

APPLICATION AND HOME STUDIES

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I. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

The following requirements apply to all persons desiring to adopt a child from the Department.

A. Citizenship

An adoption application may be accepted where either the prospective father or mother is a United States citizen. For single parent adoptions, the parent must be a citizen of the United States. If naturalization is imminent, the family study may be initiated, but approval will not be given until citizenship of at least one parent is granted.

B. Residence

Applications may be accepted from persons who currently live in Alabama, and who expect to remain in Alabama long enough to complete the application process and remain a reasonable period of time for consideration for placement. Inquiring families who live outside the State should be referred to the public social service agency in the state where they live.

C. Age

Pursuant to *Code of Alabama 1975*, § 26-10E-5, each petitioner seeking to adopt a minor must be an adult and at least 10 years older than the adoptee, unless either of the following are true:

- a) The petitioner is a stepparent or relative and files for adoption pursuant to Sections 26-10E-27 or 26-10E-28.
- b) The probate court finds, based on evidence in the record, that the adoption is in the best interests of the adoptee.

D. Marital Status

Applications may be accepted from both single and married persons. Married applicants must have been married at least three (3) years and provide verification to be included in the home study. Acceptable marriage verification includes a valid marriage certificate, other official records indicating marriage, or marriage verification sufficient to recognize a legal marriage. If previous marriages (including common-law), divorces or spousal death have occurred, they must be verified, and a copy of the verification included in the home study. An application cannot be processed where there is a married couple, living together, and one spouse does not want to adopt.

Alabama law effective January 1, 2017, abolished common law marriages in Alabama entered into on or after January 1, 2017. Couples who entered into a valid common law marriage prior to January 1, 2017, shall continue to be valid in Alabama. Common law marriage may only be considered to meet the requirement if the applicants have been in the common law marriage a minimum of three years prior to January 1, 2017 and provide three forms of verification. However, the couple must legally marry before approval can be given. Verification examples include, but are not limited to, the fact that one spouse uses the other spouse's surname; in social settings the couple is regarded as a

married couple; and both individuals are listed on utility bills, mortgages, rental agreements, leases, and tax returns. A common law marriage is ended only by a legal divorce. Established case law requires all the following for a marriage to be common-law.

- The couple has capacity of age and intellectual function and is legally free to marry.
- The couple presently has a mutual agreement to permanently enter the marriage relationship to the exclusion of all other relationships. There is public recognition of the couple's relationship as being a marriage and public assumption of marital duties and cohabitation.

In instances where the permanent plan for a child in a foster home is adoption by the child's single foster parent, and that foster parent marries, *Minimum Standards For Foster Family Homes* marriage requirements are applicable. The couple must have been married for one (1) year before the foster parent adoption can proceed, and this is subsequent to the new spouse completing all the other minimum requirements, including MAPP or Deciding Together.

E. Race

Race or national origin cannot be used as the single or exclusive criterion in the placement of children for adoption. This is strictly prohibited by the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA) and the Inter-Ethnic Adoption Provisions (IEPA). The categorical denial of placement based on race or national origin is hereby prohibited.

The consideration of race or national origin of the child or prospective parents will be used as one (1) relevant factor in placements only if doing so is in the child's best interest. This determination must be made on a case-by-case basis taking into account the child, the parents, and their specific circumstances.

F. Religion

Applications may be accepted from persons of any religious faith. Children should have parents who can give them an opportunity for spiritual and ethical development. When seeking a placement for older children, consideration must be given to their religious faith and activities to which they are familiar and accepting, and that of the prospective adoptive parents. Religious practices, beliefs and doctrines are to be considered as they relate to the child's best interest, and may be a more critical factor, particularly if a child has identified medical needs.

G. Health

The Physical Examination for Foster and/or Adoptive Applicants (DHR-FCS-634) must be completed for each prospective adoptive parent. Also required are medical reports for all household members indicating they are in good health and free of contagious diseases. If there are medical issues (i.e., physical or mental) that may impact the family's ability to parent a child, additional information and documentation must be requested. New

physical exams and medical reports must be completed and submitted every two (2) years.

H. Financial Stability

There is no minimum income level for adoptive applicants. The person/couple should have sufficient income and savings to meet its needs and provide for the child(ren) without difficulty. Money management is as important as the amount of income and savings. Applicants must complete a Financial Statement for Foster and/or Adoptive Applicants (DHR- FCS-705).

I. Employment

Applications may be accepted from persons who are employed outside the home. Prospective parents' employment and childcare plans must be discussed during the adoption home study. A child may be placed with adoptive parents even though they plan to continue their employment outside the home. The Department must exercise sound discretion in requiring an adoptive parent to remain at home for a reasonable period of time with adopted children when the parent's presence is needed to ensure a child's adjustment.

J. Motivation

It is important to understand the motives of applicants who are seeking a child and the extent to which they are motivated by their own needs and by a child's needs. The desire to adopt a child should be based on emotionally healthy needs (e.g., the desire to accept parental responsibility). Where infertility is present, the issues surrounding the infertility should be addressed when considering parents' motivation to adopt.

K. Assurance Of Medical Treatment

The Department must have assurance from the adoptive parents that they will provide medical insurance coverage for children placed in their home. When children with special needs have Medicaid coverage, this will be given consideration as assurance of the ability to provide medical care. The parents must also be willing to provide medical **treatment** to children as recommended by a legally licensed physician. Adoptive applicants who have religious beliefs that may prohibit their assurance of medical treatment must, at a minimum, agree to authorize a competent adult to provide an adopted child with medical treatment recommended by a legally licensed physician. A Medical Assurance Form (DHR-FCS-2131) must be completed.

L. Child Abuse / Neglect Central Registry Clearances

All household members age fourteen (14) years and older must sign a Child Abuse/Neglect Central Registry Clearance (DHR-DFC-1598) and be cleared through that registry as part of the adoptive home study process. If prospective adoptive parents and any other adults living in the home have resided in any other state in the past five years, the child abuse and neglect registry of each state resided in during the past five years must be checked. "Indicated" CA/N reports must be thoroughly reviewed and discussed

with the applicants. Whether approval can be given is based, at a minimum, on the details of the report - the allegations, the initial assessment, the disposition and any recommendations made; the response of the individual(s) involved; the impact on the child(ren) involved in the report; lessons learned by the individual; interventions sought; and an assessment of the likelihood of repeated abuse or neglect.

M. Criminal History Checks

Criminal history checks are conducted in collaboration with Alabama's Department of Public Safety (DPS). Prospective and approved adoptive parents are responsible for ensuring that their household members, employees, and volunteers have complied with the following criminal history check requirements.

1. Who Must Be Checked

Criminal history checks shall be conducted on all the following:

- adoptive applicants;
- adults age nineteen (19) years and older who reside in the home with adoptive applicants;
- employees who work in the adoptive applicants' home prior to issuance of the final decree;
- employees who apply or are hired to work in approved adoptive homes prior to issuance of the final decree; and
- volunteers who provide or intend to provide in-home services prior to issuance of the final decree.

2. Documentation And Fees

The following items must be provided to the County DHR.

- A completed "Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice" form indicating if a suitability determination has ever been made by DHR or the Department of Education; and if the person has ever been convicted of a crime, fully disclosing the required information on all convictions.
- A completed "DPS/DHR Criminal History Information Consent and Release" form authorizing the information's release to DHR.

Note: There are 4 versions of this form with the following headings:

- a) **\$49.00 FEE REQUIRED** is completed by individuals who are required to pay their own processing fee;
- b) **FEE PAID BY DHR** is completed by individuals for whom DHR pays the fee.

- c) Live Scan Electronic Fingerprinting – DHR Fee Paid is to be completed by individuals for whom DHR pays their fingerprinting fee.
- d) Live Scan Electronic Fingerprinting - \$72.50 fee is required for those individuals who are required to pay their own fee for fingerprinting

Refer to the last bullet in this section for additional information on payment of criminal history check fees.

- Identity verification (i.e., name, date of birth, race, sex, and Social Security number)

Acceptable verification includes photo identification from any governmental agency (e.g., driver's license, non-driver's identification, or program participation card). Child welfare staff shall make a copy of the verification. If a copy is unable to be made, staff shall complete a signed written statement indicating the verification has been seen and the individual's identity confirmed. The copy of the verification shall be filed in the applicant's case record at the County DHR.

- Two (2) complete sets of fingerprints properly executed by a law enforcement agency or an individual properly trained in fingerprinting techniques.

