

Highlights of [GAO-05-292](#), a report to congressional requesters

CHILD WELFARE

Better Data and Evaluations Could Improve Processes and Programs for Adopting Children with Special Needs

Why GAO Did This Study

On September 30, 2002, the most recent date for which Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) data were available, about 126,000 foster children were waiting to be adopted. Estimates suggest that a significant portion of these children had one or more special needs, such as a medical condition or membership in a minority group, that may discourage or delay their adoption. Federal support in the form of adoption subsidies and incentive payments to states is available to promote special needs adoption. This report (1) identifies the major challenges to placing and keeping special needs children in adoptive homes, (2) examines what states and HHS have done to facilitate special needs adoptions, and (3) assesses how well the Adoption Assistance Program and the Adoption Incentives Program have worked to facilitate special needs adoptions, and determines if changes might be needed.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HHS improve its data collection and evaluation efforts. HHS did not explicitly agree or disagree with the recommendations. It said that changes to address the data collection recommendations were being considered and that while steps to strengthen evaluations have been taken, some project results have sometimes been of limited use because of problems adhering to evaluation protocols.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-292.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

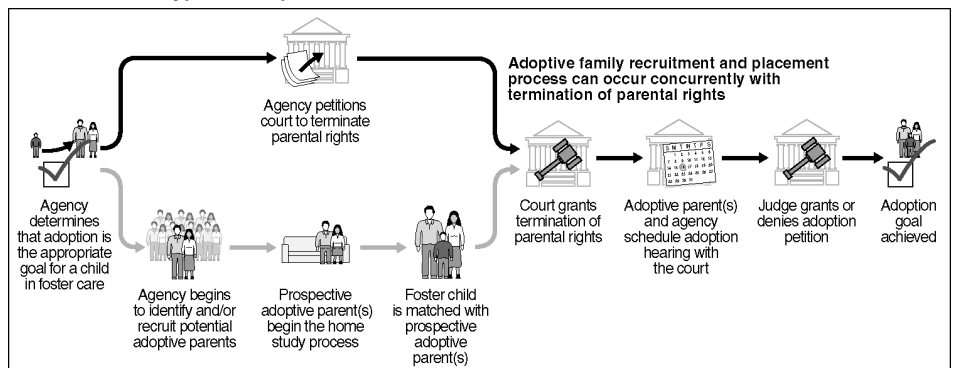
What GAO Found

According to state child welfare officials, limited resources, court processes, and delays in completing interstate placements challenged the adoption of children with special needs by hindering recruitment of adoptive families and delaying the adoption process. In particular, adoptive parents in many states received lower subsidies and fewer services than foster parents. In addition, child welfare officials, court staff, and judges said that the adoption process can take months to complete because hearings to terminate parents' rights are hard to schedule and may involve appeals. Further, officials said that interstate placements are often hampered by delays in completing home studies of prospective families, although no data exist to assess the timeliness of such placements.

States and HHS have developed and implemented strategies and programs to promote special needs adoptions, but few evaluations measure their effectiveness. Four of the 5 states we visited sponsored post adoption resource centers. However, only 9 of 49 states responding to a relevant question in our survey indicated that they had evaluated the effectiveness of their services. At the federal level, HHS supported and promoted local innovation, provided technical assistance, and disseminated information, but the agency has done little to assess the effectiveness of the programs it has funded. When HHS has taken steps to have states assess funded projects, the agency has not ensured sufficient rigor to assess effectiveness.

The Adoption Assistance and Adoption Incentives Programs have provided support for special needs adoptions, but data are lacking to determine if changes are needed to better facilitate adoption. The former uses an income eligibility threshold that is more restrictive than other cash assistance programs' standards of need and may not include all who might otherwise qualify. Since 1998, the Adoption Incentives Program has provided financial awards to almost all states for increasing adoptions, but does not provide a specific inducement for interstate placements. Data to track and credit states for collaborating on interstate placements are not available.

Flowchart of a Typical Adoption Process



Source: GAO.