

Testimony
Health and Human Services Committee
Representative Weisz, Chairman
August 5, 2010

Chairman Weisz and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Tara Lea Muhlhauser, and I am the Director of Children and Family Services (CFS) in the Department of Human Services (DHS). I am here today at your request to provide information on the Services for Pregnant Minors Study, specifically the number of infant adoptions and the number of adoptions that resulted from removals through the child welfare system.

Over the last eight years, the number of international adoptions has decreased from 22 in 2001 to 15 in 2008. Over the last eight years, the number of infant adoption (non-child welfare removal adoptions or "regular" adoptions) has decreased from 54 in 2001 to 37 in 2008. Over the last eight years, the number of special needs adoptions (generally from child welfare situations/foster care) has increased from 94 in 2001 to 115 in 2008.

Infant adoptions at the child placing agencies include both regular adoptions of infants from ND as well as infants from other states. This also includes adoptions of children relinquished to identified adoptive parents.

Special needs adoptions are generally adoptions of children from foster care (removed from the custody of their parents through the juvenile court process). Adoptions in this category are facilitated through a

private agency contract with the department (Adults Adopting Special Kids-AASK).

Over a five year period, the rate of foster parent adoptions of children with special needs was 85.8%. This means that for the 452 special needs adoptions that took place in those years, 388 were by the child's foster parent (who in some cases may also have been related to the child).

The adoption assessment is a process of providing information and education about adoption to the family as well as a mutual assessment by the family and the agency of the families' strengths and challenges as it relates to the parenting of a child through adoption. This assessment process includes group preparation, autobiographical information provided by the prospective adoptive parents, criminal background checks, reference letters, individual and family meetings with the social worker doing the assessment, and may include psychological testing as well.

The adoption process can take anywhere from three months to a year or more depending upon the circumstances of the specific situation. A child must reside in the home of the adoptive parents for six months before an adoptive placement may be finalized in a court, pursuant to North Dakota law. Adoption is a two step legal process – the termination or relinquishment of birth parent rights in one hearing, and the adoption finalization in another hearing.

Please let me know whether you have questions or need additional information.