The fingerprinting technician must sign the DPS/DHR Criminal History Information Consent and Release forms and indicate the method used to collect the fingerprints. Failure to obtain the signature does not invalidate the form but could delay processing of the criminal history check.

When fingerprinting is completed by electronic transmission of "live scan" fingerprints, the technician must complete written documentation that the fingerprints have been collected and transmitted. This documentation shall be provided to the individual being fingerprinted for submission to the County DHR.

Note: Fingerprints are not required when a disability prevents an individual from being fingerprinted, and DPS will conduct the criminal history check by name and Social Security number. Disabilities preventing fingerprinting include, but are not limited to, loss of both hands; or severe scarring on all fingers. The fingerprinting technician must provide the individual with written verification that their disability prevented fingerprinting. This

verification must be submitted to the County DHR with the fingerprint cards.

- There is a \$49.00 processing fee for each criminal history check request when fingerprint cards are used. Live Scan Fingerprint Fees are \$72.50. SDHR pays the fee for applicants who are adopting special needs children and payment by the applicants would create a severe hardship. (Refer to *Adoption Subsidy* for more information on special needs children.) Payment is based on a monthly bill submitted to SDHR by the Department of Public Safety.

Applicants adopting children other than those with special needs, adults residing in the applicants' home, employees and volunteers who are not registered DHR volunteers must pay the fee themselves by money order, cashier's check, or certified check payable to the Alabama Department of Human Resources. A separate check is requested for each individual. **Cash and personal checks are not accepted.**

On the finger printing card in the space marked "Reason for Finger Printing," enter VCA-Child Care in the block. This notation is required by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in order for them to process the card in their system. If payment does not accompany the cards, the Department of Public Safety will know to bill the SDHR.

Applicants who must pay for fingerprinting should obtain a receipt from the fingerprinting agent and provide it to the County DHR showing that payment was made. The County DHR may reimburse the applicants and then claim reimbursement to local funds on a separate PSD-BFC-676, entitled Criminal Records Check, and submit it to State DHR, Finance. Show the County DHR as payee on the PSD-BFC-676 and the adoptive applicants' name and case number on the receipt(s).

3. Processing Documentation And Fees- County DHR Responsibilities

Within five (5) working days of receipt of the criminal history check forms and documentation, County DHR staff shall (1) review all criminal history check forms and documentation for accurate completion; and (2) review the "Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice" for any disqualifying convictions.

County DHR staff must notify SDHR's Criminal History Check Office when any individual has submitted false information on the "Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice." Prepare a cover letter notifying SDHR that the individual submitted false information; and submit the letter, form, and supporting

documentation to SDHR Criminal History Check Office for a determination to be made if sufficient documentation exists for forwarding the information to the appropriate law enforcement agency.

a. Automatic Denial Of Adoptive Applicants

Adoption applications shall, without processing the criminal history check documentation, be denied when any of the following occur.

- (1) Any individual residing, employed, or volunteering in the home refuses or fails to (a) fully answer and complete a “Mandatory Criminal History Notice,” (b) sign a “DPS/DHR Criminal History Information Consent and Release Form,” or (c) provide acceptable verification of identity.
- (2) A completed “Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice” reveals a disqualifying conviction for any prospective parent.

If a disqualifying conviction is revealed for an adult household member (other than a prospective parent), employee or volunteer, provide written notification to the prospective adoptive parents so they can determine, in collaboration with DHR, if they want to withdraw or proceed with their application.

- (3) An individual with a disqualifying conviction continues to reside, work, or volunteer in a prospective or an approved adoptive home unless the suitability determination is found to be in error or is reversed upon appeal. (Refer to 5. in this section, regarding “Requests For Reversal Of Unsuitable Determinations” for additional information).

b. Disqualifying Convictions

Criminal convictions which disqualify individuals from being approved as adoptive parents or being an employee or volunteer in the adoptive home include:

- any crime against a child;
- child abuse or neglect;
- spousal abuse;
- a crime involving violence including rape, sexual assault, robbery, burglary, murder, or manslaughter (physical assault and battery is not included here);

- a crime that involves the physical or mental injury or maltreatment of a child, the elderly, or an individual with disabilities;
- murder, manslaughter, or criminally negligent homicide; robbery;
- any crime committed in another state or federal, military, Indian, or foreign country jurisdiction, which, if it had been committed in this state, would constitute an offense listed above;
- other convictions disqualifying the person under other federal or state law;
- a crime involving the sale or distribution of a controlled substance; or
- a sex crime - sex crimes include, but are not limited to:
 - enticing a child to enter a vehicle, room, house, office, or any other space for immoral purposes (§ 13A-6-69);
 - incest, when the offender is an adult, and the victim is a minor (§ 13A-13-3);
 - kidnapping of a minor in the first or second degree, except by a parent (§13A-6-43; § 13A-6-44);
 - promoting prostitution, first or second degree (§ 13A-12-111; § 13A-11-112);
 - rape in the first or second degree (§ 13A-6-61; § 13A-6-62);
 - sexual misconduct (§ 13A-6-65);
 - sexual torture (§ 13A-6-65);
 - sexual abuse in the first or second degree (§ 13A-6-66; § 13A-6-67)
 - sodomy in the first or second degree (§ 13A-6-63; § 13A-6-64);
 - soliciting a child by computer for purposes of committing a sexual act and transmitting obscene material to a child by computer (§ 13A-6-110; § 13A-6-111);
 - any violation of the Alabama Child Pornography Act (§ 13A-12-191; § 13A-12-196; § 13A-12-197);

- any solicitation, attempt, or conspiracy to commit any of the offenses listed above as a sex crime; and
- any crime listed in or subsequently added to the Community Notification Act, Code of Alabama 1975, Title 15, Chapter 20.

In addition, no adoption application shall be approved when any individual has a felony conviction within the last five (5) years for either (1) the commission of or (2) being an accessory to the commission of any of the following crimes:

- physical assault (other than against a child, an elderly individual, or an individual with disabilities);
- battery (other than against a child, an elderly individual, or an individual with disabilities); or
- drug-related offenses including possession of drugs and driving under the influence (DUI).

4. Submitting Criminal History Checks

If the documentation reveals that a prior criminal history check has been performed by DHR or the Department of Education, request a suitability determination from the Criminal History Check Office by submitting a copy of the “Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice” and a cover letter to the Criminal History Check Office. If the previous criminal history report cannot be obtained or located, the Criminal History Check Office will notify the County DHR who shall then require a new criminal history check.

If no disqualifying convictions are revealed and a prior criminal history check has not been performed, submit the items listed below to the Alabama Bureau of Investigation at the address on the consent and release form; send one (1) copy to the Criminal History Check Office, and file one (1) copy in the prospective or approved adoptive parents’ case record. Forms and documentation on employees and volunteers are also filed in the prospective or approved adoptive parents’ case record.

- The appropriate DPS/DHR Criminal History Information Consent and Release Form.
- The Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice
- The two (2) sets of fingerprints (or documentation from the fingerprint technician).
- The processing fee, when applicable.

Once the County DHR has submitted the criminal history check forms and documentation to ABI, SDHR's Criminal History Check Office will receive and review the criminal history check report and determine whether the individual meets suitability requirements based on the presence or absence of any disqualifying conviction.

The Office will issue a suitability determination letter to the individual along with a copy of the criminal history check report received from DPS and will send a copy of this information to the appropriate County DHR. The letter shall state only whether the person is suitable for approval as an adoptive parent, employee, or volunteer; and if the determination is unsuitable, that the individual has thirty (30) days from the date of notification to provide the Criminal History Check Office with a written request for a reversal of the determination.

The County Department is responsible for contacting prospective adoptive parents about taking any actions necessary when household members, employees, or volunteers have been determined unsuitable.

5. Requests For Reversal Of Unsuitable Determinations

Individuals or their legal counsel may challenge the accuracy and completeness of the criminal history check report (according to DPS procedures) by submitting a written request to the SDHR Criminal History Check Unit (see address of SDHR Criminal History Check Unit on "DPS/DHR Criminal History Information Consent and Release Form") within thirty (30) days of the notification date. The Criminal History Check Unit will forward this request to DPS. If DPS determines the information is incorrect or incomplete, the information shall be corrected, and an amended report shall be submitted to the SDHR Criminal History Checks Unit who will review the amended report to determine if the unsuitable determination should be reversed.

All requests for reversal of unsuitable determinations shall be denied when the criminal records check reveals:

- a disqualifying crime per ASFA and Alabama Act No. 2000-775 as previously listed in section 3. b.;
- a sex crime; or
- a crime involving children, elderly individuals, or individuals with disabilities.

