

ANGELS IN ADOPTION[®]

28TH 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 decisions 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, couples, 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.

2026 ANGELS IN ADOPTION[®] HONOREES

Ad Astra Advocacy Center	Suzanne Jones
Heather and Brian Ambrose	Maribeth and Jake Joraanstad
Karen Annis	Crystal and Justin Kasmiskie
Harold O. Atencio	Erin Keller
Tatiana Ayala	Alice and Erick Langseth
Assemblymember Steve Bennett	Jennifer Lisson
Emily and Josh Benton	Mary and Robert W. Long
Shannon Bingham	Elizabeth Fortin-Lussier
Jamie and Gerald Bleakley	Tammy and Damon Magee
Katherine L. Boise	Robin E. and Louis J. Marino, Jr.
Boys Town New England	Vickie and Kenneth Mars
Shanna and Joshua Brady	Hon. Deborah L. McNabb
Claudia and Robert Brown, Jr.	Jennifer McNary
Broomfield FISH Food Bank and Family Resource Center	Mission West Virginia, Inc.
Amanda and Rodney Burton	Ashley Mitchell
Butler-Lawrence Co. Isaiah 117 House	Laila-Rose Moorehead
Jaliyah Carlisle	Jolene M. Mullins
Children & Families First Delaware, Inc.	My G.E.A.R. Outreach
Teresa A. Cirelli	Anne and Don Nelson
Mindy and Christopher Deets	Alexia Newman
Kristen DeForge	New Mercies Ministries
Luis De La Cruz	Sara and Nicholas Pendleton
Thomas Dent	Heidi Peppers and Emily Story
Ashley El	Charlene Platter
Melissa and John Falendysz	Raise the Future
Family Programs Hawaii	Ronnette and Bryan Rock
Family Support Services	Alexia Rodrigues
Rhonda Fishbein	The Sacred Portion Children’s Outreach
Jessica and Donovan Flaherty	Wendy Spoerl
Fostering Hope, Inc.	Kendyl and Will Standridge
Gayle and Robert Franck	StepStone Family & Youth Services
Diana Lynn Gelfand	Nicole M. Stewart
Sarah Gerstenzang	Jenna and Robert Stoner
Coleen Globke Brasch	Mary Suddath BSN RN
Heart Gallery East Texas	Tracy Swain
Hearts With A Mission	Kalei and Miller Thompson
Steven Hernández, Esq.	Treehouse
Courtney and Jeff Hessig	Taylor Tugwell
Terri Hoover Odom	Washoe CASA Foundation
Hope Ranch of Missouri	Tiffany Wright
Traci Jamieson	YCS Specialized Treatment Homes
Steven Jones	

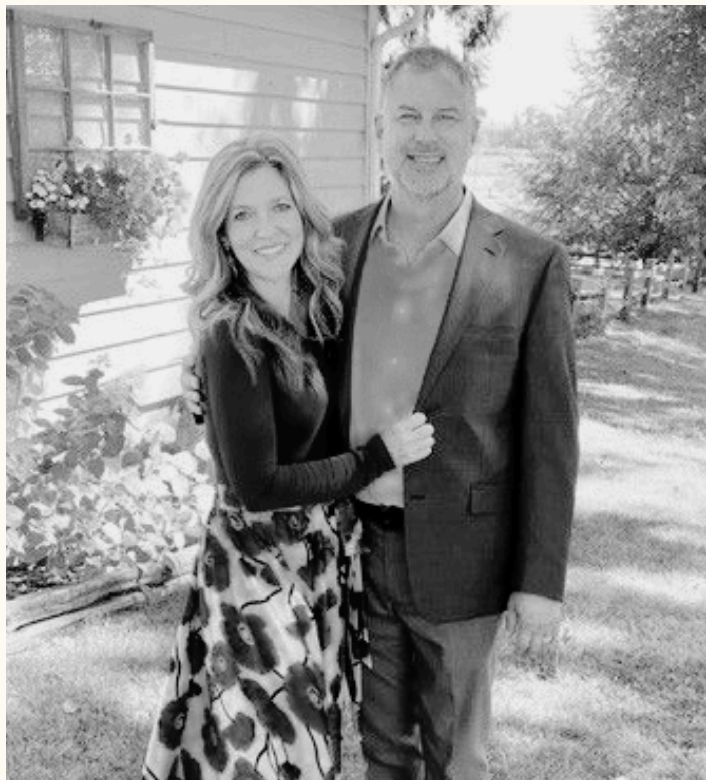


Ad Astra Advocacy Center

Kansas

Recommended by U.S. Representative Sharice Davids

Ad Astra Advocacy Center is a team of committed professionals united by one mission: to foster healing and restore hope by providing a safe, welcoming space where survivors of trauma can share their stories and receive compassionate, coordinated care through education, advocacy, forensic, medical, and mental health services. The Center provides a safe, child-friendly space where healing begins. Through collaboration with law enforcement, Department of Children and Families (DCF), medical and mental health professionals, and victim advocates, the Center ensures that every child receives the care and support they deserve — all under one roof.



Heather and Brian Ambrose

California

Recommended by U.S. Representative Ken Calvert

Heather and Brian Ambrose of Murrieta, CA have dedicated their lives to ensuring that every child and family has the opportunity to experience the hope, stability, and belonging that come from a loving home. Their adoption journey began when they welcomed their son into their family of five. A few years later, they were given the extraordinary opportunity to adopt his biological sister, preserving a sibling bond that might otherwise have been lost. That experience profoundly shaped their conviction that every child deserves the security of a permanent family and the chance to grow up knowing they truly belong.

Heather and Brian's commitment to serving vulnerable families extends far beyond their own home. Brian serves in municipal government where he leads innovative homeless services initiatives that help individuals and families move from crisis to permanent housing, restoring dignity and creating pathways to long-term stability. Inspired by that mission, Heather founded Belonging, a nonprofit dedicated to furnishing homes and providing essential resources for people transitioning out of homelessness. She also volunteers with CarePortal, mobilizing churches and community members to meet the practical needs of foster families and families working toward reunification. Together, Heather and Brian are passionate advocates for adoption, family preservation, and community transformation, believing that lasting change begins when people are welcomed into places where they are supported and given the opportunity to thrive.



Karen Annis

Connecticut

Recommended by U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro

Karen Annis is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in childhood trauma and adoption. She has 20+ years of experience in the field of child welfare and social work with nonprofit and state agencies in the state of Connecticut, serving adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents in all aspects of the adoption process. Karen specializes in adoption support, complex childhood trauma, loss and attachment, program development, advocacy, and management. As an Advanced Clinical Social Worker for the State of CT Department of Children and Families, Karen acts as a clinical consultant, partners with community members, and presents clinical information and recommendations to interdisciplinary teams. As a former social worker for the UConn Health Adoption Assistance Program, Karen interviewed adoptive and guardianship families, adoptees, or groups to assess situations, limitations, and issues, and implemented services to address needs. Karen is known for her support of clients with empathy and compassion during difficult times. As an adoption competent mental health provider, Karen developed training curricula for parents, schools, and child welfare professionals on a variety of topics including life books, the impact of trauma, talking to youth about adoption, and trans-racial adoption competency, as well as a group treatment model for adolescent adoptees. Karen has been a trainer and case consultant for Training for Adoption Competency (TAC), a post-master's certificate program.



Harold D. Atencio

New Mexico

Recommended by U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich

Harold “Hal” Atencio is a fellow and former trustee of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys. He served as president of the New Mexico Adoption and Foster Care Alliance and chaired its legislative committee, and has volunteered on committees to revise New Mexico regulations for the Children, Youth, and Families Department. Through his volunteer service and law practice, Hal has helped develop New Mexico law in the areas of adoption and assisted reproduction, and has taught continuing legal education courses to attorneys practicing in those fields. Over a 38-year legal career, Mr. Atencio has devoted himself to helping families find children and helping children find forever families.



Tatiana Ayala

California

Recommended by U.S. Representative Zoe Lofgren

From CASA Advocate to Supervisor and now Mental Health Liaison, Tatiana Ayala's journey with CASA of Monterey County is a testament to what "showing up" really means. She has been with CASA of Monterey County since 2020. Since then, Tatiana has been a steady force for youth, balancing her MSW at CSUMB with the life-changing work of advocacy. She has been serving as an advocate and has worked her way to supervisor with empathy and compassion for the youth she serves. She has been recognized by CASA internally for her dedication to her service to others.



Assemblymember Steve Bennett

California

Recommended by U.S. Representative Julia Brownley

Assemblymember Steve Bennett was elected to the California State Assembly in November 2020 and represents the 38th district that includes Western Ventura County. A former Ventura County Supervisor, Bennett first served his community as a high school economics and American history teacher for over 20 years. Known for his leadership in the Save Open Space & Agricultural Resources (SOAR) initiative, Bennett is a staunch advocate for the protection and accessibility of pristine open space, meeting the needs of society's most vulnerable people, and closing the extreme wealth and income gap.

As an Assemblymember, Bennett is driven by a passion for good government. He is a legislative leader in the areas of preventing property losses during wildfires, sustainable groundwater pumping, effective climate change policies and decreasing the influence of big money in politics. Bennett currently serves as Chair of Budget Subcommittee 4: Climate Crisis, Resources, Energy, and Transportation, and the Chair of the Select Committee on Building a Zero-Carbon Hydrogen Economy. Born in Indianapolis, IN, he graduated from Brown and Butler Universities with respective bachelor's and master's degrees in economics and education.



Emily and Josh Benton

Kentucky

Recommended by U.S. Representative James Comer

The Bentons are a family of seven, including two sons adopted internationally from Ethiopia and Haiti. In addition to parenting through adoption, they have fostered multiple children and continue to provide respite care for families in need of short-term foster support, including a young child who has been in their home since 2025. In addition, Josh works for Send Relief, a global humanitarian and community ministry of the Southern Baptists Convention that offers help and hope to the most vulnerable and those experiencing crisis. In this role, Josh leads ministry centers around the country, including one in Georgia whose focus is on foster and adoptive services and many others dedicated to serving at-risk families. This family has truly made a remarkable contribution to the world to help uplift vulnerable children.



Shannon Bingham

Nebraska

Recommended by U.S. Representative Don Bacon

Shannon Bingham is an entrepreneur, speaker, published author of *Your Ultimate Impact* and co-owner of Seven Salon + Boutique in Omaha, NE. She was crowned the 2025 Ultimate International Elite Mrs., where her platform focus was “Adoption Is An Option.” While she has been recognized through leadership and service, her most meaningful work is her lifelong advocacy for adoption. In 2007, Shannon welcomed her son through adoption—an experience that became the foundation of her personal mission. Even after later giving birth to two children, adoptive motherhood remained a defining part of her story. She came to understand that adoption is not a single moment but a lifelong journey of learning, growth, and connection. That understanding led Shannon to partner with Nebraska Children’s Home Society, where she has become a passionate state, national, and international advocate for the entire adoption triad: birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. Her advocacy is rooted in authenticity. She openly shares both the joys and challenges of adoption, entrepreneurship, and motherhood, believing that vulnerability creates connection and hope. Through speaking, writing, mentoring, and community service, Shannon encourages others to embrace every part of their journey with courage and compassion. She believes motherhood is not defined by how a child enters a family, but by a heart that continues to grow, love, and advocate for others.



Jamie and Gerald Bleakley

Alaska

Recommended by U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski

In March of 2015, Jamie and Jay were contacted regarding becoming foster parents for a 16-year-old girl named Madison who was living at the Covenant House after being removed from seven placements in less than three months. Two days after moving in, Madison's cousin gave birth to a little boy. In an effort to keep the family together, Jamie and Jay accepted placement of the infant, officially starting their foster care journey. In 2018, a set of twins were placed with the Bleakley's, and at four months, they both contracted respiratory syncytial virus. Tiny, the twin girl, never recovered and the Bleakley's became the only connection between her and her twin brother, Marcus. This ultimately swayed the Bleakley's decision to adopt their now eight-year-old son, Marcus, and begin their adoption journey. Over the past 11 years, Jamie and Jay have had 31 children placed in their home for timeframes of 24 hours up to forever. They have adopted three children and are on the path to adopting a sibling set of two girls. All of their children have been placed with them straight from the NICU. "Our adopted children are from Anvik, Perryville, Hooper Bay, and St. Michael. We have been honored to have the support of their families and/or tribes and do our best to educate ourselves and the children about the culture and history of their region so that they will be future leaders in Alaska and proud of where they come from."



