vertical mile to symbolize the final stretch of an adoption journey. Her tireless mentorship through the years leaves an indelible mark on hundreds of children, students and families alike. Jeannie Schafer of Winnetka, Illinois, is a volunteer, mentor, leader, and mother.



*Tim Sexton*

**Texas**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Julie Johnson***

Tim Sexton was appointed to the Dallas County Child Welfare Board and became Chair of the Board serving for six years. Tim also volunteered as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for six years with Dallas CASA and was on staff as a Supervisor of Advocates for seven years. Currently, Tim is Treasurer of Friends Investing in Foster Kids, a 501(c)(3), nonprofit corporation focused on supporting the needs of children assigned to the Dallas County Child Protection and Permanency Court, Judge Delia Gonzales presiding. Since 2002, Tim has worked tirelessly to help children in foster care, CASA Advocates, foster families, and kinship caregivers. Tim has been able to address issues within the system to positively impact Dallas County children and families. He is a volunteer voice for the voiceless and acts on behalf of those who could not protect themselves.





# Mary and Bill Singleton

## Kentucky

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell***

Mary and Bill Singleton moved to Stearns, Kentucky in 1981 with plans of starting their family. Fortunately, their former minister was working to establish an adoption agency through their church. The Singletons were overjoyed to adopt Stewart several months later, but quickly learned through formal diagnosis that he, at just eleven days old, had spinal meningitis. Mary and Bill spent three weeks at a children's hospital helping to monitor and care for their newborn. For years afterward, Mary drove countless hours to help Stewart receive physical and occupational therapy. Despite the challenges, the Singletons gave their new family a loving and nurturing home. When Stewart was six years old, the Singletons welcomed Elizabeth, their second adopted child. Elizabeth exhibited a remarkable aptitude for music from a young age. Through her dedication and the efforts of the Singletons, she has earned numerous achievements playing the violin, and her academic record as a student secured placement in advanced programs for mathematics and science education at the Gatton Academy at Western Kentucky University.



*Ellen and Tony Smith*

**New Hampshire**

***Recommended by U.S. Senators Maggie Hassan and Jeanne Shaheen***

Ellen and Tony Smith have served as a licensed foster home since 2023 and have recently adopted a child with complex medical needs. Throughout the adoption process, the family maintained communication with the child's biological father so that he could see how his daughter was doing. The Smiths and their older daughter, Katelyn, worked hand in hand with the birth father through the permanency process, and although reunification was not able to occur, the birth father and the Smiths were able to develop a positive relationship to support the needs of the child. While not originally planning on adopting, being presented with the opportunity was a blessing and fulfilled a lifelong dream of Ellen's, having been adopted herself. Mr. and Mrs. Smith serve as an example of how caregivers and birth families can build trust and connection throughout a case to ensure positive outcomes for children in care.



*Lisa Stockdale*

## **Arkansas**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator John Boozman***

Lisa was recently selected as the 2024 Arkansas Foster Parent of the Year. She is a nurse, army veteran, and foster parent of 10 years, and has opened her home to approximately 38 foster children. While she has cared for children of all ages, Lisa is especially appreciated for her ability and willingness to foster medically fragile children. Deeply committed to helping both the children in her care as well as their biological families, Lisa approaches fostering with compassion and an unwavering focus on what is best for each child and their original families. Her desire to help children in need shows no limit, and Lisa is more than happy to do all of it knowing she's a small part of a bigger plan. Lisa is a proud single mother to her two sons, Ethan and Isaac.