If the request for reversal contains crimes other than those listed above, the request will be accepted **only when** five (5) years have elapsed for misdemeanors and ten (10) years have elapsed for felonies, counting from the date of the end of the sentence, probation, or parole, whichever is the latest.

Individuals with disqualifying criminal convictions shall affirmatively show clear and convincing evidence of successful rehabilitation. All of the following factors shall be considered when making a determination of successful rehabilitation.

- Nature and responsibility of the position that the convicted person would hold or has held
- Nature and seriousness of the offense committed
- Circumstances under which the offense occurred
- Date of the offense
- Age of the person when the offense was committed
- Whether the offense was an isolated or repeated incident
- Social conditions which may have contributed to the offense
- Available probation or parole records, reports, or recommendations
- Evidence of rehabilitation including good conduct in prison and the community; counseling or psychiatric treatment received; acquisition of additional academic or vocational schooling; successful business or employment history; and the recommendation of immediate supervisors.

N. Special Requirements

The following situations have special requirements that must be met in addition to the general requirements for all adoptive applicants.

1. Applicants Who Are Interested In Legal Risk Placements

Individuals or married couples applying to adopt only and desiring to accept legal risk adoptive placements must meet the *Minimum Standards For Foster Family Homes* and requirement for current CPR certification and training and pediatric and infant first aid in order to receive consideration.

2. Applicants Who Have Adopted From Other Agencies

When an application is received from parents who have previously adopted from another agency, a request may be made to that agency for information. Consideration should be given to the length of time since the previous adoptive placement and the whether the family and placement agency has had significant contact since the adoption was finalized.

If the parents have previously completed MAPP or any preparation or selection program to TIPS or Deciding Together (DT) in another state, an assessment of the family's strengths and needs related to the 10 skills for successful foster/adopting is still a requirement. To consider the participant's participation in a previous program, documentation of the specific title, content and duration of the completed sessions is required along with the prior agency's assessment of the family's strengths and needs identified at that time. A decision as to whether the parents should participate in all or

specific MAPP or DT sessions is to be made depending on the length of time since the training was received, whether the family had a successful adoption placement after training was completed, or if the home study/consultations reveal needs the family will be required to work on to be successful with a placement. It may be helpful for all parents who received MAPP, or any other programs comparable to MAPP or DT in another state, to attend MAPP Meeting 6, Understanding the Needs Behind Behaviors and Meeting 9, Perspectives and New Experiences in Learning (PANEL).

3. Applicants Who Are DHR Employees

Employees of the Department of Human Resources can apply to adopt children in the Department's permanent custody. However, the application may not be processed, nor home studies completed by employees who work in the same County Department.

All Departmental policies concerning acceptance of adoption applications, eligibility requirements, and placements apply to Department employees and no special consideration may be given to an applicant's status as an employee. Department employees may not apply to adopt a child within their caseload or in the caseload of a worker who is under their direct supervision. Additionally, an employee may not transfer a case in order to meet this criterion.

When an employee wishes to make application to adopt, the County Director should arrange for staff in a neighboring county to conduct the home study and process the application through placement and finalization. SDHR employees may apply to the County Department in their county of residence. SDHR Family Services staff must notify the County Director of their interest in adopting so that appropriate arrangements can be made for conducting the home study. All records pertaining to an employee's application or adoption must be retained in a secure place, and inaccessible to other DHR employees who are not directly involved in the home study or adoption process.

O. Exceptions To General Requirements

If a particular family does not meet all qualifications but appears to have considerable attributes for parenting children with special needs and is willing to accept such children, a request for exception may be made to the Office of Adoption prior to proceeding with the application. The request should include narrative and applicable documentation to support the County Department's recommendation the exception. The Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299) must be discussed and completed with the applicant(s) and should indicate a willingness to accept, rather than a willingness to discuss, special needs children. Refer to *Adoption Subsidy* for additional information on special needs children.

No exceptions will be granted to the criminal history check requirements.

II. MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR ADOPTIVE HOMES

Prospective adoptive homes shall meet the following minimum requirements prior to approval.

- Cleanliness - The home and grounds are to be maintained in a clean and safe condition.
- Space - There must be adequate bedroom space for the number of children the applicant desires to have placed.
- Firearms - All firearms must be kept in a locked storage area that is inaccessible to children.
- Fire Extinguishers - A 2A-10BC chemical fire extinguisher, no less than 5 pounds in weight, is required; it must be plain view and in an accessible location near room exits that provide an escape route.
- Smoke Alarms - Smoke alarms shall be installed in working order outside each separate sleeping area and in the immediate vicinity (within 10 feet) of the sleeping rooms. Alarms shall be no more than 30 feet apart in hallways outside sleeping rooms. Also, a smoke alarm shall be placed at the head of the stairway on each additional story of the home, including the basement.
- Heaters - Unvented heaters are prohibited. If the home has an existing unvented heater, written approval regarding safety and continued use of the heater is required from an inspector licensed by the State Heating and Air Conditioning Board or the Liquid Propane Board.
- Pools/Hot Tubs/Spas - Applicants shall develop rules governing pool, hot tub and/or spa use. The pool shall be equipped with a ring buoy, rescue tube or other appropriate floatation device with an attached rope of sufficient length to cover the pool. Household members who will directly supervise children using the pool/hot tub/spa must be certified in First Aid/CPR and water safety.
- Pet Vaccinations - Verification of rabies vaccination shall be provided for all pets in the home with documentation included in the adoption home study.
- Mobile Homes - All mobile homes shall conform to the National Mobile Home Construction and Safety Standard Act of 1974. An aluminum plate permanently attached to the mobile home will indicate conformity this Act. Mobile homes shall comply with anchoring and tie-down requirements as specified by Code of Alabama, 1975 § 24-5-30 through § 24-5-34.

III. ADOPTION HOME STUDY

The adoption home study process is the mechanism by which the Department, along with the prospective adoptive family, mutually assesses the family and its potential for success in parenting children who may have experienced the trauma of abuse and/or neglect and are permanently, legally separated from their birth family. The purpose of an adoptive home study is to evaluate the applicant's ability to meet the needs of the children for whom the agency has permanent custody and to help adoptive applicants determine whether they have the capacity to

become parents for these children. Major consideration should be given to the personal adjustment of each of the applicants, their parents, siblings, and any children of their own; their motives in seeking a child; their understanding of childhood development and behaviors, separation and loss issues; and their commitment to providing a permanent home for a child.

The adoptive applicant is a potential resource for the agency. There is no guarantee of a placement even though a home study is approved. Applicants should understand that the Department's focus is finding an adoptive home for a child, not a child for the approved adoptive resource. The home study process allows the agency to evaluate applicants who may meet the needs of children. The agency is also helping the applicants evaluate their capacity for parenthood and their commitment to having a child or children placed with them who can become a permanent part of their family. The emphasis is on whether the applicants can parent the special needs, ages and characteristics of children who are likely to be available for placement by the Department. In order to do these things, the home study, a process of getting to know the individual applicants, must be completed with emphasis on applicants' feelings, attitudes, and relationships. Additionally, factual information gathering is required in the process of completing the home study.

A. Inquiry And Screening

Individuals and couples interested in adopting may contact the Department through a quick link on the agency's web site or through a toll-free hotline (1-866-4AL-KIDS) (1-566-435-5437). Staff with the SDHR Recruitment Response Team (RRT) will provide inquirers information about the adoption home study process, training requirements and general agency adoption policies and procedures. After providing this information to the interested individual/couple, the RRT will provide the individual/couple's name and contact information to the designated point of contact for receipt of such information in the county in which the individual/couple lives. The county resource worker then becomes responsible for providing additional information and conducting the screening of the potential applicant(s). During the screening process, the county resource worker should discuss with potential applicants general circumstances that may bring children into the Department's care; a general description of the special needs of children who are likely to need adoptive placement by the department; and how a child may become available for adoption through termination of parental rights of birth parents.

The difference between "fostering" and "adopting" should be explained since Department policy allows applicants the opportunity to become a foster/adoptive resource. Individuals or married couples interested in fostering as well as adopting must complete the Application to Foster and/or Adopt (DHR-FCS-704) and meet the *Minimum Standards For Foster Family Homes*.

Each of the minimum requirements for adoptive applicants themselves and their physical home should be discussed with inquirers. In particular, inquirers should be asked about any history of felony or misdemeanor charges, and any reports of abuse or neglect committed against a child.