Katherine L. Boise

Vermont

Recommended by U.S. Senator Peter Welch

Katherine Boise brings more than 13 years of experience in post-permanency services, grounded in a deep commitment to the families she serves. Her expertise in permanency, early trauma, and clinical best practices is extensive, but what truly distinguishes her is the way she applies that knowledge with compassion, humility, and purpose in every interaction. She is highly skilled in collaboration and coordination, working closely with staff at the Addison County Community Mental Health Agency to ensure families receive integrated and thoughtful care. Recently, she has also developed a promising partnership with the Middlebury Department for Children and Families to create a community event supporting adoptive and guardianship families, strengthening connection and belonging across the region. Over the past year, Katherine has expanded her focus to include older youth, supporting their transition to adulthood while strengthening caregiver–youth relationships. Her work in this area is both impactful and instructive, serving as a model for providers across Vermont. Katherine approaches her work with transparency, respect, and a strengths-based philosophy that helps her build trust even with families who have had difficult experiences with systems in the past. She has successfully managed complex, high-acuity cases, responding to crises with calm, sound clinical judgment and a strong ethical foundation. She reflects deeply on her practice and consistently prioritizes the well-being of both youth and caregivers.

A defining strength of Katherine’s work is her ability to connect. Through curiosity, empathy, and empowerment, she helps families shift perspectives and see new possibilities. She meets people where they’re at, adapts her approach to individual needs, and leads with acceptance and understanding. Families and community partners alike consistently note the trust she builds and the meaningful progress that results from her support. Katherine is also a strong and ethical advocate who does not hesitate to address systemic barriers. When challenges arise, she steps forward to push for solutions in a professional and constructive way that leads to meaningful change. Katherine Boise exemplifies service rooted in heart, integrity, and unwavering dedication to families and youth.



Boys Town New England

Rhode island

Recommended by U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse

Boys Town New England is dedicated to strengthening families and helping children remain safely connected to their homes whenever possible. The organization provides a range of services designed to support youth and families facing significant challenges. In some cases, children with severe behavioral or emotional needs are placed in care to receive intensive support, with the goal of achieving stability and permanency, including reunification with family members or adoption when appropriate. The organization also serves children entering foster care and those who cannot safely remain with their biological parents due to circumstances such as incarceration, substance use disorders, or other barriers to caregiving. Through its programs, Boys Town New England works to stabilize families, support caregivers, and ensure every child has the opportunity to grow up safe, connected, and prepared to thrive. Boys Town New England is headquartered in Portsmouth, RI and operates an additional facility in Warwick, RI.

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Shanna and Joshua Brady

Florida

Recommended by U.S. Representative Gus Bilirakis

Shanna and Joshua Brady have a heart for service. Shanna is a dedicated public elementary school teacher. Beyond teaching, she volunteers with the Special Olympics program, helping children of all abilities build confidence and a sense of belonging. Joshua, a corrections officer, shares that same spirit of service. In addition to his career in public safety, he volunteers at an annual prom for adults with special needs. Shanna and Joshua's journey of service deepened when they opened their home and hearts to a child in foster care. They adopted their first child, Charley, who has autism and faced significant developmental delays. Through dedication and unwavering love, the Bradys provided Charley with a stable and nurturing environment. Two years later, Charley's biological mother had given birth to a baby girl, Chloe, who was born addicted to drugs. The Bradys welcomed Chloe into their family, surrounding her with love and support. In 2025, the Bradys received a call asking if they would consider adopting a newborn baby boy born to the same mother. Even though Shanna was already pregnant with their second biological child, the couple did not hesitate. Baby Chevy joined the family just four months before Shanna gave birth. Today, the Brady household is a beautifully blended family of seven. They have created a home where each child's unique needs are met with love, patience, and opportunity.



Claudia and Robert Brown, Jr.

Louisiana

Recommended by U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy

Robert Brown and his wife, Claudia, stepped up to take in their three grandsons after a tragic event that led to the murder of their daughter. Notable poet, Langston Hughes wrote, "life for me ain't been no crystal stair." This metaphor resonates with Robert's journey as a parent but, most of all, a grandparent. Claudia and Robert rose to the challenge of raising their grandsons with perseverance and strength. Robert is active at the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Information Center of Louisiana. Through the center, Robert found the lawyer who helped with the adoption process of his grandchildren. Robert was inspired to dedicate himself to participating in workshops and conferences at the center while sharing tips and moral support to grandfamilies. He has shared his family's story with local, state, and national audiences to help other grandfamilies get the supports and services they need. Robert is a valued member of Generations United's GRAND Voices Network of kinship caregiver advocates who have a range of expertise and personal experience as relatives who have raised children when their parents have been unable to raise them, also called grandfamilies. He is an agent for change in kinship.



Broomfield FISH Food Bank and Family Resource Center

Colorado

Recommended by U.S. Representative Brittany Pettersen

Broomfield FISH plays a critical role in supporting families in the City and County of Broomfield experiencing financial hardship. They provide emergency food services, help with utility bills, and offer financial assistance, stepping in at critical moments before situations worsen. Their work not only meets immediate needs but also helps families get back on their feet and move toward long-term stability. As the only food bank and resource center in Broomfield, they fill a major gap in the community. One notable aspect of their work is a vegetable garden that provides families with fresh, nutritious food, reflecting a thoughtful approach that prioritizes not just access to food, but quality and health, as well. By ensuring families have access to basic necessities, Broomfield FISH reduces stress at home and helps create more stable environments where children can thrive. Their intentional, community-focused approach has a direct and lasting impact on children's well-being throughout Broomfield. Through their steadfast commitment to supporting vulnerable families and improving outcomes for children, Broomfield FISH has demonstrated why they are a strong and deserving Angels in Adoption® honoree.



Amanda and Rodney Burton

Indiana

Recommended by U.S. Representative Erin Houchin

Amanda and Rodney Burton of Seymour, IN had one biological son, Trenton, when they made the decision in 2014 to adopt from Haiti, welcoming Marcus into their family in 2017. Their biological daughter, Ryli, was born in 2019. In 2022, Amanda and Rodney learned that Marcus had a half-sister who was up for adoption and without hesitation, began the process to bring her home as well. On November 12, 2025, the Burtons became a family of six with the adoption of 4-year-old Takierra, welcoming their second child from Haiti and completing their family.

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Butler-Lawrence Co. Isaiah 117 House

Pennsylvania
Recommended by U.S. Representative Mike Kelly

Opened on February 9, 2025, the Butler & Lawrence County Isaiah 117 House provides a safe, welcoming home for children who have been removed from their families due to concerns for their safety while they wait for foster placement. Too often, children in these circumstances are brought to child welfare offices where they may wait hours, or even days, while placement is arranged. During this difficult and confusing time, many arrive frightened, exhausted, and without any personal belongings. Under the local leadership team, the Butler-Lawrence County Isaiah 117 House offers a compassionate alternative. Children are welcomed into a warm, home-like environment where trained volunteers provide clean clothing, warm meals, toys, blankets, and comforting support. Instead of waiting in an office setting, children are able to spend this transitional time in a safe and nurturing space surrounded by caring individuals who understand the trauma they are experiencing. The mission of Isaiah 117 House is threefold: to reduce trauma for children awaiting placement, to lighten the load for child welfare professionals, and to ease the transition for foster families. The Butler & Lawrence County house fulfills this mission every day by providing immediate comfort and care while allowing child welfare staff to focus on securing the best possible placement for each child. Through dedicated leadership, strong community partnerships, and a network of compassionate volunteers, the Butler-Lawrence County Isaiah 117 House has created a place where children feel safe, valued, and supported during one of the most difficult moments of their young lives.



Jaliyah Carlisle

Delaware

Recommended by U.S. Senator Chris Coons

Jaliyah Carlisle's passion for helping and caring for children long preceded her employment as a Family Crisis Therapist at the Department of Services for Children, Youth, and Their Families (DSCYF). Jaliyah grew up seeing both her grandparents and her mother serve the needs of children through foster care. Her mother adopted one of Jaliyah's siblings and was providing care for another family friend when she passed away in 2019. Jaliyah, at just 21 years of age, took over the care of her 9-year-old adopted sister and obtained guardianship of her. Two years later, in 2021, Jaliyah's career journey brought her to the Division of Family Services, the child welfare and child protection arm of DSCYF, where she helps children and families achieve permanency, often through adoption.

In 2024, Jaliyah decided that she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her grandparents and mother and become a foster parent herself. Jaliyah said, "I want to be there. I want to be that person". She talked with her sister about her feelings about having children join their home, and her sister was supportive. Since 2024, Jaliyah has provided foster care for eight children and has adopted two of them! Like many children who experience foster care, her now adopted daughters had experienced trauma. Jaliyah worked with the girls' social work teams to connect them to services. The girls were often scared that they would have to leave Jaliyah, a feeling that they experienced up until the day they were adopted.

Jaliyah's daughters were always ready for adoption. Both girls knew that they wanted to change their names. One of the girls shared that she wanted to change her birth name because it was "attached to her trauma". Jaliyah supported their desire and helped the girls make a list of potential names. They even gave Jaliyah a vote in the decision! Though the girls wanted to be adopted as soon as possible, they patiently waited for National Adoption Day. On that special day in November, Jaliyah and her daughters legally created a new family. Jaliyah Carlisle is not only a dedicated member of the Division of Family Services, but she has also created a family that supports some of the most vulnerable citizens in our state – children who suffered abuse and neglect. Jaliyah is a Dover, DE native who attended Dover High School and Delaware State University, graduating with a Bachelor of Social Work.



Children & Families First Delaware, Inc.

Delaware

Recommended by U.S. Representative Sarah McBride

Children & Families First (CFF) has been a trusted leader in child welfare for over 140 years, transforming lives through its compassionate and innovative foster care and adoption programs. Their longevity is matched by a forward-thinking approach that centers dignity, respect, and person-first language, ensuring that every child, resource family member, and birth family member is seen and valued beyond their circumstances. CFF's staff includes individuals with lived experience—former foster parents, adoptive parents, and those who have been adopted—bringing empathy and authenticity to their work. Their expertise has earned national and international recognition, with staff invited to train child welfare professionals around the world. They are also published authors of a children's book and articles in leading child welfare publications, helping shape the field through storytelling and scholarship. CFF has also played a vital role in shaping policy, contributing to the passage of key adoption legislation in Delaware that improves outcomes for children and families. Their advocacy ensures that laws reflect the realities and needs of those directly impacted by the child welfare system. Families consistently praise CFF's support and mission. One resource parent applicant shared, "CFF offers an extensive network of support groups and resources. We strongly resonate with the mission of your agency, believing like you, that children should always come first." Another resource parent applicant noted, "I know CFF is a leader in the child welfare field and treats its staff well. I trust the organization to meet a high standard of service for the kids as well as the resource and bio/primary families." For its enduring impact, inclusive leadership, and transformative work, Children & Families First is a truly deserving Angels in Adoption® honoree.



Teresa A. Cirelli

New York

Recommended by U.S. Representative Nicole Malliotakis

Teresa Cirelli is an exceptional advocate for children and families whose personal connection to adoption has shaped both her life and her career. As Chief Development Officer of the Seamen's Society for Children and Families, Teresa plays a critical leadership role in sustaining and expanding programs that support foster care and adoption services for vulnerable children. Teresa's commitment to this work is deeply personal. As a child, her family turned to Seamen's Society for support during the adoption of her sister. That experience left a lasting impact and ultimately guided her professional path. Today, she has come full circle, serving in a leadership role at the very organization that helped shape her family. Her story reflects the transformative power of adoption and the lasting ripple effects of strong support systems for families.

In her role, Teresa oversees a comprehensive development operation that ensures the organization has the resources necessary to serve children in need. She leads efforts across major gifts, foundation and corporate grants, government funding, and community-based fundraising initiatives. Through her work, she has strengthened the organization's ability to provide stable, nurturing environments for children in foster care and to support families navigating the adoption process. Beyond fundraising, Teresa is a tireless advocate and communicator. She leads public awareness campaigns, engages with community stakeholders, and elevates the visibility of foster care and adoption issues through strategic outreach. Her efforts help reduce stigma, encourage community involvement, and connect more children with permanent, loving homes. Teresa Cirelli exemplifies the mission of Angels in Adoption® through her leadership, advocacy, and deeply personal commitment to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to grow up in a safe and supportive family.