CONGRESSIONAL COALITION ON ADOPTION INSTITUTE'S

ANGELS IN ADOPTION®

*2025 Program*

60





*Kimberly and Donald Swanson*

**Pennsylvania**  
***Recommended by U.S. Representative Mike Kelly***

Kimberly and Donald Swanson's journey in foster care began in the early 2000s, marking the start of a profound legacy of love, compassion, and unwavering service. Since then, they have opened their hearts and home to more than 100 children and infants, providing critical care in both foster and respite roles. In partnership with Adoption by Choice and the Office of Children and Youth (OCY) in Erie, Pennsylvania, they have been a vital resource for children in crisis — offering safety, stability, and nurturing support during some of the most challenging moments in young lives. In addition to raising three biological children, the Swansons have adopted five children through these agencies, extending permanent homes and unconditional love. Among their adopted children are three biological siblings, whose bond was preserved thanks to Donald and Kimberly's courageous decision to keep them together. This extraordinary act reflects their deep understanding of the importance of family unity and their commitment to meeting the holistic needs of every child entrusted to their care.

The Swansons' story is one of unrelenting dedication and transformative impact. The countless lives touched by their kindness—many of whom arrived during moments of emergency and left with a renewed sense of safety and love—speak volumes about their compassion. They have answered every call with grace and empathy, setting a standard of excellence in the foster care and adoption community. Donald and Kimberly Swanson's unwavering advocacy for vulnerable children and their selfless devotion to providing loving, stable homes make them truly deserving of national recognition. Their legacy is one of hope, healing, and inspiration.



*Nicole Thalken*

**Nebraska**

***Recommended by U.S. Senator Deb Fischer***

Omaha native Nicole Thalken had always been drawn to the idea of adopting a child, but she never could have imagined how perfectly her daughter Rosa, now 5 years old, would fulfill that dream. When Nicole's sister, a preschool teacher, was preparing to foster a young boy in her class and his older brother, she learned that the siblings also had a baby sister on the way. Determined to keep the children connected, Nicole quickly completed the required foster care training and welcomed newborn Rosa home from the hospital as her foster parent.

Nicole's foster care caseworker described her as one of the best foster parents they had ever worked with, noting how she went above and beyond to meet Rosa's needs and love her as her own. When Rosa was diagnosed with a heart condition at her first-year check-up that would require surgery, Nicole and Rosa fearlessly faced the situation together. After three heart surgeries—and with the understanding that lifelong monitoring and treatment may be necessary—Nicole never wavered in her devotion to Rosa. Today, Nicole delights in watching Rosa sing, dance, and play.

Nicole has worked diligently to maintain contact with Rosa's three brothers and raise her in a stable, loving environment. Rosa has always called Nicole "mom," and their forever family became official on September 17, 2024, when her adoption was finalized. When asked about their life, Nicole laughed and replied, "My life is pretty boring, except for Rosa." She describes her daughter as the kindest and most polite, little girl anyone could meet. In Nicole's words, "she's incredible."





# Katrina and Rudy Villarreal

**Texas**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative John Carter***

Katrina and Rudy Villarreal are admired and deeply respected for their extraordinary dedication and tireless advocacy in the field of child adoption and welfare. Their commitment has transformed the lives of countless children and has left a lasting impact on the broader community. Both personally and professionally, Rudy and Katrina embody a rare combination of compassion, vision, and action. They have opened their hearts and home through adoption, expanding their all-boy household of three sons with a beautiful baby girl, Sofia, when she was one-year-old. Their family story is a testament to the love and blessings of adoption.

For over 22 years, Rudy and Katrina have served as champions for vulnerable children, leading numerous mission trips to Honduras with Friends of Los Ninos. This volunteer-driven nonprofit organization provides critical resources, such as education, housing, spiritual guidance, medical treatment, and nutritional support for children in need. Their impact extends well beyond their own family. Domestically and internationally, they have worked tirelessly to support families and advocate for the dignity, stability, and opportunities that every child deserves. Deacon Rudy leads the family faith formation and evangelization program at St. John Vianney Catholic Church, while Katrina leads global operations for LHH, supporting individuals in times of career transition. Together, they approach every endeavor with unity and purpose. Rudy and Katrina Villarreal exemplify what it means to lead with selfless integrity and live one's values. As caregivers, community leaders, and passionate advocates, they have built a legacy that will continue to uplift and inspire future generations.