A more thorough interview may be held if it appears that the inquirer may not meet one of the requirements but appears to have considerable attributes for parenting children with special needs (e.g., a child with marked physical, emotional or mental disabilities; children with high-risk backgrounds; any child over 5 years of age; sibling groups of two). A written request for exception

should be submitted to the Office of Adoption prior to proceeding with the application. The request should include documentation to support the County Department's recommendation for exception to proceed with the application and home study.

During the initial inquiry and screening, the inquirer should understand that no guarantee of a placement can be made, even after approval of a study, and that the Department's efforts are directed toward securing an adoptive family for a child. This approach is different from a private licensed child-placing agency that focuses its efforts on locating a child for its approved resource.

Individuals or married couples may not be approved to adopt by the Department and approved with another agency at the same time. The only exception may occur after approval if the approved adoptive resource identifies a child who is in the permanent custody of another state's child welfare department. Refer to Section VIII. Requests To Release Adoptive Home Study. If an inquirer has previously adopted a child through the Department, refer to Section VII. Reapplication From Previous DHR Adoptive Families; and, if an inquirer has previously adopted from another agency refer to Section I. N. 2 Applicants Who Have Adopted From Other Agencies.

Inquirers who initially express an interest in adopting only healthy children under the age of 6 should be informed that the Department's primary need is for homes for children who are defined as having special needs. Children identified as having special needs include, but are not limited to, children five (5) years or older; sibling groups of two (2) or more; and children who may have physical, mental or emotional needs. It should be explained to inquirers that training will be offered which allows for a mutual decision between Department staff and the applicants regarding the type of child(ren) they are best able to parent. It is only in rare unique situations that the Department will seek homes for young children without special needs.

Inquirers interested in adopting healthy children under the age of two should not be discouraged from filing an application; however, they should be made aware of private agencies in the State who may be better able to meet their desire for a healthy child under the age of two.

Inquirers should be informed at inquiry that adoption home studies are considered the property of the Department and shall not be released to another state agency, independent agency or PIP prior to six (6) months from the date of approval of the home study. This is to provide the staff in the Department time to review the approved home study to determine if the family is an appropriate match for any of Alabama's waiting children. However, should the family be approved and desire a copy of their approved home study, they may request an "UNOFFICIAL" copy of the home study for their personal use. Refer to Section VIII. Request to Release Adoptive Home Study.

Inquirers or prospective adoptive applicants should be registered in FACTS when inquiry is made, and application forms are requested or provided to prospective applicants. Contact your county's FACTS mentor for assistance with registering prospective adoption applicants.

B. Model Approach To Partnerships In Parenting Foundations/ Deciding Together

All adoptive applicants for children in the Department's permanent custody are to be prepared through Model Approach To Partnerships In Parenting (MAPP) Foundations, a thirty (30) hour program held over the course of ten (10) weeks. Deciding Together (DT), a derivative of MAPP is a one-on-one home study process for families who cannot participate in group meetings. Applicants may apply for dual approval to adopt and to foster as MAPP and DT guides foster and adoptive applicants through the complex issues they will face. Whether applicants complete MAPP or DT, applicants must be informed from the very beginning that completion of the sessions is only a part of what is required to be approved as an adoptive resource.

MAPP and DT include assessing current parenting skills and the applicants' ability to develop the skills necessary for success. Through carefully designed activities, parents see first-hand the challenges of fostering and adopting. Leaders help prospective parents, during group and individual activities to decide if their expectations and abilities match the realities of foster and adoptive parenthood. Parenting strengths and needs are identified, and strategies are developed with families to help meet those needs. Integrating a process of education and self-assessment, prospective parents and the Department make informed decisions about their ability, willingness and readiness to become an adoptive parent, foster parent or both.

Although MAPP is the preferred method for preparing and assessing adoptive applicants, DT can be used with families who cannot participate in a group process because of their schedules or when there are not enough applicants to conduct a group in the county or region. It can also meet the needs of rural county departments who may only have one or two applicant families at a time.

C. Required Forms and Documentation

The following forms, verifications and documentation make up an adoption home study. The required forms must be completed, and verifications submitted by all adoptive applicants. Refer to Checklist For DHR Home Study (DHR-FCS-1745 in Forms and Instructions).

- Application to Foster and/or Adopt (DHR-FCS-704);
- Financial Statement for Foster and/or Adoptive Applicants (DHR-FCS-705);
- Information Regarding Immediate Relatives (DHR-FCS-706);
- Physical Examination for Foster and/or Adoptive Parents (DHR-FCS-634);
- Medical statement on all other household members;
- Criminal History Check (refer to section I, M);
- Child Abuse/Neglect Central Registry Clearance (refer to Child Protective Policies and Procedures, Forms and Instructions, DHR-FCS-1598);
- Marriage, divorce and death verifications when appropriate;

- Verification of pet vaccinations when appropriate;
- Verification of CPR, Pediatric and Infant First Aid, and Water Safety when appropriate;
- Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299);
- Current color photograph of the applicants and children in the home;
- Individual autobiography of each applicant;
- MAPP Profiles, S/N worksheets, other MAPP Roadwork;
- Narrative recording of the adoption home study.

D. Autobiography

Each applicant must write an autobiography, and a guide is provided in the *Appendix*. This is a valuable and insightful tool in getting to know the applicant and it provides points of reference when conducting individual interviews, particularly with married couples.

E. Family Consultations And Interviews

The worker may use discretion in determining the location of interviews during the study, but at least one (1) home visit is required. Many applicants are unable to schedule appointments during regular office hours because of conflicts with work schedules or for other reasons. Some applicants may lose pay for work missed in order to schedule appointments for the interviews. Many of these same applicants will be able to offer nurturing adoptive homes for children in the Department's custody. Therefore, it is very important to try to accommodate the applicants' schedules whenever possible, to encourage applicants throughout the home study process, and not to judge the applicants' interest in adoption by an inability to miss work for interviews.

MAPP requires at least two (2) family consultations. The family consultations are to discuss any red flag indicators in the applicants' profiles; any areas where the applicants need to offer further explanation of written responses or comments made and behaviors displayed in MAPP sessions; and to assist the applicant in developing strategies to obtain additional information to increase their knowledge and ability in areas of identified needs. The Department can request additional information and/or documentation (e.g., clarification of doctor's findings, mental health records, domestic abuse assessments) as needed to make an informed assessment.

Deciding Together requires at least seven (7) family consultations, and the worker and family will need to establish a schedule. All profiles are to be completed and all requirements of the home study apply. For a married couple, individual interviews are required. In addition, there must be interviews with all household members, applicant's children and the person designated to care for the adoptive child in the event the adopting parents become permanently unable to do so.

1. First (1st) Family Consultation

The first family consultation is to assess the family's progress in the program, discuss the family's strengths and needs as they relate to skills for successful fostering and adopting, and to develop a plan to help the family turn identified needs into strengths. This first interview should be considered as a period for workers and applicants to get to know each other and become comfortable together; for applicants to become familiar with the Department's program and the social worker; and for mutual trust to be established. Because the matter of trust is very important, it should be established from the beginning that problem areas will be noted and handled as they arise. Though some of the material may have been presented previously in MAPP classes, the individual or couple may be more comfortable during the initial family consultation in the personal interview. Any questions the applicant's have about the Department's adoption program should be answered.

The worker needs to thoroughly review completed profiles prior to the first consultation and make notes of strengths and needs for further exploration or clarification. In any event, the following areas are to be covered during the initial interview.

- How the individual or couple came to apply.
- The sequence of events leading to the decision to apply is important. It is in this discussion that clues may be given about the applicants' feelings regarding childlessness, if this is the case. If negative areas (e.g., failure to resolve feelings about sterility, failure to accept adoption) are uncovered, these feelings must be explored. A married couple should have reached a mutual decision to adopt.
- Experience with children, particularly adopted children.
- A general discussion about children the applicants have known may provide some indication of their readiness to accept the change in lifestyle that children will bring. Their warmth and ability to form relationships with others can be revealed here.
- Expectations they have for the prospective child. This discussion can be related to the applicants' experience with children but should be focused on what they imagine their child will be like. It should precede the worker's explanation of types of children available since the worker's discussion of children in need of placement may distort the couple's free expression of feeling. The worker should look for indications of rigidity or inflexibility and should keep in mind that fantasies about one's "child-to-be" are natural. Applicants should be flexible about their expectations for a child, and they should be capable of accepting a child as he is or may develop.