Mindy and Christopher Deets

Utah

Recommended by U.S. Senator Mike Lee

Mindy and Chris Deets are devoted parents who have built their family through adoption, welcoming their two children, Cloey and Trey Deets, shortly after birth. Cloey is now 17, and Trey is 14. From the beginning, adoption has been a meaningful and intentional choice for their family, creating a strong and lasting bond that has made the Deets family whole. The Deets are highly respected in their community for their commitment to family and active involvement in their children's lives. Both Cloey and Trey participate in a variety of community programs and extracurricular activities, with Trey especially engaged in multiple sports. Mindy and Chris are consistently present and supportive, attending events, encouraging their children, and staying closely involved in their interests and achievements. Chris is also actively engaged in coaching and supporting Trey's athletic activities, reinforcing the family's shared commitment to teamwork, encouragement, and community connection. Through their dedication, Mindy and Chris Deets exemplify the values of love, involvement, and lifelong commitment to their children.



Kristen DeForge

Maine

Recommended by U.S. Senator Susan Collins

The journey of Kristen DeForge as a champion for children began 22 years ago with a single, haunting observation that would alter the course of her life. While serving as a parole officer, she frequently noticed rows of anonymous trash bags and battered duffle bags lining the hallways of the courthouse. Upon learning that these bags contained the entire lives of children entering foster care, Kristen was struck by a profound sense of injustice. That visual of a child's belongings discarded in a hallway became a call to action she could not ignore. In 2005, she transitioned from the justice system to the front lines of child welfare, becoming a licensed foster parent and beginning a two-decade legacy of providing the "safe home" she realized so many youth lacked. Over the years, Kristen has distinguished herself through an unwavering commitment to the most vulnerable subset of the foster population: teenagers and young adults. She operates with the deep-seated belief that the need for a family and a fierce advocate does not end at 18. Her own family is a living testament to this philosophy. In 2019, she welcomed her first daughter into her family through adoption at the age of 17, followed by the adoption of another 17-year-old girl in 2021. Her commitment to lifelong connection was further solidified in 2025, when she completed the adoption of an 11-year-old girl for whom she had originally provided foster care when the child was only 6. This reunion served as powerful proof that in Kristen's world, once a connection is forged, it is never truly broken.

Kristen's impact stretches far beyond the legal definitions of a "resource parent" or "professional advocate." She is a practitioner of lifelong connection whose home remains a sanctuary for dozens of former foster youth who are now adults. They continue to reach out to her to share their trials, ask for guidance, and celebrate their triumphs. This legacy has even reached the next generation; several adults who were formerly in the system now have children of their own who affectionately refer to Kristen as "Ocean Nana." Living near the coast, she has become the stable, loving grandmother figure to families who might otherwise have been born into a cycle of instability, stretching her love and kindness beyond formal systems to create a true kinship network. In her professional capacity, Kristen is the exemplary definition of what it means to go above and beyond. Known for her extreme accessibility, she regularly makes last-minute trips to the office to support families in crisis and ensures that every call is answered with urgency and empathy. She treats every child on her caseload with the same ferocity and protective spirit she gives to those in her own home. Ultimately, Kristen does not just participate in the child welfare system; she heals it. She took the "trash bags" she saw in a hallway over two decades ago and replaced them with a lifetime of dignity, permanency, and hope.

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Luis De La Cruz

Arizona

Recommended by U.S. Representative Greg Stanton

Luis De La Cruz was appointed President and CEO of the Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation (AFFCF) in 2022, becoming the youngest CEO in the organization's history. AFFCF is a 42-year-old statewide non-profit dedicated to supporting youth ages 0–26 through basic needs assistance, educational resources, and workforce development programming. Luis was also the first leader in AFFCF's history to have been a direct recipient of its services, having aged out of the Arizona foster care system on his 18th birthday. Leaning into his powerful lived experience alongside his corporate background as a consultant for Deloitte, he spearheaded a transformative era for the foundation. Under his leadership, AFFCF significantly expanded critical services for youth transitioning out of care, elevated its fundraising capabilities, and grew into the largest foster-care non-profit in the state. After four years at the helm, Luis concluded his successful executive tenure in August 2026. He subsequently joined Valle Del Sol, a long-standing community health organization in Arizona, as Chief Strategy Officer. In this executive role, he continues his lifelong commitment to advancing opportunities and driving strategic support for individuals and families impacted by the child welfare system.



Thomas Dent

Mississippi

Recommended by U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith

Thomas Dent is an adoptive and former foster parent with extensive experience serving children and families within Mississippi's child welfare system. He previously worked with the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services for over five years, including serving as Director of Faith-Based and Volunteer Services and as Foster Parent Liaison, where he supported caregivers and strengthened partnerships across the state. Thomas currently serves as a Constituent Services Representative for U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, continuing his commitment to advocacy and public service. Having both lived and professional experience in child welfare, Thomas understands the challenges that accompany this calling. Through it all, he carries a deep and steady hope rooted in his faith in Jesus—the Father of the fatherless—which continues to guide his work and service to others.



Ashley El

Illinois

Recommended by U.S. Representative Danny K. Davis

Ashley's life is a testament to compassion, resilience, and unwavering commitment to family - no matter how that family is composed - providing stability and permanency to children in her community. Ashley was an amazing mom to her biological son. After marrying a man with children, Ashley embraced the beauty of a blended family, building strong and respectful relationships among her biological son and her three stepsons, as well as with each of the children's biological mothers. Her love for family extended further when her son's aunt (still a minor at the time) became a teen mother. Without hesitation, Ashley welcomed both the young mother and the baby into her home. She raised and supported them until the teen mother graduated high school, pursued higher education, and became a stable, independent adult.

During this time, Ashley's own marriage faced challenges and ultimately ended in divorce. Despite this, she maintained meaningful relationships with the family she helped nurture. Life presented another unexpected turn when the biological mother of her stepsons was involved in a devastating car accident. As the biological mother resided in a nursing facility as a paraplegic who was unable to care for her children, Ashley extended her arms and welcomed the boys back into her home after this unimaginable hardship. She provided them with stability, love, and guidance during one of the most difficult times in their lives. Through Ashley's care and dedication, one of the young men is now thriving in college, her son is currently a junior in high school, one is currently in eighth grade, and the youngest is in fourth grade. Ashley's story exemplifies what it truly means to be a parent, a mentor, and a pillar of strength so that children in need have stability, permanency, and unconditional love.



Melissa and John Falendysz

Wisconsin

Recommended by U.S. Senator Ron Johnson

Melissa and John Falendysz had long hoped to become parents, and today they are proud adoptive parents of two children. Their journey began in the foster care system, embracing what they knew would be a meaningful but challenging path. Their first placement was Nolan, with whom they quickly formed a strong connection. He came from a complex family situation and was navigating an ongoing custody process, and throughout that time, Melissa and John provided steady support, offering stability and care during a difficult period in his life. After a few years, the court determined they were the best permanency option, and Nolan was officially adopted.

Even after adoption, they remained committed to honoring Nolan's family connections. They stayed in communication with his biological mother and siblings, included her in milestones like birthdays, and offered support during difficult times. Their approach reflects a deep belief in maintaining healthy family ties whenever possible. With room in their hearts and home, they continued fostering and later welcomed Aleesia. They provided her with the stability she needed, and she quickly bonded with the family. She was eventually adopted, becoming Nolan's little sister. The Falendyszs path to parenthood was not always easy, but it has been marked by patience, compassion, and unwavering commitment to the children in their care. Today, Melissa and John are grateful for the family they have built and the love that continues to grow within it.



Family Programs Hawaii

Hawaii

Recommended by U.S. Senator Mazie Hirono

Family Programs Hawaii has worked alongside children and families across the state's child welfare system since 2004. The organization helps families stay together when it is safe to do so, supports children and families through crisis, and prepares young people leaving foster care for stable, independent futures. The organization is guided by five values: compassion, integrity, trust, respect, and excellence. Its staff and board work alongside families, providers, funders, and public agencies to strengthen Hawai'i's broader child welfare community. Each year, that work reaches thousands of children, youth, and families statewide.

Family Programs Hawaii partners with foster and adoptive families, volunteers, clinicians, and public agencies, including the state's Department of Human Services and Child Welfare Services, Family Court, schools, and behavioral health providers. Much of the work sits in the space between systems and daily life: keeping siblings connected across placements, providing shelter and trauma-informed care while safe homes are identified, and offering the kind of ordinary support, a ride to practice, help with a job application, a presence at a graduation, that keeps a young person's development on track.

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Family Support Services

Florida

Recommended by U.S. Representative John Rutherford

As the lead community-based care agency serving Northeast Florida, Family Support Services (FSS) plays a vital role in the region's child welfare system. Since 2001, FSS has assisted thousands of children and families by providing foster care, adoption, family preservation, and independent living. FSS embodies the principle that stable, supportive families have a profound impact on the safety and well-being of children and communities through its innovative and compassionate approach to adoption. The organization actively recruits and supports adoptive families, ensuring they are well-prepared through comprehensive training and ongoing post-adoption services. By prioritizing stability and long-term success, FSS helps children not only find forever homes but also thrive within them. Beyond direct services, FSS serves as a collaborative leader within the community, working alongside the courts, child advocates, service providers, and local governments to improve outcomes for children. The organization also promotes public awareness of adoption through outreach initiatives that celebrate families and encourage others to open their hearts and homes. They embrace innovative strategies in recruiting and matching children with prospective homes – leveraging both data and emergent technology to create lasting permanency for children. Their tireless dedication to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children exemplifies the true spirit of this honor and continues to make a lasting difference in the lives of families across Florida.



Rhonda Fishbein

Georgia

Recommended by U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock

Rhonda “Ronnie” Fishbein is a Georgia attorney who practices exclusively in the area of adoption law. As an adoptive mother herself, she is passionate about the services she provides and sensitive to the issues her clients face. With more than 35 years of legal experience, Ronnie has represented over 3,000 adoption clients, providing highly personalized and responsive legal services. She is widely recognized at both the local and national levels for her extensive knowledge of adoption law and her commitment to ethical, client-centered practice. Ronnie holds a master’s degree in counseling from New York University, further strengthening her ability to support families through the emotional aspects of the adoption process. She previously served as Executive Director of Adoption Planning, Inc., a licensed child-placing agency in Georgia, where she gained valuable experience in all facets of adoption services. She was the first Georgia attorney admitted to the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys and is a fellow of the Georgia Council of Adoption Attorneys. Ronnie also holds an AV rating from Martindale-Hubbell, the highest level of peer-reviewed recognition for professional excellence and ethical standards. Through her decades of service, Ronnie has made a lasting impact on the field of adoption, helping thousands of families grow with care, integrity, and compassion.



Jessica and Donovan Flaherty

South Dakota
Recommended by U.S. Senator John Thune

Donovon and Jessica's journey to adoption began years before they were licensed to foster, while volunteering during college at the Royal Family Kids Camp, now known as For the Children. Through those summers spent serving children in the foster care system, their hearts were opened to both the deep challenges and incredible resilience of these children. Even then, they felt a calling to foster one day, even if they did not yet know it would later become a reality. That calling came into focus in 2018, when they met two of their future sons through a close friend who had been fostering them at the time. As they built a relationship with them, they knew it was time to take the next step. They became licensed foster parents in 2019 and soon welcomed their first placement, the sweet baby brother to the boys. After a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful reunification, all three boys came to live with them in 2021. After fostering their three oldest sons for nearly five years, they were given the privilege of adopting them, making official what had long been true: they are, and always have been, their family.



Fostering Hope, Inc.

Oklahoma

Recommended by U.S. Senator James Lankford

Fostering Hope (FH) started in 2016 with a mission to meet the immediate needs of children in foster care. What began with a few Bags Full of Hope has grown into a statewide ministry serving families across Oklahoma. Based in Muskogee, FH has expanded to reach 60 of the state's 77 counties. The Bag Full of Hope program provides bags with necessities, including clothing, toiletries, a Bible, a book, toys, and a handmade card. The Fostering Hope House, opened in 2020, provides a safe place for children awaiting placement. This respite center offers bathing facilities, a kitchen, and spaces where children can rest and play while caseworkers find placement. Replacing an office cubicle, children are welcomed by staff and volunteers with a warm bath and a hot meal.