## Stephanie and Kenneth White

### California

#### ***Recommended by U.S. Representative Doug LaMalfa***

Stephanie and Ken White became foster parents after moving to Southern California, where Stephanie chose to not to seek employment in order to provide full-time care as a foster parent. They welcomed two young girls whose parents were unable to care for them due to substance abuse and legal detention. From the beginning, the Whites encouraged and facilitated contact with the girls' biological parents and extended family with the hopes of reunification. After 14 months in the White's care, the girls were placed with their paternal grandmother, aunt, and cousins.

During this time, the Whites provided respite care and fostered another child, while continuing to support the girls and their family. After 18 challenging months, the birth family ultimately requested that the girls be returned to and adopted by the Whites. By then, the Whites had moved back to Redding, CA, where their two older children had already graduated from high school. Thrilled to reunite, they officially welcomed the girls into their family through adoption in May 2024.

Though the journey was full of twists and turns, the Whites have ensured that the girls maintain connections with their biological family while providing them with a loving, stable home. Stephanie and Ken have given up dual incomes and retirement benefits to dedicate themselves fully to their daughters. Humble and selfless, they seek no recognition—but stand as a model for all parents, especially foster parents.



*Kailah & Taylor White*

**Nebraska**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Don Bacon***

Student Eliza White started a business selling hand-sewn, homemade pillows, donating one to Boys Town's Foster Family Services for every pillow sold. Each pillow contains a message of encouragement and is given to children as they are placed in a foster home. Eliza's volunteer efforts sparked a family interest in foster care. In 2023, Eliza's parents, Taylor and Kailah, completed training and certification to become licensed foster parents. The Whites had always wanted to make a difference in the lives of children, and that dream became reality when they adopted River in April 2024, surrounded by a packed courtroom of supporters. Just a few months later, they welcomed four-year-old Mystic into their forever family as well. In addition to raising three biological daughters and maintaining busy careers, the Whites continue to open their home to foster children. They remain committed to prioritizing permanent connections, actively involving biological siblings and parents whenever possible.



*Beth Wilbur*

**California**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Zoe Lofgren***

Beth has served as the Executive Director of CASA of Monterey County, an organization that trains and supports community volunteers who advocate for abused and neglected children placed in foster care, upholding the children's rights while pursuing a safe and permanent home. Over the last year, Beth and her team have supported 183 volunteers, recruited and trained 33 new volunteers, and served 148 children and youth.





## Christie and Nathan Winters

### Wyoming

***Recommended by U.S. Representative Harriet Hageman***

Christie and Nathan Winters adopted their three children when they were just toddlers. At the time, Nathan was a state legislator and pastor, but he now leads the Wyoming Family Alliance. Operating under a 501(c)(3) designation, Wyoming Family Alliance Foundation works throughout Wyoming to build stronger family policy alliances, train pro-family statesmen, and keep Wyomingites informed about issues that affect their family.



*Emily and Bill Wireman*

**South Carolina**  
***Recommended by U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham***

Emily and Bill Wireman have spent over 15 years selflessly opening their home and hearts to some of South Carolina's most vulnerable children. As longtime foster parents, the Wiremans have welcomed more than 70 children into their family. Bill, a youth pastor, and Emily, a middle school teacher, are the proud parents of five biological children, three adopted children, and five current foster children. Their journey has been marked by both extraordinary joy and immense challenge, including Bill's stage 4 kidney failure and subsequent successful transplant. The Wiremans began their work in a boys' group home and have since impacted generations of children, many of whom credit their stability and success to the love and guidance they received in the Wireman household. Resilient, compassionate, and devoted, the Wiremans embody the very best of South Carolina. Their commitment to turning pain into purpose has uplifted countless children, making both their state and our nation stronger.