- Leisure time activities – How will a child disrupt or augment? What do they do together and what are their separate interests? Do they spend time with extended family members?
- Family support system – This discussion should include information about current family relationships, other relationships and friendships that will likely be available to help meet the emotional, material and other needs of the adoptive family and child(ren) in placement. The availability of supportive relationships is particularly important for single and married applicants whose extended families live in distant locations.
- A couple’s marital stability and relationship - Answers revealed on the MAPP profiles may be used as a basis for further exploration.
 - Their courtship – How did they meet? What were their dating activities? How long before they were married?
 - The Wedding – Were both families involved? Did either spouse’s immediate family members have reservations about the marriage? If so, how has it impacted their relationship and/or been resolved?
 - Present marital satisfactions and adjustments – This can provide clues for further discussion in individual interviews. Perhaps their childlessness will become a subject of spontaneous discussion. If it does, their general attitude toward each other should be noted and recorded. Any history of marriage counseling should be discussed in detail. Depending upon the circumstances, the worker may need to request a report from the counselor.
- Any prior history of criminal offenses (felonies or misdemeanors) or previous reports of suspected abuse or neglect of a child, by the applicants, should be discussed along with the effects of this history on their application.
- A tour of the home is to be taken and viewed for adherence to the minimum requirements for adoptive homes (Refer to II, Minimum Requirements for Adoptive Homes). The narrative recording for the study must include a description of the neighborhood in which the home is located; a description of the home itself; a description of bedroom(s) to be used for a child or children; and what the house reveals about the applicant’s personality and interests.

2. Individual Interviews

Individual interviews should be scheduled with each spouse when there are married applicants. For single applicants, it may be necessary to have another interview in addition to the two (2) required family consultations.

During this interview, the worker should discuss incomplete information given in the autobiography. Any indications of unresolved issues must be addressed. There may have been some indication of dissatisfaction with work, dysfunctional family history, marital difficulties, of the like which could not be explored fully in the group and should be discussed in an individual interview.

Individual interviews are focused on the applicant and should include, but are not limited to, the following areas.

- Early life – What are the applicant’s first memories? What was the applicant’s position in the family? What were the parents like - their marriage, involvement with each other and children? What were the family crises and how were these handled? What were the happy times?

The worker should look for family solidarity, a good indication of future adjustment. If early deprivation is revealed by the history, the applicant’s resolution of conflicts, separation from parents, etc. should be thoroughly explored. Applicants should be asked if they were ever abused, physically or sexually, or neglected as a child. If so, a full discussion of the circumstances should follow, including the applicant’s resolution of the abusive or neglectful experiences. The worker’s impression of present adjustment to traumatic life experiences is important here.

- Schooling – What were satisfactions, frustrations, and disappointments? Did the individual form attachments to teachers and school friends, particularly if family relationships were barren? How does the applicant’s educational attainment affect educational expectations for a prospective child?
- Work – What are the frustrations and satisfactions? How does the applicant view employer and fellow workers? If the applicant’s job is not satisfying, is there a plan to change? Are there leisure time activities to compensate? What do the applicants’ imagine caring for a child will be like? How long can the applicant be off work after placement? Since one or both parents will be expected to take time off for the child’s initial adjustment, this discussion should be specific. What are the childcare plans if both parents work outside the home of if the applicant is single and employed?

- Marriage – There should be a full and in-depth exploration with the applicant around adjustments, differences, and disagreements that have had to be worked out throughout the marriage. If there have been any previous marriages, discuss those relationships, including the reasons for dissolution. Questions to be answered include what lessons were learned and the impact of the previous relationships on the current marriage.

Particular incidents and specific areas of difficulty should be pinpointed to illustrate how problems have been handled even though these may not be considered serious problems by the couple. It is important to know if they have ever separated or if either spouse ever contemplated separation. If the couple has ever attended marriage counseling, it should be explored in terms of dates, reasons, duration, and outcome. How are problems worked out now? Has the marriage been what the applicant expected? Has the spouse measured up to expectations? What sort of gender roles have developed between the couple since they have lived together? Who handles finances?

- For single applicants, what courtships or relationships have they had? What lessons were learned; what areas of difficulties noted? What is the hope for a future relationship and thoughts of how it may impact adoption plans?
- Infertility – If infertility is present, can the couple identify their feelings and how they have handled these? Can the applicant use casework services in working this out? Does the applicant primarily view the problem as the spouse's responsibility, and would this be conveyed to the child? What treatment has been pursued to solve the infertility? Are there feelings of guilt or resentment toward the spouse? Does each spouse express satisfaction with the intimacy of the relationship?
- Religion – What influence has religion had on the applicant's life? How does the applicant see the prospective child affected by the applicant's religious experience? How will spiritual training be provided for the child?

3. Second (2nd) Family Consultation

This interview is child centered. The couple may already have discussed some of their feelings about the child they desire. They should now be ready for further discussion along this line. The discussion should include the following areas.

- Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299) is to be completed by the applicants. Applicants should understand that the completion of this form is critical to their being given consideration as a potential resource for a child in the Department's custody. The worker is to review the form with the applicants and discuss the choices and implications. Workers should pay careful attention to any differences of opinion between married applicants or indecisiveness by all applicants, explore these areas and document the applicants' responses.
- What is the minimum and maximum age they will accept? Will they accept twins or sibling groups? Could they accept minor handicaps such as an umbilical hernia, birthmarks, or the need for special shoes? What about major physical handicaps such as clubfoot, harelip, or cleft palate? Would they consider a child with an intellectual disability or a child with a diagnosis of ADHD, Oppositional-Defiant Disorder, or Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome? If the application is for an older child, there should be discussion of the special needs and problems of older children including behaviors these children may exhibit (e.g., loud, noisy, active behavior; withdrawal; sexual acting out; regression; temper tantrums; biting; school problems, lying; stealing; memories of past bad experiences; manipulation; squabbles among siblings; jealousy).
- Would they consider a child with a learning disability or a child below grade level who is not motivated to reach full potential? Can they accept a child who has been physically and/or sexually abused? A child who is likely to need continuous therapy. It is essential that applicants understand that a large percentage of children placed by the Department have been abused, sexually or physically, and they should be prepared to accept this possibility, especially since some children do not reveal the abuse until after adoptive placement.

The worker should share examples of situations in which families will be challenged or impacted by issues/problems children may have, how these will be handled/resolved, and how to access community resources. Applicants should be encouraged to evaluate their insurance coverage of any special medical needs they are willing to accept in accordance with their completed Child Characteristics Willing to Parent Form (DHR FCS-1299).

A detailed discussion should be held concerning the situations from which adopted children enter foster care, including neglectful

abusive situations and multiple separations from biological and foster parents, friends and relatives. Applicants for older and special needs children should understand the difficulty that many of these children have in forming attachments to new families, and the grief and other feelings they may experience in regard to their biological or former foster families.

Upon completion of the Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299), the worker should review the answers with the applicants to ensure that they have made an informed decision on their responses to the various areas and that their understanding of the various areas addressed is consistent with the Department's interpretation of their responses. An example might be an applicant who checks "cannot parent" for a child with mental illness or intellectual disability in the family background, but checks "can parent" a child where no background is available. An effort should be made to clarify subtle and possible discrepancies in their responses. No effort should be made to pressure applicants to be more accepting than their behaviors and verbal expressions indicate. Applicants, who want to expand their choices, may want to read educational materials on various childhood issues, behaviors and diagnoses. Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections has an excellent library of books and videotapes on their website at www.childrensaid.org/apac or Warmline 1-866-803-2722. Refer to Resource Guide for Post Adoption Services in the *Appendix* for additional information.

- Background – How accepting are applicants of various diseases in the child's background? This discussion should include heart disease, tuberculosis, diabetes, epilepsy, and cancer. What about diseases with social connotations such as alcoholism, AIDS or venereal disease? What about drug use? How do they feel about mental illness and would the degree of pathology matter? Also, what do they think and feel about intellectual disabilities and what degree of intellectual disability in a child might the applicant(s) accept and be willing to parent?

Applicants for infants should be asked if they could accept an infant, with no information on birth parents available.

The worker should talk with applicants about the reasons children become free for adoptive placement and that almost all children placed by the Department have some less than desirable factors in the family background. While applicants should not be encouraged to accept background factors which they are not willing to consider, they should understand that a certain degree of

flexibility is required if the Department is to be able to consider them as a resource for children in need of a permanent family.

- Birth parents – Can applicants understand how a mother could give up her child? If not, do they respond with some sympathy or understanding of the circumstances that might have brought about the parents’ decision? How would they feel if information was not available about the birth father and what are their reactions when they learn why there may be limited information? How will they meet questions from the child, friends and family concerning the child’s status, background, and natural parents? It can be helpful to ask if the applicants have known unmarried mothers, or neglectful or abusive parents. Their discussion of specific situations can uncover hostile and negative feelings toward birth parents or indications of acceptance.
- Child rearing – A discussion of applicants’ ideas about child rearing techniques should occur. This discussion should address their ideas about training and discipline through the various stages of development (e.g., infant, toddler, school-age and teenage.)