Fostering Hope also provides To-Go Birthday Parties that include gifts, a birthday cake, party supplies, an outfit, and a new pair of shoes because every child deserves to be celebrated on their birthday. FH is investing in the next generation through its Teen Ambassador Board, which focuses on service, leadership, and community giving. By developing young leaders, FH is helping build a stronger community of care. The mission of Fostering Hope is to serve children in foster care from birth through age 18. Through its programs, FH is planting seeds for a brighter future, one child at a time.



Gayle and Robert Franck

Minnesota

Recommended by U.S. Representative Pete Stauber

Gayle and Robert Franck have devoted themselves to fostering children — primarily infants — for the past 11 years. Over that time, they have adopted three children: a son, who has since passed away, and two daughters, now 9 years old. On average, they foster infants for about nine months, until each child can be reunited with a parent, family member, or go to a non-relative adoption home.



Diana Lynn Gelfand

Florida

Recommended by U.S. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz

Diana Gelfand became a foster parent in 2013, opening her home to children in need. Her first placement was a premature newborn boy with medical complexities who spent months in the NICU and ICU. Soon after, Diana welcomed a premature baby girl with medical needs. In 2019, a third infant arrived at her doorstep after severe malnutrition nearly claimed his life. Diana has since adopted all three children, now ages 7, 12, and 13.

As a licensed clinical social worker, Diana combines lived experience with professional expertise and tireless advocacy. For more than a decade, she worked at Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital, supporting children and families through difficult circumstances. She recently transitioned to private practice, providing telehealth therapy to adolescents and caregivers navigating complex medical conditions, rare and genetic diseases, foster care, adoption, grief, and caregiver burnout.

Alongside raising her children as a single mother, Diana recently completed three years as Broward County Co-Director for The Hands and Feet. This nonprofit provides essential items to children entering foster care, living with relatives, reunifying with family, or participating in extended foster care within 48 hours of referral. Diana is an advocate, caregiver, and community leader whose impact reaches far beyond her own home. Through compassion, perseverance, and service, she has supported hundreds of families while working to ensure every child feels safe and supported.



Sarah Gerstenzang

New York

Recommended by U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand

Sarah Gerstenzang is a Columbia University trained licensed clinical social worker. She also has experience as a birth, foster/adoptive and kinship parent. She provides attachment-focused family therapy as well as consultation and training for prospective foster and adoptive parents. Additionally, she offers training and supervision for other professionals working with children who have experienced complex developmental trauma. Sarah served on the advisory board for the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI), a program funded under Adoption Opportunities and led by the Center for Adoption Support and Education. Sarah was a curriculum reviewer for Training for Adoption Competency (TAC), the first credentialed adoption curriculum for mental health professionals in the United States. Sarah is the Board President of the Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition of NY (AFFCNY), a statewide organization that provides information, support, and advocacy for foster and adoptive families, after formerly serving as its Executive Director. She co-founded the Adoption Foster Care Therapist Network and served as an Advisor on the Effects of Early Life Adversity on Brain Development (Nim Tottenham, Ph.D.) as part of an NIMH grant. Lastly, Sarah served as Associate Project Director for The Collaboration to AdoptUS Kids, a multi-million dollar federal grant to recruit foster and adoptive parents for children in foster care following work as a policy analyst at Children's Rights.



Coleen Globke Brasch

South Dakota

Recommended by U.S. Senator Mike Rounds

Coleen Globke Brasch is the founder and Executive Director of All About U Adoptions. Coleen and her late husband, Rob Globke, were high school sweethearts and married in 1991. Coleen and Rob adopted two children together. Having gone through the process of adopting and raising their children, Coleen and Rob learned that the adoption process could be fraught with complications and emotional struggles, and those challenges do not stop once an adoption finalizes. Adoptive parenting comes with a separate set of challenges than parenting biological children. Coleen then found her calling and founded All About U Adoptions. Since 2006, the All About U (AAU) adoption team has grown to include caring professionals who share the All About U Adoptions passion for providing compassionate support and empowerment to all involved in the adoption process. Today they average 25-30 adoptions yearly. All About U Adoptions has placed 350+ children in adoptive families since January 2007. For AAU, it's not about being the agency with the highest number of adoptions per year. It's about providing the resources, empathy, ethics, and education to ensure a quality life for the adopted child, as well as birth and adoptive families. Coleen continues to be a lifelong advocate for adoption and now has a beautiful blended family including adopted grandchildren with her husband of three years, Brian Brasch.



Heart Gallery East Texas

Texas

Recommended by U.S. Representative Nathaniel Moran

There are nearly 20,000 youth in Texas foster care, including 6,000 waiting for adoption. Of those, 1,800 need advocacy beyond traditional recruitment, including older youth, sibling groups, and children with complex medical or behavioral needs. In East Texas alone, about 100 youth face these barriers at any given time. Heart Gallery East Texas exists to connect these children with forever families through portrait exhibits and narrative-driven storytelling that highlights each child's individuality. Beyond the gallery, the organization provides education, resources, and guidance to adoptive families, helping create stable placements and reduce the likelihood of children re-entering foster care.

The results are significant. A child featured in a Texas Heart Gallery increases their chance of adoption from less than 1% to 60%. To date, 70 children featured by Heart Gallery East Texas have found permanent families. Nearly 200 businesses, churches, and community organizations have hosted exhibits, generating hundreds of adoption inquiries through heartgalleryetx.org. Volunteer professional photographers capture each child's unique personality in a compelling portrait paired with a written narrative. Families can view the gallery online or in person, inquire about a child, and connect with the child's caseworker. A single photograph can inspire life-changing connections, mobilizing the community to help children find permanent, loving homes. Heart Gallery East Texas is a program of The Fostering Collective in Tyler, TX.



Hearts with a Mission

Oregon

Recommended by U.S. Senator Ron Wyden

In 2006, Kevin read a newspaper article about 1,500 homeless youth in Jackson County and the need for a youth shelter. After many discussions with local service agencies confirming this need and no other agency willing to take it on, he felt compelled to do what was needed to establish a youth shelter, which first required forming a non-profit organization. Hearts With A Mission (HWAM) was granted its 501(c)3 as a non-profit organization in March of 2007. HWAM opened its doors as a licensed Child Caring Agency in the State of Oregon on December 21, 2009. Sixteen years later, they have expanded to include two Transitional Living Programs for young people 18-21 and implemented the Safe Families for Children program in six counties, which focuses on helping families stay whole. Their Independent Living Program provides life skills for foster youth. In 2023, they started the Hearts For Seniors program, geared toward their community's isolated seniors, which has now expanded to all six counties. With the amazing support of God, remarkable staff, and a caring community, many now have access to support filled with love and compassion in a safe and supportive environment for everyone.



Steven Hernández, Esq.

Connecticut

Recommended by U.S. Representative John Larson

Steven held the bipartisan, bicamerally appointed role of Executive Director at the Commission on Children, Women, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity (CWCSEO) at the Connecticut General Assembly for a considerable period before transitioning to his current role as ED of ConnCAN. While at CWCSEO, he sat in on a 2017 public hearing where Chris Scott of SUN Scholars Inc. testified for a college-funding bill. Steven followed up afterward, provided a fellowship and free office space for the new organization when SUN was just getting off the ground, and helped them host roundtable talks at the State Capitol to lift lived experience to legislators. He also brought several SUN alumni on as fellows at CWCSEO, effectively launching many foster youth into their careers.

If it were not for Steve in SUN's early days, the organization might not exist. He shared his network and connections when SUN was just getting started, helping them build legitimacy and enter spaces that led to their current funding. Chris Scott believes what is exceptionally special about Steve is how many lives he has changed. Many leaders in their respective fields and communities would say the same. He has been a truly unsung hero behind the scenes for so many. Beyond this extraordinary support, Steve is responsible for countless areas of positive change in Connecticut for its most vulnerable populations, including foster care and adoption.



Courtney and Jeff Hessig

Nebraska

Recommended by U.S. Senator Deb Fischer

Courtney and Jeff Hessig of Omaha, Nebraska, always dreamed of having a big family. When struggles with infertility delayed plans to start their family, open hearts and a sense of purpose drew them to open their home to children in need of love and stability. As the Hessigs worked to obtain their foster care license, they welcomed biological twins William and Gavin through IVF. The twins were around age 5 when Courtney and Jeff completed the process to become a licensed foster care home in late 2023. A few weeks later in February 2024, they received a call about a newborn baby boy in need of a stable home, and did not hesitate. Three-week-old Cairo quickly meshed with his older brothers and thrived in the love and stability he found in their home. Cairo is a member of the Ponca Tribe, and their foster care case worker noted the Hessigs are “not just preparing to raise a child, they are honoring his whole identity, history, and community.” Courtney grew up in Oklahoma where she was enrolled in the Cherokee Nation, so she realizes how essential cultural respect is for Cairo’s developing sense of self. The Hessigs are learning and engaging to ensure he will grow up knowing his tribal heritage and maintain this important connection. Now two years old, Cairo’s adoption was finalized on April 10, 2026. Throughout their journey, Courtney and Jeff have also shown remarkable compassion and respect for Cairo’s biological mother, making her feel valued throughout the entire process. Courtney and Jeff have chosen openness and inclusion as they continue their efforts to maintain this strong relationship. Their priority is always the well-being of the child. According to Courtney, “It’s never easy, but it’s always worth it when you see the child thriving and happy.”



Terri Hoover Odom

Louisiana

Recommended by U.S. Representative Julia Letlow

Terri Hoover Odom is a Louisiana adoption attorney who has devoted 38 years to serving children, women, and families through adoption. As the owner of Odom-Saska Adoptions, LLC, she has guided expectant mothers, birth parents, adoptive parents, relatives, stepparents, and caregivers through life-changing decisions and complex legal proceedings with compassion, dignity, and integrity. A member of the American Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys since 1998, Terri has long been a trusted resource and mentor within the adoption community. She was also recognized as a BayouLife Leading Lady for her leadership, service, and impact in Northeast Louisiana.

Terri now practices alongside her daughter, Emily Saska. Their relationship has grown from mother and daughter to mentor and colleague, with Terri passing forward not only her legal knowledge but also her conviction that adoption work requires ethical responsibility, careful attention, and genuine care for every person involved. Rooted in her Christian faith, Terri considers this work both a profession and a calling. Her legacy can be seen in the women she has supported, the families she has helped create and strengthen, the children whose futures have been secured, and the next generation of adoption professionals she continues to encourage.



Hope Ranch of Missouri

Missouri

Recommended by U.S. Representative Ann Wagner

Hope Ranch of Missouri is a nonprofit based in Sullivan, MO that serves foster children and teens who have experienced severe trauma, abuse, and neglect – particularly those who have struggled in traditional foster care or school settings. Founded out of a desire to address the growing need for services for at-risk youth, Hope Ranch was inspired by its founder, a former superintendent of a local school district, Jennifer Hope’s firsthand experience working with foster children who were falling through the cracks. Hope Ranch was built from the ground up through community collaboration and support, with local professionals in health care, social work, law enforcement, education, and legal fields. They opened their facilities in 2022 and have helped 60 children and counting successfully transition into reunification, adoption, or adulthood.

Hope Ranch is a comprehensive, long-term healing environment that helps foster children heal, build confidence, and cope with stress. The program is structured around five pillars: housing, education, counseling, community service, and spiritual development. Youth live in family-style homes with trained “teacher parents,” creating a stable and nurturing environment that models healthy family relationships. With their own school on-site, Hope Ranch’s educational program is individualized and trauma-informed, often with one-on-one instruction and flexible learning approaches. What makes Hope Ranch of Missouri especially unique as it is a one-of-a-kind program in Missouri that is deeply rooted in community effort. Hope Ranch is sustained very much by the community, and in turn, the foster children themselves become active participants in that same community through Hope Ranch’s Community Service pillar, creating an inspiring cycle of support. Ultimately, Hope Ranch’s goal is to help each child transition successfully into reunification, adulthood, or adoption.