# Jacqueline and Rodd Wohlfeil

## Montana

### ***Recommended by U.S. Senator Steve Daines***

Since receiving their foster care license in 1998, Rodd and Jacque Wohlfeil have worked tirelessly to show God's love to his most vulnerable children. The day they were approved to be foster parents, the Wohlfeils received a call about a three-month-old baby boy named Donte. From the moment they met him, they knew he was meant to be a permanent member of their family, and little brother to their three biological children. After two and a half years of navigating the foster care system, Donte was officially adopted in December 2000. The Wohlfeils' adoption journey didn't stop there. In 2009, after attending a presentation on international adoption at Harvest Church, they felt led to expand their family – this time through international adoption. On Valentine's Day in 2010, they welcomed home three young boys from Ethiopia: Isaiah, Jason, and David. The transition presented challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and uncertainty regarding the children's ages. After initially determining Isaiah to be a fifth grader, Jason a fourth grader, and David a five-year-old, they would later discover that Isaiah and Jason were actually twins, making their story all the more remarkable.

Over the years, the Wohlfeil home has become a safe haven for children of all ages. In 2002, Taka, a Japanese exchange student, moved in with the family. In 2007, Audra, a classmate of Rodd and Jacque's daughter whose mother had passed away, moved in so she could complete her high school education. Maddie joined the household in 2013 when her living situation changed. In 2019, Emily, a high school student living alone while her father was on the road, moved in until her dad returned. Rodd and Jacque Wohlfeil's unwavering commitment to children of all ages and backgrounds has impacted countless lives and has even come full circle as they've inspired the next generation. In fact, Rodd and Jacque's daughter, Kaci, and her husband, Jeremy, have since gone on to adopt two little girls of their own – a powerful testament to the rich blessings adoption brings.





*Maggie and Nick Zehring*

**Arizona**

***Recommended by U.S. Representative David Schweikert***

Maggie and Nick Zehring became licensed foster parents in 2016. Over the next seven years, they fostered four children in long-term placements and supported countless other families through respite care and hands-on assistance. Together, they have shared hundreds of hours of training with specific expertise in trust-based relational intervention (TBRI), de-escalation, in-utero substance exposure, and PTSD and ADHD behavior management. The Zehrings embraced not only the children in their care but also their biological families, consistently advocating for trauma-informed services and offering unwavering support. They went above and beyond the typical role of foster parents — becoming a place of support and connection for the families they served, hosting holidays and parties after reunification, and supporting the family as they weathered new storms.

In 2019, Maggie lobbied at the Arizona State Capitol on behalf of children in foster care, advocating for more post-permanency support. In 2021, she joined the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) as a family preservation case manager. Shortly after joining DCS, the Zehrings received a call to care for a sibling set, eventually adopting their son from foster care after he had spent more than half of his life in their home. In 2022, Maggie returned to DCS to help offices manage backlogged cases, while occasionally substitute teaching at her four boys' elementary school. She currently leads a quarterly special needs support group, volunteers at a local shelter, and is entering her 2L year at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, where she is pursuing a J.D. and Certificate in Child Welfare.



*Karen Zilberstein*

**Massachusetts**  
***Recommended by U.S. Representative James McGovern***

Karen Zilberstein is a psychotherapist who focuses on supporting children and families impacted by foster care and adoption. In 2013, Karen founded the Western Massachusetts chapter of A Home Within, a national organization providing pro bono therapy to foster youth. As its clinical director, she has brought high-quality, long-term mental health services to a rural region underserved in child welfare. Under her leadership, the chapter has recruited, trained, and supported dozens of private practice therapists who offer free, weekly therapy to foster children and alumni of the child welfare system.

Karen's work is enriched by her research on the clinical and systemic challenges in child welfare. Collaborating with academic partners and practitioners, she has published more than 30 academic papers, two books, and contributed to various interviews and public forums. Her 2019 book, *Parents Under Pressure: Struggling to Raise Children in an Unequal America*, earned two Next Generation Indie Book Awards. Her next book, focused on working with children and families in the child welfare system, will be published by Guilford Press in 2026.

A recognized child welfare expert, Karen has served on national committees for APSAC, NASW, and ISTSS and chairs a task force that is developing guidelines for visitation in child welfare. Through her multifaceted roles, Karen inspires change by blending clinical practice, research, and advocacy to address systemic inequities and improve outcomes.