In regard to corporal punishment of children who have been physically or sexually abused, the issues should be explored and the applicants’ sensitivity to these areas discussed. Since many children placed by the Department will have been abused, alternate forms of discipline and appropriate ways of relating to the child should be discussed and encouraged.

Previous experiences with the type children desired should be discussed as well as why the applicants believe they can parent that type of child, particularly if interested in special needs children. If they already have children, the children’s behaviors and the parents’ handling of behaviors should be discussed.

- Telling of adoption – There should be discussion of the applicant’s attitude about telling the child about the adoption and the applicant’s ideas of how this should be handled. For younger children, the worker may introduce a discussion of how use of the word “adoption,” and stories and pictures related to their child’s adoption could lead to the child’s gradual awareness of the realization of being adopted. The dangers of over-emphasizing the child’s “special” status should be discussed. The use of a life book for an older child should be discussed and encouraged. For older children, the discussion will be centered on the reasons for adoption and should be commensurate with the ability to understand human behaviors.

It is DHR policy that adoptive parents agree to tell adopted children about their adoption. The applicants' agreement and desire to share this with the child should come from their conviction of the importance of the child feeling free to discuss this aspect of life with them as the need arises. Suggested readings might be offered at this time to stimulate thinking and discussions during the agency contacts after approval.

Adoptive applicants should also be made aware that the adoptee might legally request and acquire information concerning the biological family background at age nineteen (19) years (Refer to Introduction, IV. E. Adult Adoptees) The Summary of Non-Identifying Information, that adoptive parents receive at the time of adoptive placement, can be very useful in providing the child with basic information about the birth family and the reason for adoptive placement as the child's age and maturity level dictates.

- Legal Risk Placement – There should be discussion and explanation of the applicants' willingness to accept a child on a legal risk basis (i.e., placement of the child with the prospective adoptive family on a foster care basis prior to termination of parental rights or during an appeal process). This is particularly important for applicants desiring infants, since some infants may need to be placed with a prospective adoptive family directly from the hospital on a foster care basis and prior to termination of parental rights. For older children, when termination of parental rights is being appealed, the legal process may be lengthy, and the children's best interests may be served by an at-risk placement with the adoptive family prior to the children becoming legally free for adoption. Applicants should understand the possibility that birth parents may change their minds about placement or that appeals may not be resolved in favor of the Department. Refer to *DHR Placements*, III, Legal Risk Placements for additional information.

- Explanation of Program

Any remaining questions about agency policy and procedure are to be covered in detail. The applicants should know what they can expect from the agency and what the agency will expect of them. It should be made clear to applicants that final approval of the adoption application is a decision of the State Department of Human Resources and that the County Department will make a recommendation to the State Department regarding the application's approval.

The worker should review with the applicants how they will be considered for a particular child once approval is given (refer to *DHR Placements, II, Non-Foster Parent Adoptions Placement By Office of Adoption*). Applicants are to be told that the Department complies with the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA) and the Inter-Ethnic Adoption Provisions (IEPA) in that there will be no denial or delay in placements made solely on the basis of the race of the applicants or children.

The adoption subsidy program is to be discussed with applicants who are interested in special needs children. Refer to *Adoption Subsidy*.

The placement process should be discussed with adoptive applicants. The Adoptive Home Placement Agreement (DHR-FCS-2130) should be reviewed, and terms explained. Applicants should understand that the State Department of Human Resources has the right to remove the child from the prospective adoptive home when, in its sole judgment, the child's best interests require it. Changes in family circumstances (e.g., divorce, marital problems, emotional and physical illnesses, the child's failure to adjust) and other factors may necessitate the child's removal from the adoptive home. The terms of this agreement will be discussed again at the time a child is placed.

F. Additional Interviews

The following interviews are also required for adoption home studies.

1. Other Household Members

If there are other persons living in the home with the applicants, these persons must be interviewed and their position in the family described. If they are to have a special relationship with the child (e.g., applicant's parent lives in the home and will provide childcare), their willingness and appropriateness to assume that responsibility should be explored and documented. Other household members' attitude toward adoption and toward children must be explored.

Other children of the adoptive applicants should be interviewed, if they are age-appropriate for an interview, and their attitudes about the adoption explored. If the children do not live with the applicants, a special effort should be made to assess the children's attitude about the adoption and the extent of the applicants' relationship with the children.

2. Other Pertinent Individuals

In the case of single applicants or those applicants, usually foster parents, who are older than usual, the person(s) they name who will be responsible for the child should something happen to them, should be personally interviewed. That person's willingness and appropriateness to assume responsibility for the child should be explored and documented.

3. References

Reference contacts should occur only after the worker is reasonably certain the applicant will be recommended for approval. Close relatives (particularly applicants' parents), friends, a minister, and applicants' employer should be interviewed as references. It may also be necessary for the agency to interview independent references. Serious questions about the applicants should be cleared with them first even though there may be need for further discussion with references. At least two (2) references should be personally interviewed (i.e., face-to-face or by telephone). Letters of reference from other individuals may also be accepted in addition to required interviews.

Discussion with references should include what their association or relationship with the applicant has been and in what context have they known them? Do they have firsthand knowledge of the applicant's desire to adopt? Does the reference feel that the applicant's family and community will accept an adopted child? Reference interviews should be related to impressions the worker has gathered during the adoption study and should be viewed as confirming these impressions rather than uncovering hidden information.

Relatives may have ambiguous feelings about sharing their lives and their name with a child of unknown background and can benefit from an interpretation of agency policy. A discussion of the basis of selection of children (capacity and interest of the adoptive parents; a child's individual needs and ability to benefit by placement) and the confidentiality of material may be valuable in paving the way for the child with the extended family.

G. Documentation

All contacts with and about adoptive applicants should address the applicants' strengths and needs and must be sufficiently documented to substantiate conclusions. Workers' impressions and assessment should be included at the end of each interview. Documentation should also reflect how the applicants' MAPP participation and paperwork completion have helped the applicant develop the potential for being a parent to an adoptive child.

1. Ten Skills for Successful Foster and Adoptive Parenting

Documentation must also address the 10 Skills for Successful Foster and Adoptive Parenting. Skills documentation should not repeat, verbatim, what has been previously recorded, but should summarize the information obtained and provide a synopsis of the evidence to support strengths or needs in the area and give an assessment of work to be done in the future. The 10 skills are:

- (1) Know Your Own Family
- (2) Communicate Effectively
- (3) Understand the Child and Trauma to Assure Healthy Development
- (4) Build on Strengths and Meet Needs/ Develop Trust

- (5) Work in Partnership
- (6) Build Resilience
- (7) Build Connections
- (8) Build Stability by Teaching Healthy Behaviors and Coping Skills
- (9) Assess Impact and Navigate Roles
- (10) Make an Informed Decision/Plan for the Future

2. Diagnostic Evaluation, Recommendations and Future Plans

A diagnostic evaluation, recommendations and plans for future work should be recorded at the end of the adoption home study even though the worker will have recorded impressions and evaluations as the study progressed.

The evaluation should include applicants' personality characteristics and how they will function in the parental role. For married applicants, include how the couple reacts to each other. General statements such as "stable marriage" or "close family relationships" may be made if the documentation supports them.

The recommendations should indicate the type of child the worker thinks can best be served by the applicant and why. This should also include the number of children, age and sex. The evaluation of the applicant and the County's recommendation of the type of child the applicant can serve must be supported by the home study's documentation. The focus is on whether the applicant can meet the needs of the children likely to be available for placement rather than the ideal child that the applicant may desire.

IV. APPLICATION DECISIONS

Adoption studies, including forms and MAPP profiles, are to be submitted to SDHR's Office of Adoption for concurrence of the County Department's recommendation to approve the applicants. Original materials must be submitted as these records are kept permanently on file in the State Department of Human Resources. A copy of all materials submitted to SDHR should be retained at the County Department. The Checklist For DHR Home Study (DHR-FCS-2126), located in *Forms and Instructions*, should be used to ensure that all required materials have been included in the adoption home study.