Traci Jamieson

Idaho

Recommended by U.S. Senator James Risch

Traci Jamieson's biggest contributions to adoption and foster care include her time as a foster parent, adoptive parent, and "house parent" at the Sheppards's Home in McCall, ID. From 2006 through 2020, Traci and her husband, Jason, fostered 109 children in the West Central Mountains region, adopting seven of them. They have adopted two sibling sets of three, prioritizing keeping children together and establishing a forever family with them. Traci's lifelong dream had been to foster and adopt, and in 2006 it became a reality. The following year, while continuing to foster, she opened Raising Little Angels, a daycare facility, to continue to support families and their children. In 2012, she and her husband began serving as house parents for The Shepherd's Home, a local nonprofit group home that "as a faith-based foster home offers a loving family atmosphere where a compassionate and dedicated team supports each child with unconditional love. The home also serves as an emergency placement center, offering immediate refuge for children removed from unsafe situations." Traci and Jason served The Shepherd's Home from 2012 through 2015, then again for an additional two years when a need for house parents arose. Since stepping down from their role as house parents, they have continued to provide support to The Shepherd's Home in various capacities. Traci earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling during her foster and adoptive journey. As a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) since 2019, she now specializes in children and teens with trauma, often serving as an advocate for youth in foster care or youth who have been adopted. Seeking to further her dedication to making an impact in the work of strengthening families and preventing child abuse, Traci co-founded Ignite Idaho Family Resource Center in 2021, a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to connecting local families with the resources they need to thrive. Ignite Idaho Family Resource Center's mission is to strengthen families in the Valley and Adams County area and to prevent child abuse through education and intervention. Ignite Idaho is a one-stop shop for resource connection and support where community members can walk in for assistance. In addition, Ignite Idaho has a mental health clinic, in-person crisis response program, two daycare facilities, free parenting classes, teen support groups, substance use disorder outpatient treatment programs, a youth assessment center that supports at-risk youth and families, and a youth center where teens can gather to have fun in a safe environment. Not only does Traci lead the organization as its executive director, but she is the proverbial boots on the ground, providing crisis response, counseling to at-risk youth and youth who have experienced trauma, and strengthening partnerships with local community organizations. She shines the most when advocating for youth experiencing difficulties in life, whether due to foster care or adoption, challenging life circumstances, or mental health conditions.



Steven Jones

Alabama

Recommended by U.S. Representative Barry Moore

Steven Jones has dedicated his life to making a difference in the lives of children who need a safe place to call home. His passion for this work is deeply personal. As a young man, Steven was once a resident of the Baldwin County Sheriff's Boys Ranch. Years later, he returned to the Ranch, first serving as a houseparent and eventually becoming director. In his role, Steven has worked alongside houseparents, staff, donors, law enforcement, and community supporters to provide stability, guidance, and opportunity to young men from difficult circumstances. He believes every child deserves more than a place to stay; they deserve to know they are loved, valued, and capable of building a better future. Being recognized as a 2026 Angels in Adoption® honoree is especially meaningful to Steven because it represents the journey from once being a child who needed others to believe in him to now having the opportunity to be that person for other children. His story is a reminder of what can happen when a child is given a chance, a home, and people who refuse to give up on them.

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Suzanne Jones

Tennessee

Recommended by U.S. Senator Marsha Blackburn

Suzanne Jones has dedicated her career to advocating for and supporting some of Tennessee's most vulnerable children. For more than two decades, she has worked to help children overcome difficult circumstances and find permanent, stable families. She began her career with Youth Villages in March 2000 as a foster care counselor, providing guidance and support to children in care while working with families of origin to navigate the system and pursue reunification when possible. In 2004, she became an Adoption Specialist, a role in which she has helped more than 300 children achieve permanency through adoption. Throughout her 25-year career, Suzanne has focused on serving children who have experienced significant abuse and trauma, many with complex needs. Her work has included supporting older youth, children with special needs, and large sibling groups, including those in residential treatment awaiting adoptive placements. Her commitment extends beyond her professional work. After the loss of both parents of her niece, Suzanne assumed permanent guardianship, providing a stable and supportive home during a difficult time. Through her dedication and consistent advocacy, Suzanne has made a lasting impact on the lives of children and families across Tennessee.



Maribeth and Jake Joraanstad

North Dakota

Recommended by U.S. Senator Kevin Cramer

Maribeth and Jake Joraanstad of Fargo, ND, completed a six-year adoption journey that drew national attention in June 2025 when their two adopted daughters, sisters Mitialove and Mirlanda, were rescued from gang-controlled Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Through multiple international trips, Maribeth and Jake witnessed firsthand the need for safe, permanent families for at-risk children. Jake first traveled to Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, where he developed lasting relationships. When Maribeth and Jake were ready to adopt, Haiti was the natural choice. Although their adoption was finalized, escalating violence prevented the girls from leaving through the traditional process after the international airport closed and fell under gang control. After exhausting every available option, the Joraanstads turned to Grey Bull Rescue, a nonprofit that provides safe transport for Americans and allies in some of the world's most complex and dangerous environments. On June 10, 2025, the team flew a helicopter into Port-au-Prince and safely evacuated the girls and another adoptee. The sisters arrived in Fargo the following day and have embraced their new home with enthusiasm. Now a family of five with son Amos, the Joraanstads remain committed to their daughters' Haitian roots while providing the permanence and stability every child deserves. Their international adoption reflects perseverance and a commitment to maintaining meaningful connections with family and friends in Haiti.



Crystal and Justin Kasmiskie

Minnesota

Recommended by U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar

In December 2025, Crystal and Justin Kasmiskie finalized the adoption of their two-year-old twins, Shadrach and Meshach, in the Liberian courts. They then began working with the U.S. Embassy to secure the boys' visas so they could travel home to Minnesota together as a family. The visas were conditionally approved on January 16, but an error on Meshach's application required additional security screening. With a visa ban set to take effect on January 21, the family faced the heartbreaking possibility of being separated. Crystal and Justin worried they might have to remain in Liberia indefinitely, while their young daughter, Selah, waited for them at home in Minnesota. Leaving either one of the twins behind was never an option. Working closely with Senator Amy Klobuchar's office, the U.S. Embassy, and other advocates, the Kasmiskies pushed tirelessly to resolve the issue. On January 20, both visas were approved, and Crystal and Justin picked them up in Monrovia with just six hours to spare before the embassy closed and the visa ban went into effect. Today, Crystal, Justin, Selah, Shadrach, and Meshach are together in Shakopee, MN, grateful to be living life as a family of five.



Erin Keller

Florida

Recommended by U.S. Representative Lois Frankel

Erin Keller has made a profound impact on child welfare through her own family. A devoted mother, she adopted four children — including a set of twins — after losing her husband, and chose to embrace single motherhood at a young age. Through resilience and unwavering love, she has built a beautiful life for her children.



Alice and Erick Langseth

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

For over 28 years, Alice Langseth has served the children of North Carolina, but her commitment to permanency doesn't end when she leaves her office at the Watauga County Department of Social Services. Since 2005, Alice and her husband, Erick, a Desert Storm veteran, have turned their home into a sanctuary for 12 long-term foster children and four permanent additions to their family. As a Class 3 Social Worker with two decades of service in Watauga County, Alice is a pillar of the child welfare system. Her expertise spans the entire lifecycle of a case: Alice is deeply involved in training, licensing, investigating, and the delicate process of placing children in foster and adoptive homes. She is a fierce advocate for those aging out of the system, ensuring that young adults reaching the critical 18–21 age gap are supported through their transition to independence rather than facing it alone. Only two weeks after completing their foster training, Alice and Erick welcomed Elijah as an infant adoptive placement. Soon afterwards, they opened their hearts to Amanda, who is two months younger than Elijah. Amanda, who has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, found not only a home in the Langseths, but advocates as well. Today, both are 21 years old; Amanda is living a productive adult life, and Elijah is a successful professional welder. In 2013, the Langseths fostered Stephanie, a five-month-old with Down syndrome who had suffered severe abuse. After four years of intensive, trauma-informed care, Stephanie was fully adopted. Now 13, her growth and health are a testament to the Langseths' healing environment. Their mission continues today as they provide guardianship for Britney, a 19-year-old with special needs who entered foster care at age 17. She bounced around between 14 foster placements but in October 2024, the Langseths took her in and became her legal guardian when she turned 18 in January 2025. The Langseth's represent the very best of North Carolina. They do not just believe in the foster system; they have dedicated their entire lives to proving that every child, regardless of their challenges, deserves the dignity of a "forever" family.



Jennifer Lisson

Texas

Recommended by U.S. Representative August Pfluger

Jennifer Lisson's program, The WHIT Program, provides essential tutoring for children in the foster care system, reaching all corners of Texas and continuing to expand its reach every year. The WHIT Program is deeply personal to Jennifer, as she founded it in memory of her late daughter, Whitney, who was always eager to help those less fortunate and had a genuine passion for making a difference. At its core, The WHIT Program offers one-on-one assistance to foster children in grades K-12 who are struggling academically. Jennifer's innovative idea pairs these kids with volunteer tutors – ranging from university honors and education students to business professionals, military members, and retired teachers. These dedicated tutors meet weekly with foster children, either in-person or via Zoom, until each child can catch up academically. The program's ultimate goal is to raise the high school graduation rate for foster children, which is currently the lowest among any tracked group in Texas, and to help end both the “foster-care-to-prison pipeline” and the path to homelessness that so many foster children face.

Jennifer and her husband, Jeff, have poured their hearts, time, and personal resources into raising awareness about the needs of foster children. What began as a local effort in San Angelo has grown to serve children throughout the entire state of Texas. Jennifer's vision is to one day have WHIT tutors available for every foster child who needs academic support. Beyond her work with The WHIT Program, Jennifer is fully immersed in supporting the foster care community: she organizes fundraising efforts, regularly donates to other nonprofits, serves as a CASA volunteer, and was voted CASA of the Year in 2022. This year, she was appointed by DFPS Commissioner Audrey O'Neil to serve on the Services and Supports Subcommittee, helping guide policies and services affecting children and families throughout Texas. In 2024, she was voted one of Texas's Remarkable Women for the work she does for The WHIT Program. She also sits on the Sonrisas Therapeutic Riding board of Directors. Before founding WHIT, Jennifer was a successful quarter horse trainer and judge, making her mark in the quarter horse industry both nationally and internationally. Jennifer's contagious passion, deep knowledge, caring spirit, and remarkable business sense fuel her work every day. She has built The WHIT Program from the ground up, and her commitment to improving the future for foster children in Texas is truly inspiring.

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Mary and Robert W. Long

North Carolina

Recommended by U.S. Representative Addison McDowell

Through their philanthropic and servant-leader investments in adoption, foster care, and child welfare, Mary and Bob Long have made a significant and lasting difference in the lives of thousands of children in need of families. Since becoming involved with Gift of Adoption (GOA) in 2012, they have directly and indirectly contributed to more than 300 children being adopted into forever families in the Carolinas and across the country — giving them permanence and the opportunity to thrive. Their nearly four decades of involvement with Children’s Home Society (CHS) have contributed to thousands of adoptions across North Carolina and beyond, and their ongoing support now impacts more than 20,000 children and families served annually by CHS. In 2020, the Longs launched the Family Relief Fund at CHS, providing critical assistance to foster and adoptive families navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bob has also spoken publicly about his own adoption through CHS, sharing his story to inspire others and deepen community commitment to adoption and child welfare. In addition to serving on CHS or GOA boards and committees, Bob draws on his executive experience in financial markets to act as an informal CEO thought partner to both GOA and CHS.

Mary and Bob continue to share their passion for adoption with friends, family, and business colleagues, championing the belief that a loving family is a necessity for every child. As strategic philanthropists, they have coined the phrase "infinite rate of return," referring to the incalculable value created when charitable investment leads to a child being adopted into a safe, permanent, and loving family. Beyond adoption, Mary brings her passion for service to many sectors of the community, including literacy and historical preservation. Together, Mary and Bob give generously of their time, applying their business and nonprofit acumen in thoughtful, strategic and grace-filled ways — consistently leaving organizations and people better for their involvement.