A. Approval

Only those home studies for "adoption only, no identified resource" (ANIR) are submitted to the State Office of Adoption for approval. The County Department should consult with the Office of Adoption prior to submitting the ANIR home study and then submit as complete home study as possible. The Office of Adoption reviews the ANIR home study and the County Department's recommendation for approval and notifies the County Department. The County Department is then responsible for notifying the ANIR adoptive applicants of their approval. Approval does not guarantee a placement by the Department, nor can any assurance be given on the length of time applicants may have to wait for a child. The key to how often a family may be considered

for an adoptive placement is the informed decisions made by the applicant(s) when completing the Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299).

Applicant(s) who are seeking to foster and adopt are approved by the county department completing the home study. The county department does not submit these home studies to the Office of Adoption but approves the home study at the county department level.

B. Denial

The agency will sometimes be confronted with denial of an application at various stages of the application and study process even when MAPP has been completed. The most important single factor the worker can introduce to explain a denial is honest respect for the individual or married couple whose application must be denied.

The primary purpose of MAPP is for both the agency and the applicants to make an informed decision about the family's ability and appropriateness to provide an adoptive home for the children in the Department's permanent custody. Hopefully, this will be a mutual decision, but there are times that the agency will be confronted with denial of an application and the applicants may not readily agree with the decision.

When it is found that applicants' needs are such that placement of a child is not to be considered, it is the worker's responsibility to help applicants understand and accept this decision. Be honest and share the specific issues, problems or attitudes that prevent them from being considered as a resource for the Department. The failure to approve an application must always be related to the Department's responsibility to choose homes that would best serve the children in its care. When possible, applicants should be helped to withdraw their application.

Denials should occur as early as possible in the application and home study process while recognizing respect for what applicants felt they had to offer and what it meant to them. When denial is due to psychological factors, the worker should make every effort to make the explanation as constructive as possible. The denial should be given verbally and in writing.

V. UPDATING HOME STUDIES PRIOR TO PLACEMENT

The home study for approved adoptive resources must be updated semi-annually (i.e., at least every 6 months) and more frequently when there are significant changes in the family's situation or availability as a resource for children. Studies must be kept current at all times through narrative recording after each visit with the approved resource. Many approved families are considered when selecting a home for a child who is ready for placement and current information on all approved resources is imperative.

The semi-annual visit should take place in the approved resource's home. Not only does this visit address any changes that have occurred, but it is also the time when the professional development plan continues and any needs or needs revealed by the study are handled. Discussion should center around the resource's interactions with children already in the home or other children with whom they have contact. If not in the home, how frequently are they near their relative's children, children in the neighborhood or children at church? What about their

friend's children? Do they seek engagement and participate in activities where children are present? What do they enjoy most and least? Can they describe behaviors and how they would handle these? Do they continue to be realistic in their expectations and knowledge of childhood development and related issues?

The worker should provide information approval to the resource to enhance the skills that the resource has identified as a concern or need. A referral can be made to Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections and more information is located in Resource Guide for Post Adoption Services in the *Appendix*.

The worker should be able to record a clear picture of the resource's family life. Who provides formal and informal supports? Does the marriage continue to be stable? What issues has the couple (jointly or individually), or the single person had to work through during the previous six months? If the couple has been reading about childcare and adoptions, they may have much more to contribute now to such general discussions.

The Financial Statement for Foster and/or Adoptive Applicants (DHR-FCS-705) must be reviewed and updated every two (2) years or at any time the resource's financial status changes. Medicals are to be updated every two years.

The Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR FCS-1299) form is to be reviewed every twelve (12) months with any changes noted. The resource worker should encourage the adoption resource to make thoughtful, informed decisions in making changes to the DHR-FCS-1299 and not to react to the length of time that has passed since approval.

For ANIR approvals by the SDHR Office of Adoption, original narrative recording of the semi-annual updates must be sent to the Office of Adoption. Additionally, when any forms are reviewed and changes made on ANIR approvals, copies of the forms must be sent to SDHR Office of Adoption to assure that SDHR approvals remain up to date on all information related to the approved adoption resource.

For foster/adoptive approved resources, it is imperative that the narrative includes information about the foster children who are currently in the home and for those foster children who are no longer in the home. Why did they leave? How did the family meet the children's needs? Were there any concerns regarding the quality of care and nurturing being provided? For the children who are currently in the home, what are their permanency goals? Are there significant issues present that require extraordinary attention of the parents? How may the foster child be impacted if an additional child comes into the home? What strengths have been noted in handling issues with the children in foster care? What types of behaviors and circumstances have presented themselves and how were these successfully handled? Were needs identified in specific parenting areas? How are the parents working in partnership with the birth parents and the agency?

If an approved resource or applicant pending a home study receives a child independently, gives birth to a child, or applies to another child-placing agency, the application will be closed, and the

County Department will be responsible for notifying the resource/applicants of the action taken. These individuals may reapply when the adoption is finalized or in a reasonable time after birth of the child. The Office of Adoption must be advised if an approved resource has been closed.

An exception to this policy may be requested by contacting State Department of Human Resources Family Services Director. All exceptions must be well documented in the case record.

VI. REAPPLICATIONS FROM PREVIOUS DHR ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Families who have previously adopted from the Department may file an application to adopt another child after the Final Decree of Adoption has been entered on the prior adoption. When this occurs, the following forms, verifications, and documentation are required.

- Application to Foster and/or Adopt (DHR-FCS-704);
- Financial Statement for Foster and/or Adoptive Applicants (DHR-FCS-705);
- Information Regarding Immediate Relatives (DHR-FCS-706);
- Physical Examination for Foster and/or Adoptive Applicants, (PSD-BFC-634) for the applicant and medical statements for all household members. Additional information or documentation can be requested to clarify any issues that may impact the ability of the family to parent a child.
- Criminal History Check and CA/N Central Registry clearance except as noted below:
 - (1) If a reapplication is made within two (2) years of the previous adoption's Final Decree, the family has lived in the same county, the County Department has had periodic contact with the family, and there has been no indication of criminal offense, neither a Criminal History Check nor a CA/N Central Registry clearance is needed unless there is a new household member.
 - (2) If less than two (2) years have passed since the previous adoption's Final Decree, there has been no periodic contact with the family, or the family has moved out of county or there is indication of a criminal offense or CA/N allegations, criminal history checks and CA/N Central Registry clearances are required for all appropriate household members (For more information refer to Child Protective Services Policy and Procedures, Forms and Instruction, DHR-DFC-1598).
- Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS 1299) --A new DHR-FCS-1299 must be completed. As with the initial adoption study, it is important that the individual or married couple make informed choices and give consideration to the potential impact of their adopting another child may have on the child already in their home. Any changes in the initial DHR-FCS-1299 and the new one is to be addressed and discussed during the home study process.

- Home Study

There is no specific guide for completing second applications since individuals' circumstances (e.g., length of time between applications, circumstances surrounding the first placement) will vary. However, requirements noted in sections I. General Requirements and II. Minimum Requirements for Adoptive Homes must be met. At least one (1) joint interview and individual interviews for married couples should be obtained. There should be at least one where the child or children already in the home are present in order for the worker to make observations about the child(ren)'s adjustment.

The reapplication study should include discussion of the following areas.

- (1) Areas of change since the first study, including financial ability to take on the responsibility of another child; childcare plans; physical space for another child; how family activities have changed and what further changes they expect with the next child.
- (2) Parenting Ability and Skills – discussion of normal childhood behaviors and how these are handled; responses of applicants to school performance of child and how needs are met; is the child encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities? What methods of discipline are used? Can they relate examples and how they would have handled an incident differently or sought a better outcome? Do they vocally advocate if their child has special issues?
- (3) Adopted child – It is important to know about the child's relationship to the adoptive parents. The worker should look for indications of developing maturity and whether the child is being pushed beyond the expected ability or held too protectively to the parents. Depending on age, does the child understand the differences between a birth child and being an adopted child? Does the child understand the purpose of the worker's visit? What are the child's feelings about the family adopting another child? If there was already a child in the home when the first child was placed, what is the state of that relationship? What adjustments were made, and lessons learned?
- (4) Married couple – Since a stable marriage is so important to the well being of children, it is important to find out how the marital relationship has been affected by the placement of an adopted child and how the responsibilities of parenthood have been shared between spouses.