Elizabeth Fortin-Lussier

New Hampshire

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

In October 2019, Ms. Lussier began fostering three brothers. When in-person visits with their birth family were paused due to COVID, she facilitated phone and video calls. Recognizing that video calls were ineffective for the two younger boys who struggled to stay engaged, she advocated for more meaningful ways to maintain their connection. When the permanency goal shifted from reunification to adoption, Ms. Lussier continued to support ongoing contact between the boys and their birth mother. She encouraged communication based on the boys' wishes while also honoring their birth mother's desire to stay connected. Prior to the adoption, she spoke with the birth mother about the boys' adoptive names, despite the emotional difficulty of that conversation, reflecting the mutual respect between them. Although there is no formal mediated adoption agreement, Ms. Lussier voluntarily keeps the boys' birth mother involved in their lives. She encourages the boys to share milestones, such as losing a tooth, learning to ride a bike, or starting school, through calls or messages. She also includes their birth mother when sharing photos and updates with her own family, believing it is natural to share the boys' lives with those who care about them. Today, the oldest son maintains direct contact with his birth mother via cell phone, while Ms. Lussier helps facilitate communication for the younger boys when they request it. She remains responsive when the birth mother reaches out. When the birth mother has traveled from Texas to New Hampshire, Ms. Lussier has planned visits and activities, including outings, weekend trips, and even attending a family reunion together. Ms. Lussier intentionally includes the boys' birth mother as part of their extended family. She recognizes the importance of preserving this relationship and considers what a parent would want to know about their children. By honoring the birth mother's role, she supports her sons' sense of identity and connection.



Tammy and Damon Magee

Louisiana

Recommended by U.S. Representative Mike Johnson

Tammy and Damon Magee have devoted themselves to the service of others through foster care and adoption. After raising two biological sons, they answered the call to expand their family through adoption. The Magee Family has now grown with two adopted children and a third in the same process through foster care. Not only have Tammy and Damon opened their hearts and home to their adoptive children, but they are tireless advocates for the purpose of foster care and adoption. As Pastor of Kings Temple in Shreveport, LA, they have expanded their personal ministries to include encouraging, mentoring, and advising others who also consider welcoming foster and adoptive children into their lives. Their example has spurred many other families in their congregation to start fostering children. The care that the Magees have shown their children and other families is truly remarkable and a testament to their devotion to the sanctity of life through foster care and adoption.



Robin E. and Louis J. Marino, Jr.

New Jersey

Recommended by U.S. Representative Herb Conaway

Robin and Lou adopted three special needs sons: Armani, John, and Andrew. John and Andrew are biological twins; John is deaf and blind. One of the boys advocated at a municipal township meeting petition for a blind crossing signal to be put at a main crosswalk in the township. John and Andrew are Eagle Scouts. All three boys participated for years in the Special Olympics. Armani represented team US in Florida, and is also a firefighter with Delran Fire Dept. Andrew joined Delran Fire as a junior member. Lou Marino has been a Lieutenant firefighter in Delran since 1991, and was also the Animal Control officer for 14 years. The entire family volunteers for nearly every township function, including the boys in the activities. Lou and Robin also willingly and happily help their neighbors and community to navigate Special Education and Child Study Team resources, constantly giving new parents guidance with navigating the process. They are a 100% service-driven family and they have dedicated everything to providing for all three boys. They fight for every resource and service that could give them the best shot, while still also being active in every way with their community.



Vickie and Kenneth Mars

Wyoming

Recommended by U.S. Representative Harriet Hageman

Reverend Kenneth R. Mars was born and raised in Lubbock, TX, and attended Texas Tech University. While there, he met his future wife, Vickie, a military kid who had been raised mostly in the southwest. Vickie and Kenneth both earned bachelor's and master's degrees in geology and were married in 1997. Kenneth worked as a uranium geologist for five years in Casper, WY, before entering seminary in Fort Wayne, IN. In 2005, he was ordained and began serving a dual-parish in western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming, and Vickie began homeschooling their children. Their family grew from four biological children to eight total: Nathaniel (Hannah), Timothy (Elie), Patrick (Landrey), Maria (Tyler), Lydia, Sirena, Abigail, and Noah. Patrick, Sirena, and Noah were placed into their home as foster children in 2014 at ages 10, 6, and 1, respectively. They were officially adopted into the Mars family the following year. In 2021, Maria joined the family after she completed high school and soon thereafter was unofficially adopted. They moved to Cody, WY in 2022 where Kenneth now serves Christ the King Lutheran Church as pastor. Vickie and Kenneth have been blessed to watch the family continue to grow with four sets of in-laws and three living granddaughters. They give thanks to God for all His many gifts.



Hon. Deborah L. McNabb

Michigan
Recommended by U.S. Senator Gary Peters

Chief Judge Deborah McNabb of the Kent County 17th Circuit Court has made an extraordinary and enduring impact on child welfare through decades of judicial leadership, innovation, and unwavering advocacy for children and families. As the first woman to serve as Chief Judge of the 17th Circuit Court, she brings more than 25 years of experience in family court, where she has consistently championed practices that promote stability, permanency, and improved outcomes for vulnerable youth. Adopted as a child, Judge McNabb’s personal connection to the system profoundly shapes her work. Her career—from Michigan Migrant Legal Aid to Circuit Court Referee to Chief Judge—has been defined by a deep commitment to ensuring every child is seen, heard, and treated with dignity. She has presided over thousands of child welfare, adoption, and family cases, always with a focus on timely permanency and minimizing trauma for children. One of her most significant contributions is her leadership in implementing the “One Family, One Judge” model, which ensures that a single judicial officer oversees all aspects of a family’s case. This approach has reduced fragmentation, increased accountability, and strengthened judicial understanding of family dynamics, resulting in more consistent and child-centered decision-making.

More recently, Judge McNabb has been a driving force in implementing Michigan’s statewide juvenile justice reform. Under her leadership, Kent County has embraced evidence-based practices, including validated risk and needs assessments, individualized case planning, and expanded community-based programming designed to reduce out-of-home placements. She has supported the development of Juvenile Success Centers, strengthened diversion opportunities, and championed the use of incentives and family-centered interventions to promote positive youth outcomes. These efforts align services with each youth’s needs while holding systems accountable for measurable results—prioritizing rehabilitation over punishment. Beyond the courtroom, Judge McNabb is a collaborative leader who brings together courts, child welfare agencies, schools, and community partners to improve systems of care. Her vision, compassion, and commitment have transformed how child welfare and juvenile justice services are delivered in Kent County. Through her leadership, Judge McNabb continues to shape a more responsive, equitable, and effective system—one that gives every child the opportunity to thrive.



Jennifer McNary

Massachusetts

Recommended by U.S. Representative Seth Moulton

Jenn McNary is the proud biological mother of two men, Austin and Max, with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, son James with a primary immune deficiency, and a daughter, Norah. In her journey as a rare disease mom, Jenn recognized the significant need for a permanent family that so many children lack. In the beginning, she opened her home to foster children in emergent situations. As Jenn said, “I can’t completely change those kids’ lives, but sometimes just providing some love and support for one night makes a difference.” Jenn also opens her home to long-term placements, as well as harder-to-place children, often calling it a way to flex advocacy muscles in a very personal way.

Jenn did not stop there. In 2024, she adopted a daughter from foster care, Mia. Soon after, Jenn was faced with the devastating loss of her son, Austin, due to complications of his Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. While grieving the loss of her son, the bond with her foster daughter grew and she adopted Hazel Rose from foster care in late 2025. Over the past five years, she has cared for nearly 100 children in her home. What stands out about Jenn McNary as a mom, whether in the context of her biological children, her foster children, or her adopted children, is her ability to create a safe space for everyone. She knows when a child walks in the door that they need care, routine, and clear expectations. Children are drawn to her because she has a calm and loving presence.



Mission West Virginia, Inc.

West Virginia

Recommended by U.S. Representative Carol Miller

For nearly 30 years, Mission West Virginia (WV) has been a statewide leader in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. Through openness to new ideas, dedication to results and relationships, responsiveness, and keeping their mission in focus, Mission WV recruits, prepares, and supports foster, adoptive, and kinship families while helping children achieve safe, stable, and permanent homes. Serving the entire state, Mission WV offers comprehensive services, including foster and adoptive parent recruitment, training and family support, kinship navigation, child-specific recruitment, operates the states adoption exchange, academic mentoring, and educational success initiatives. The organization equips caregivers with the knowledge, resources, and ongoing support needed to navigate foster care and adoption while empowering youth to build life skills, succeed academically, and prepare for adulthood. And beyond, Mission WV has always been ready to "fill in gaps" of service delivery. Recognized for its collaborative spirit and innovative approach, Mission WV partners with state agencies, communities, and local organizations to address the evolving needs of children and families. By combining statewide reach with evidence-informed programming and personalized support, Mission WV helps thousands of WV children and caregivers build stronger families and brighter futures. Through their strong commitment to permanency, stability, and opportunity, Mission WV continues to improve lives across the Appalachian community.



Ashley Mitchell

Utah

Recommended by U.S. Senator John Curtis

Ashley Mitchell is the Co-Executive Director and Co-Founder of Adoption Rights, where she supports people impacted by private adoption through education, advocacy, and community support. As a birth mother in an open adoption, she has been a trusted and influential voice in adoption and motherhood spaces for nearly two decades, known for her transparency, compassion, and ability to translate complex social issues into accessible conversations. Through her platform, Big Tough Girl, she shares powerful stories and resources that inspire national dialogue on adoption ethics and reform. Beyond her work in adoption, Ashley has led community-based initiatives that champion family well-being and connect parents to meaningful resources. She serves on the Parent Advisory Board for Parents Driving Change, contributes as a Speaker and Committee Member with MomTalks Atlanta, and is a two-time Utah Mother of the Year nominee with American Mothers. She is also the Co-Creator of The Adoption Conference and created the first nationwide support group curriculum for birth mothers through her organization, Knee to Knee. Through her speaking, writing, and outreach, Ashley continues to build communities that honor dignity, equity, and lifelong support for women and families.

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Laila-Rose Moorehead

Nevada

Recommended by U.S. Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Laila-Rose Moorehead is an Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Nevada. Prior to joining the United States Attorney's Office in July 2026, she served as a Children's Attorney at the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, where she represented children and youth in the foster care system. Drawing on her decade of lived experience in foster care, Laila-Rose brings both professional expertise and personal understanding to her work, shaping a deeply rooted commitment to advocating for vulnerable children and strengthening the legal system that serves them. During her time representing foster youth, she helped young people navigate complex legal proceedings while ensuring they received strong, compassionate, and consistent representation, often serving as both a legal advocate and a steady source of support.

Her previous work at the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada reflected the organization's mission of providing direct legal representation, counsel, and community education to individuals who cannot afford an attorney. Through its broad range of programs, the organization serves victims of domestic violence and crime, individuals facing consumer fraud, and children involved in the foster care system. Although her professional role has evolved, Laila-Rose remains deeply committed to serving foster youth and continues to represent a limited number of youth on a pro bono basis. Her advocacy is informed not only by her legal training but also by her lived experience, reflecting a lifelong dedication to ensuring that every child in the system is seen, heard, and protected.



Jolene M. Mullins

Florida

Recommended by U.S. Representative Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick

Jolene has dedicated herself to ensuring that young children and families in Florida's 20th congressional district have access to nutritious food. Over the past year, as reductions in benefits have increased food insecurity, her efforts have been especially critical. Through her tireless work, Jolene has helped ensure that vulnerable children and families receive the nourishment and support they need to thrive.



My G.E.A.R. Outreach

Iowa

Recommended by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

My G.E.A.R. Outreach is a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing comfort, hope, and stability to children from birth through age 18 as they experience the traumatic transition into foster care, adoption, or relative (kinship) placement for the first time.

Their mission is reflected in the meaning of G.E.A.R.:

- Give the hope of Jesus.
- Equip children with their most basic needs.
- Accept every child with love, dignity, and compassion.
- Restore relationships within their families and communities.

My G.E.A.R. Outreach provides Welcome Boxes and First Overnight Bags filled with essential items to meet children's immediate needs while reminding them they are loved, valued, and never alone. Beyond those first moments, they continue supporting children and families through Back-to-School Bashes, Adoption Celebration Bags, Happy Birthday Bags, Apartment in a Suitcase gifts for teens aging out of care, Graduation Parties, Connection Events, and Christmas Parties. Every program is designed to provide practical support, restore dignity, and create lasting memories for children and families navigating the foster care journey in Eastern Iowa and Western Illinois.



Anne and Don Nelson

Indiana

Recommended by U.S. Senator Jim Banks

Anne and Don Nelson exemplify the spirit of the Angels in Adoption® Program through their resilience and unwavering commitment to children and families. They are overwhelmed by God’s faithfulness as they reflect on their adoption journey. After experiencing the hardships of miscarriage and infertility, they pursued adoption, navigating a challenging and complex process from international to domestic adoption with determination and faith. Through seasons of waiting, uncertainty, disappointment, and joy, God was at work in ways they could not always see. Their perseverance led them to welcome their daughters, Olivia and Anabella, into a loving and stable home. Anne and Don are deeply grateful for the birth mothers whose love and sacrifice are an important part of their daughters’ stories. Throughout their marriage, the Nelsons have built a family grounded in faith, service, and dedication. As homeschooling parents, they invested deeply in their daughters’ academic, emotional, and spiritual growth. Today, Olivia and Anabella are thriving teenagers – a testament to God’s faithfulness in equipping Anne and Don as adoptive parents.



Alexia Newman

South Carolina
Recommended by U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham

Alexia Newman has served as Executive Director of the Carolina Pregnancy Center (CPC) for 37 years. Under her leadership, the Center has grown from serving just 56 women in its first year to reaching approximately 3,000 clients annually. Today, CPC provides vital services including ultrasounds, parenting classes, mentoring programs, and material assistance for individuals and families facing pregnancy-related needs. Alexia has devoted her life to ministry, community service, and advocacy. For her, the Carolina Pregnancy Center is far more than a job, it is family. An initial visit to the Center is often just the beginning of an enduring relationship. Alexia builds genuine connections with those she serves and continues to offer support long after their first appointment. Her work has impacted countless lives, with many children across generations benefiting from her dedication and care. Through her compassion and steadfast faith, Alexia represents the very best of our state and continues to make a meaningful, lasting difference in the lives of others.



New Mercies Ministries

Indiana

Recommended by U.S. Representative Marlin Stutzman

New Mercies Ministries' Hosting Ministry exemplifies compassionate, practical faith in action by providing urgent, family-centered care for children and stabilization support for parents facing crises. Families turn to New Mercies during hospitalization, mental-health emergencies, domestic violence, substance-use treatment, incarceration, and other crises. Whether parents self-refer or are connected through shelters, hospitals, social service agencies, or treatment centers, New Mercies responds quickly and professionally to preserve family integrity. Their strength lies in a thorough, safety-first approach: children are placed only with carefully screened and trained volunteer Host Families, and each hosting arrangement is overseen by a dedicated Family Coach. These coaches closely monitor the child's well-being in the host home while partnering with parents to set and achieve measurable, individualized goals, ensuring that hosting is not merely temporary care but a bridge to family restoration.

New Mercies goes beyond crisis intervention by investing in long-term resilience. After a hosting, mothers are invited into Rooted Together, a mentorship program that pairs each woman with a mentor-friend for ongoing spiritual and practical support. Through guided Bible study and twice-monthly fellowship nights, participants build community, deepen life skills, and work toward sustainable stability for their families. Serving 11 counties across northeast Indiana, New Mercies combines regional reach with individualized care. Their model honors both the child's immediate safety and the parent's dignity and potential for change, creating measurable pathways from crisis to restoration.



Sara and Nicholas Pendleton

Mississippi
Recommended by U.S. Senator Roger Wicker

Sara and Nic Pendleton have been foster parents for more than 15 years and have welcomed over 25 children into their home. The Pendletons have a unique foster care journey with their commitment to caring for medically fragile children. They often welcome children directly from settings such as state hospitals, providing them not only with critical medical care, but with the stability of a family. When reunification is not possible, they offer a forever home. To date, Sara and Nic have adopted five children from foster care and are also parents to one biological son. Beyond meeting the intensive medical and daily needs of the children in their care, the Pendletons take time to understand each child's unique abilities and advocate fiercely on their behalf. Their advocacy extends beyond their own family, as they work to amplify the voices of children with similar needs. From empowering their autistic daughter to advocate for herself and access appropriate educational supports, to building a statewide community for caregivers of medically fragile children and speaking with foster parents across the state, their impact reaches far beyond their home.



Heidi Peppers and Emily Story

Wisconsin

Recommended by U.S. Representative Gwen Moore

Heidi Peppers and Emily Story were licensed as foster parents in 2016. Just one month later, they welcomed a baby girl into their home. Over the next few years, they also took placement of her two younger brothers, ensuring all three siblings could remain together under one roof. Throughout their fostering journey, Heidi and Emily built a supportive and respectful relationship with the children's birth mother, including providing transportation to medical appointments and advocating for her during legal proceedings. Their approach reflected a deep commitment to family connection and reunification whenever possible. When reunification was no longer an option, Heidi and Emily adopted the three siblings, providing them with a permanent, loving home that continues to meet each child's unique needs. Earlier this fall, they also welcomed the children's younger sibling into their care, continuing their commitment to keeping the family connected. Those who visit their home consistently note the strong sense of love, stability, and attentiveness Heidi and Emily provide. Their dedication to sibling unity, family relationships, and individualized care reflects the heart of their parenting and their ongoing commitment to the children they serve.



Charlene Platter

Maryland

Recommended by U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen

Charlene Platter's extraordinary career with the Allegany County Department of Social Services, beginning June 18, 1986, reflects a lifelong commitment to ensuring children grow up in safe, stable, and permanent families. For nearly four decades, she has been a driving force behind meaningful, measurable improvements in outcomes for children and families across Allegany County. Under her leadership, the agency strengthened pathways to permanency, including reunification, guardianship, and adoption. When children could not safely remain at home, Charlene ensured they were placed in nurturing, familiar environments that promoted stability and lasting connections. A forward-thinking and resourceful administrator, Charlene consistently secured external funding to expand and enhance services. These efforts increased program capacity and positioned the department to respond effectively to evolving community needs. She played a pivotal role in strengthening the Out of Home Unit and advancing the overall effectiveness of child welfare practice. Equally impactful is Charlene's commitment to workforce development. She cultivated strong partnerships with Frostburg State University and Allegany College of Maryland, creating hands-on training pipelines that attract and prepare future professionals. Internally, she fostered a culture of growth through mentorship, coaching, and leadership development, while championing strategies to successfully transition interns into dedicated full-time staff. Charlene Platter's legacy is one of vision, compassion, and enduring impact. She has helped build a more responsive, prevention-driven, and family-centered child welfare system that will benefit Allegany County for generations to come.



Raise the Future

Colorado

Recommended by U.S. Representative Diana DeGette

For more than 40 years, Raise the Future has been a steadfast leader in advancing permanency and stability for children and youth impacted by foster care across Colorado and beyond. With a deep commitment to serving some of the most vulnerable populations, including older youth, sibling groups, and children with complex behavioral, emotional, or medical needs, the organization has transformed the child welfare landscape through innovative, compassionate, and community-driven solutions. Raise the Future's work spans the full continuum of care, from prevention and early intervention to the recruitment, preparation, and support of adoptive families, as well as comprehensive post-adoption services. By focusing not only on finding permanent families but also on ensuring those families are supported long after placement, the organization has helped thousands of children achieve lasting connection, stability, and a sense of belonging.

A defining strength of Raise the Future is its ability to convene public agencies, private partners, and community members to develop meaningful and sustainable solutions. Through programs that center youth voice, address trauma, reduce systemic barriers, and strengthen families, the organization ensures that each child's unique needs are understood and met. Their work reinforces the belief that permanency is not simply a placement outcome, but a lifelong commitment requiring ongoing care and support. Prevention is central to Raise the Future's mission. By intervening early and providing consistent, relationship-based support, the organization helps prevent youth from exiting foster care only to enter other costly and harmful systems such as homelessness, substance use, early pregnancy, or incarceration. These efforts stabilize placements, reduce disruptions, and decrease the likelihood of youth re-entering care, resulting in improved outcomes for children and significant cost savings for the state. Raise the Future's legacy in Colorado is one of innovation, collaboration, and unwavering dedication to children and families.

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Ronnette and Bryan Rock

Maryland

Recommended by U.S. Representative Sarah Elfreth

Ronnette and Bryan Rock exemplify the spirit of Angels in Adoption® through their extraordinary commitment to children and families in Anne Arundel County. Since becoming foster parents with the Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services in May 2021, they have cared for 16 children, including sibling groups and children needing emergency or respite care. The Rocks have adopted one child who was placed with them directly from the hospital and has remained in their loving care ever since. His adoption was finalized in November 2025. Despite his specialized needs, Ronnette and Bryan have consistently provided exceptional care, ensuring that every medical, developmental, and emotional need is met. They also obtained custody and guardianship of an older sibling group, preserving the children's vital family connection and providing them with a stable, permanent home.

Beyond their own household, the Rocks actively support the broader foster care community. Bryan mentors prospective foster and adoptive parents with pre-service training and has served on the Anne Arundel County Foster Parent Association. Ronnette has provided leadership through the same Foster Parent Association, collaborating with community partners on advocacy efforts, coat, toy, and diaper drives, and other initiatives. Together, they support birth families, promote reunification, keep siblings together, and provide a nurturing foundation for children in need. Their compassion, leadership, and unwavering dedication make them truly deserving Angels in Adoption.



Alexia Rodriguez

Rhode Island
Recommended by U.S. Senator Jack Reed

Alexia Rodriguez is a Soldier in the Rhode Island Army National Guard, Miss Rhode Island 2025, and advocate for children and youth in foster care. Having experienced foster care before being adopted, Alexia understands firsthand the challenges many foster youth face. Her lived experience allows her to connect authentically with children currently in care while bringing a unique perspective to conversations with community leaders, policymakers, and child welfare professionals. She is passionate about turning her story into action and ensuring every child knows their circumstances do not define their future.

Through her initiative, Foster Hope, Adopt a Dream, Alexia advocates for foster youth through public speaking, community outreach, education, and collaboration with organizations dedicated to improving the child welfare system. She works to raise awareness, encourage community involvement, and help create opportunities that empower children and families. By sharing her journey, Alexia hopes to challenge misconceptions surrounding foster care while inspiring others to become champions for children in need. Alexia's vision is a child welfare system where every child feels safe, every voice is heard, and every young person has the opportunity to reach their full potential. She believes that when children are given stability, support, and someone who believes in them, they can build extraordinary lives.



The Sacred Portion Children's Outreach

Montana

Recommended by U.S. Senator Steve Daines

The Sacred Portion Children's Outreach is a state-licensed and Hague-accredited adoption agency dedicated to "creating better environments and brighter futures for children without families." As the only Hague-accredited agency in Montana, the highest ethical standards are upheld, ensuring the protection and wellbeing of children and families throughout the adoption process. The mission of The Sacred Portion Children's Outreach has always been to assist orphanages to provide quality care for resident children; to seek families to adopt internationally and domestically; to advocate for older children who are harder to place in adoptive families; and to offer an opportunity for people to give their "sacred portion" out of love and obedience (Deuteronomy 26:11-14). The Sacred Portion Children's Outreach conducts international and domestic adoption home studies and post-placement supervision for families in Montana. They also facilitate inter-country adoptions, primarily with the Philippines, for families across the United States. Thank you, Angels in Adoption®, for the honor of this recognition and for how you support and strengthen the realm of adoption with your work in Washington D.C.!



Wendy Spoerl

Ohio

Recommended by U.S. Senator Jon Husted

Ms. Spoerl has served at Adopt America Network for over 25 years, announcing in December of 2025 that she intended to retire in the coming year. In her role as President of Adopt America Network, a Toledo, OH-based national adoption charity, she assisted approximately 3,000 children in joining their adoptive families. Ms. Spoerl's work isn't confined to just local foster and adoption issues, she has been an advocate at both the state and national levels, serving on numerous professional organizations, including the National Adoption Association and Voice for Adoption. Ms. Spoerl lends her voice and expertise to numerous professional conferences and works with constituents nationwide to improve legislation and programs that help children in foster care successfully transition out of the system and have the chance to achieve their own version of the American Dream. Ms. Spoerl helped establish the Richard K. Ransom Award for service to Children and Families, presented annually at the Adopt America Network's "Home for Good" Gala. Recipients include the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Ms. Debra Waller of the Jockey "Being Family" Foundation, actors Jamie Farr and Dean Cain, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, former NFL Quarterback Daunte Culpepper, and Bishop W.C. Martin and Lady Donna Martin. Under Ms. Spoerl's leadership, Adopt America Network has received numerous awards and recognition for its work on behalf of children and families.