- (5) Single Applicant - What significant relationships have been enjoyed? How has this person been introduced to the child, and what is that relationship? Is there formal or informal support available to provide the benefits of the absent parental figure?
 - (6) Attitude toward adoption - What is their attitude toward adoption now? It is helpful to know what they remember about the natural parents of their child and what they are telling their child about being an adoptee. Since the Department strongly encourages adoptive parents to tell a child about being adopted, this issue should be discussed in terms of how the parents are handling it with the first child. If the parents are having difficulty with, or resisting, telling the first child about the adoption, counseling should be provided by the worker on the importance of this issue. Have they thought through the answers they may give to questions the child may ask at an older age?
 - (7) Strengths and Needs - At the time of the first study, strengths and needs were recorded in the diagnostic evaluation. These were expected to influence the potential for parenthood and included the ability to give of oneself, to admit mistakes, to use difficult experiences constructively, to accept things as they are, and such tendencies as the need to control, possessiveness, or defensiveness. What is the current assessment of past challenges and needs, and how they have been overcome or successfully handled? Have new ones been identified as new situations have arisen with the children in the home? What are the current strengths and needs of each individual parent as well as the married couple jointly?
 - (8) References should be interviewed. It is often advantageous to interview references that were interviewed at the time the first study was completed. If these references are not available, applicants should be asked to furnish other references they have known for at least two (2) years. It may also be necessary for the agency to interview independent references. Refer to III, F, 3. for additional information on interviewing references.
- Diagnostic Evaluation, Recommendation and Plans For Future Work

Although the worker will have recorded impressions and evaluations as the study has progressed, a diagnostic evaluation, recommendations and plans for future work should be recorded at the end of the study.

The evaluation should include the personality characteristics of the applicants, how they react to each other and how they have functioned in the parental role. Such general statements as “have accepted the first adopted child as their own” and “have successfully adopted” may be made if they are supported by the documentation.

The recommendations should indicate the type of child the worker thinks can best be served by the family, given the children in the home and any special needs they may have, and why. This should also include the number of children, age and sex. Be sure to include a current photograph of the applicants with the completed application and home study material.

The reapplication material should be submitted in the original as these records are kept permanently on file at the State Department of Human Resources. A copy of all materials submitted to SDHR should be retained in the county file. The Checklist for DHR Home Study (DHR-FCS-1745), located in *Forms and Instructions*, should be used to ensure that all required materials has been included in the home study.

VII. INQUIRIES FROM APPROVED APPLICANTS ABOUT CHILDREN IN RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES

Families with approved ANIR home studies may submit inquiries for interested children through the web site listings. Members of the RRT staff will respond to the inquiries, submit a copy of the family's approved ANIR study to the applicable placement consultant and copy the family's county worker alerting them that the family has inquired about a specific child/sibling group. Additionally, when an approved resource identifies an Alabama child who is available for an adoptive placement, the approved resource should discuss this with their county worker. Based on the limited information available about the child, the county worker is to notify the Office of Adoption and provide a recommendation of whether the approved adoptive resource should be considered as a resource for the child. Should the child not be the type of child that the resource has indicated a willingness to parent on the Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299), the worker should carefully discuss this with the adoptive resource prior to making the referral to the Office of Adoption. It is important that the resource worker seek clarification as to whether the approved resource has made an informed decision about their willingness and ability to parent a child with background and/or issues not previously considered and accepted by the adoptive resource. The Child Characteristics Willing to Parent (DHR-FCS-1299) should be updated and submitted to the Office of Adoption at the same time as the referral along with narrative recording of the discussion.

VIII. REQUESTS TO RELEASE ADOPTIVE HOME STUDY

Applicants should be informed that adoption home studies are considered the property of the Department and shall not be released to another state agency, independent agency or Private Independent Practitioner (PIP) prior to six (6) months from the date of approval of the home study. This allows the staff in the Department time to review the approved home study to determine if the family is an appropriate match for any of Alabama's waiting children. Should

the family be approved and desire a copy of their approved home study they may request an “UNOFFICIAL” copy of the home study for their personal use. (See Item A. 2. b. below)

When an approved resource contacts the worker requesting that the home study be released to another agency, the reasons for the request should be explored. Some applicants who are still in the home study process and not yet approved will seek out children and become impatient with the length of time required to gain approval to adopt. Some applicants are interested only in pre-school and infants, and after approval, seek such placement from a licensed child-placing agency or independently. The worker should review the Department’s adoption program with the applicants or approved resources, and while a placement cannot be guaranteed, make them fully aware of the need for adoptive families for the children in the Department’s permanent custody. Not all the children available for adoption are in recruitment activities and most of the children from other states featured on sites such as AdoptUsKids have similar challenges as Alabama’s waiting children.

A. Releasing Adoption Studies

1. Policy

Home studies approved and current within the last 12 months can be considered for release to other state child welfare agencies, licensed child-placing agencies (LCPAs) or Private Independent Practitioners (PIPs). Families approved for adoption can request an “unofficial copy” of the approved home study.

2. Procedures

a. Release to Other State Child Welfare Agencies, LCPAs, or PIPs

- (1) Obtain a written request from the approved adoptive resource to release the home study to a specific state child welfare agency, LCPA, or PIP.
- (2) Collect the required \$300 fee for the home study release to non-state agencies. (Refer to Non-DHR Adoptions, II. F. Fees For Independent Adoption Investigations.)
- (3) Verify PIP’s licensure, if applicable, through the Office of Adoption or the Alabama Board of Social Work Examiners.
- (4) Remove from the home study the suitability letters from the Office of Criminal History Checks.
- (5) Attach a cover letter to the home study being released stating: **“This adoption study is confidential and should not be released without written permission from the Alabama Department of Human Resources.”**

b. Release to Approved Adoptive Parents of an “Unofficial Copy”

- (1) Ask the approved adoptive parents to submit a written request to the Program Manager in the Office of Adoption. (See **Collateral**

Information at the end of section A. for the DHR State Office Address.)

- (2) The Office of Adoption will remove reference contacts from the home study and mark each page “unofficial copy” before releasing the home study.
- (3) A cover letter will be attached noting that the study is unofficial along with contact information and procedure for obtaining a complete and official copy of the home study.

c. Release to Other State’s Child Welfare Agencies for Out-of-State Adoption

- (1) Inform the family interested in a specific child in another state that the Office of Adoption provides the official copy of home studies to other state’s child welfare agencies.
- (2) Ask the family to send a letter with original signatures to the SDHR Office of Adoption requesting release of the home study. (See **Collateral Information** (6) below for the SDHR address.) The letter is to contain:
 - the family’s permission to release their home study to the other state agency; and
 - specific information regarding the child(ren) of interest and contact person in the other state agency.
- (3) The DHR Office of Adoption may then forward an official copy of the home study to the other state agency with a cover letter that includes:
 - contact information in the Office of Adoption;
 - a request for confirmation of the family as an adoptive resource for a specific child(ren) within 60 days of the cover letter date; and
 - a statement that compliance requirements for Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) must be met.
- (4) Ask the other state agency to submit a completed ICPC packet to DHR’s ICPC Office if the cross-state adoption is pursued. (See **Collateral Information** (6) below for the SDHR address.) Refer to *Interstate/Intercountry Services To Children Policy and Procedures*.
- (5) Another home study release can be requested if:

- the other state’s agency responds that the family is not being considered; or
- 60 days from the cover letter date has passed since the first request.

(6) Collateral Information

Alabama Department of Human Resources address to which a family should send request for release of home study to other state’s child welfare agencies is

Alabama Department of Human Resources
Family Services Division
50 North Ripley Street
P.O. Box 304000
Montgomery, AL 36130

For Office of Adoptions - Attn: Program Manager
For ICPC Office - Attn: Deputy Compact Administrator

B. When Adoption Home Studies Cannot Be Released

No adoption home study, current or closed, is to be released to attorneys or adoption facilitators. Adoption facilitators are not Licensed Child-Placing Agencies (LCPA) and act as intermediaries between the birth mother and adoptive resource. National or regional adoption recruitment entities are usually not LCPA, and a copy of the home study cannot be released to these agencies. Current, approved studies may only be released as previously describe in this section.

If the home study is in process and has not been approved, it should be closed immediately. The worker should confirm in writing to the applicants that their application is being denied because they have notified the Department that they are no longer interested in being a resource for the Department’s children.

A copy of a previously approved, but now closed adoption study is not to be released regardless of the reason for the study being closed (e.g., after a successful placement; after being referred to another agency). A written summary may be given about the agency’s involvement with the family, the success or non-success of a DHR placement with the family, and an assessment of the family’s strengths and needs. The dates of the Department’s involvement with the family should be clear and no recommendation can be made because of the lack of a current, open study on the family.

A copy of a home study where an adoptive placement has been made, but a Final Decree has not been issued, cannot be released. The family must reapply to adopt

after the Final Decree of Adoption is issued in the pending adoption. Refer to VI. Reapplications From Previous DHR Adoptive Families for additional information.