Kendyl and Will Standridge

Alabama

Recommended by U.S. Representative Robert Aderholt

Will Standridge serves as the pastor of Geraldine First Baptist Church, where he is passionate about faithfully preaching God's Word, shepherding the congregation, and helping people grow in their relationship with Christ. He and his wife, Kendyl, have a deep love for their family and are thankful for the opportunity to grow it through adoption. Together, they are the grateful parents of their adopted daughter, Mackenzie, who is now two years old and brings endless joy and laughter to their home. They are currently in the process of another adoption and are prayerfully anticipating the day they can welcome another child into their family. Throughout this journey, they have experienced God's faithfulness and the love and support of their church family. Kendyl and Will are grateful for the privilege of serving their community and desire for both their home and ministry to reflect Christ's love and compassion.



STEPSTONE®

FAMILY & YOUTH SERVICES

StepStone Family & Youth Services

Kentucky

Recommended by U.S. Representative Morgan McGarvey

StepStone's impact is both measurable and deeply meaningful. In the past year alone, 170 children achieved pre-adoptive or adoptive placements through StepStone's foster care network. Over the last three years, 652 children have reached pre-adoptive or adoptive placements. Each number represents a child whose life trajectory has been transformed; each one a child who now has the security and belonging of a forever family. Equally important to StepStone's vision is its commitment to family preservation and kinship care when safe and appropriate. In 2025, 219 children were safely reunified with their primary caregivers, and 225 children were placed with relatives. StepStone works collaboratively with state agency partners, birth parents, courts, and community stakeholders to ensure permanency decisions are timely, child-centered, trauma-informed, and lasting. StepStone's success is grounded in individualized planning and accountability. In 2025, all 2,438 children served by StepStone had an agency-developed initial and ongoing safety and well-being plan, reflecting its commitment to quality, oversight, and measurable outcomes. For the hundreds of children who have been reunited, placed with relatives, or welcomed into adoptive families they now call their own, StepStone has demonstrated what it truly means to be an Angel in Adoption - ensuring children do not simply move through a system, but instead move to a home.



Nicole M. Stewart

Massachusetts
Recommended by U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley

Nicole Stewart, Executive Director of Boston CASA, is redefining what's possible for children and youth in foster care. A former foster youth herself, Stewart leads an organization that recruits, trains, and supports Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) who serve children removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect in Suffolk and Middlesex Counties. Boston CASA currently supports over 300 children annually through a growing corps of trained volunteers. Each CASA advocates for the best interests of one child or sibling group, helping improve safety, permanency, and access to critical services. The cost? Just \$4,500 per youth per year—an astonishing contrast to the \$300K–\$500K estimated public cost of a single unsupported foster youth. Judges overwhelmingly support the model: 92% say CASAs improve outcomes, and 80% say they support psychological well-being. Under Stewart's leadership, Boston CASA increased fundraising by 25% in FY2024 and surpassed \$1.4 million in annual revenue for the first time. That momentum is powering a five-year strategic plan to double the number of children served and reach nearly 50% of eligible foster youth in the region by 2028. To meet demand, Stewart has expanded volunteer training cohorts from two to three annually and added key staff roles, including a Transitional Age Youth Coordinator.

A former foster youth with two master's degrees, Stewart brings firsthand insight into the systemic barriers in child welfare and understands the transformative impact of a caring adult. She launched a Youth Advisory Board to ensure that the experiences and needs of foster youth aging out of care, often without family support and resources, inform policy and drive meaningful change. Through strategic partnerships with courts, agencies, and donors—and by centering lived experience—Stewart has made Boston CASA a more effective, representative, and sustainable organization. Her work demonstrates that advocacy, equity, and economic efficiency are not mutually exclusive—they're essential to building a better child welfare system.



Jenna and Robert Stoner

Nebraska

Recommended by U.S. Representative Adrian Smith

Jenna and Robert Stoner, a family from Holdrege, NE, adopted one youth with higher needs. A short while later, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was looking for a home for a sibling group of three children, some of whom had significant behavioral and attachment issues. The Stoners were committed to the siblings from the moment they agreed to the placement. The nurturance and care they provided allowed the siblings to feel safe, and their caseworkers observed a dramatic decrease in behaviors. The Stoners never wavered in their dedication to these children and, even through the most challenging behaviors, consistently reassured them that they were loved and that they were not going anywhere. They treated the siblings as their own from day one. They were always open and honest about expectations while continuing to reinforce that the siblings were there to stay. The Stoners also took it upon themselves to seek further education on attachment issues and how best to support the siblings. The DHHS caseworker expressed a wish that they could clone Robert and Jenna to provide more homes for youth in need of permanent placements. Currently, the Stoners have adopted four children, and have seven children total.



Mary Suddath BSN RN

Georgia

Recommended by U.S. Representative Buddy Carter

Mary Suddath is a dedicated nursing professional and community advocate with a strong commitment to child welfare and public service. Mary graduated from Burbank Hospital School of Nursing in 1977 and received her BSN from Fitchburg State University in 1983 prior to relocating to Georgia. She spent the next 38 years as a Pediatric ICU nurse at Memorial in Savannah where she also served on numerous leadership boards and committees before retiring in 2021. Her volunteer history includes serving as a Judicial Citizen Panel Review member for 15 years and a member and past-chair of the Chatham County Fatality Review Team. She is a member of the Coastal Georgia Nurse Honor Guard, the Bryan County Republican Party, and an Ambassador with Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality - North American Volunteers. Her expertise has led to appearances on several nationally syndicated podcasts and radio programs, where she shared insights on nursing, the open adoption experience, and medical child abuse.

Mary has been married for 49 years to her husband Mathew, a retired respiratory therapist. Together, they homeschooled their three adult children from kindergarten through high school. After serving as foster parents for five years, Mary, Mathew, and their biological daughter welcomed their two youngest children into the family through adoption. Mary and Mathew have been residents of Richmond Hill, a suburb of Savannah, since 1994.



Tracy Swain

New Jersey

Recommended by U.S. Representative Thomas Kean

Tracy Swain adopted her daughter, Olivia (17), through New Jersey's Department of Child Protection and Permanency nearly 10 years ago. A dedicated single mother, Tracy works full-time as an education consultant while remaining deeply committed to Olivia's growth and well-being. Through Tracy's steady support and nurturing presence, Olivia has flourished into a thoughtful and resilient young woman. Olivia's early years were marked by significant challenges, as her birth mother struggled with heroin addiction, and her childhood was shaped by instability, abuse, and neglect. Despite this difficult beginning, Tracy's unwavering care and commitment have provided Olivia with the stability, love, and encouragement needed to grow and thrive.



Kalei and Miller Thompson

South Carolina
Recommended by U.S. Senator Tim Scott

Kalei and Miller Thompson grew their family through adoption after serving as foster parents. Since 2019, they have opened their home to children in foster care, and in 2024 they adopted three of their foster children. Through fostering and adoption, the Thompsons have learned to hold the grief and beauty that coexist in caring for children during their most vulnerable days — a balance they continue to navigate through their ongoing relationships with their children's biological mothers.

Professionally, Kalei and Miller both work to serve children. Miller, a graduate of Clemson University, Francis Marion University, and the University of South Carolina, holds two master's degrees in education. Over the past decade, he has served in the public school districts of Darlington and Aiken Counties, and he currently serves students ages 3–18 as Head of School at Curtis Baptist School in Augusta, GA. Kalei earned her nursing degree from Anderson University and has spent the past decade working as a registered nurse, with a particular passion for pediatrics. This fall, she will begin practicing as a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, providing trauma-informed care to her patients daily.

The Thompsons reside in North Augusta, SC, where they are active in advocacy through their work, their church, and their partnership with a South Carolina nonprofit organization.



Treehouse

Washington

Recommended by U.S. Representative Adam Smith

Treehouse is Washington state's leading organization advancing educational opportunities for youth in foster care. Students in foster care don't lack ability or drive, yet they experience the poorest educational outcomes in a world where a high school diploma opens doors. In partnership with youth, Treehouse removes barriers and creates opportunities for youth in foster care to thrive.

Founded in 1988, Treehouse provides educational support and advocacy, access to everyday essentials and experiences that increase school engagement, and improves the systems that shape young people's lives. In partnership with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), and communities across Washington, their direct service helps young people today, and their work to change the child welfare and education systems expands what is possible for every young person tomorrow. Since 2013, Washington's statewide graduation rate for students experiencing foster care has increased from 36% to 51%. Treehouse is proud to have helped drive this progress while working toward a future where foster care and education are bridges to opportunity and independence.



Taylor Tugwell

Virginia

Recommended by U.S. Senator Mark Warner

At just 20 years old, Taylor fostered two children, Violet and Chase, who were 7 and 8 at the time, after their mother tragically passed away. They did not have fathers present in their lives, and in the years leading up to her death, they experienced significant neglect, abuse, and trauma. Stepping into that role at a young age required immediate sacrifice and a level of responsibility that reshaped Taylor's life. Taylor made the difficult decision to step away from college to provide the children with the stability and care they desperately needed. In many ways, their story mirrored Taylor's own childhood. She experienced instability growing up, and it was only because of the adults who stepped in and gave her a safe, supportive environment that she was able to build a better future. That perspective fueled her commitment to do the same for Violet and Chase.

In their first year under Taylor's care, Violet underwent two major surgeries. Navigating those medical challenges while helping both children process trauma required resilience, advocacy, and constant support. Taylor worked to ensure they received the care they needed by connecting them with multiple forms of therapy and creating an environment where healing could begin. Over time, Taylor was able to rebuild her own path, as well. She obtained her real estate license and went on to build a successful career, allowing her to provide further stability and opportunities for the children. She enrolled them in private school and created a consistent, nurturing home environment where they could grow and thrive. Now at the age of 30, Taylor can confidently say that this experience has shaped her passion for advocating for children in foster care and adoption spaces. She understands firsthand the impact that one stable, committed adult can have on a child's life, and she is dedicated to being that presence while encouraging others to step into similar roles.



Washoe CASA Foundation

Nevada

Recommended by U.S. Senator Jacky Rosen

The Washoe CASA Foundation supports the Second Judicial District Court, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program in Washoe County by raising funds, increasing community awareness, and recruiting volunteers who advocate for children in foster care who have experienced abuse or neglect. CASA volunteers serve as consistent, trusted adults who work alongside the courts and child welfare professionals to help ensure each child's best interests remain the priority. Through community partnerships, fundraising initiatives, volunteer recruitment, and educational outreach, the Foundation helps expand the CASA program's capacity to serve more children in foster care throughout Washoe County.



Tiffany Wright

Arkansas

Recommended by U.S. Senator John Boozman

As the Director of the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for Arkansas, Tiffany Wright is responsible for the safety of children and youth in the state, child abuse and neglect prevention, foster care, and adoption programs. In addition to her current leadership role, she has spent her entire career dedicated to advocating for children and families. She joined DCFS in 2009 as a family service worker tasked with providing protective and foster care services to children experiencing abuse and neglect. In 2016, she was promoted to Foster Care Program Manager, working to engage, support, and recruit foster families across the state. In 2019, she became the Foster Care and Adoption Program Administrator. In this role, she bolstered efforts to bring permanency to children in foster care and engaged partners in impactful initiatives like the Project Zero Heart Gallery, which features compelling biographies and photos of adoptable children in need of loving forever homes. In addition to being a compassionate and effective leader, she is also known for being willing to do whatever it takes to bring attention to adoption efforts in the state. This includes in 2025 when she announced she would run one mile for every child in foster care in the state who is waiting to be adopted.



YCS Specialized Treatment Homes

New Jersey

Recommended by U.S. Senator Cory Booker

Youth Consultation Services (YCS) has a rich history spanning more than a century, beginning as a refuge for orphaned children and abandoned women in need of safety and support. Over time, the organization has grown and evolved to meet the changing needs of the communities it serves, while remaining steadfast in its mission to care for those most vulnerable. Today, YCS transforms lives across New Jersey through more than 60 dynamic programs, including specialized schools, community-based mental health clinics, and residential care services. Each of these programs is designed to provide stability, healing, and opportunity, ensuring that individuals facing significant challenges are met with compassion and comprehensive support. Through this wide-reaching network of services, YCS continues to empower children, families, and communities, creating pathways toward resilience, independence, and lasting well-being.

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