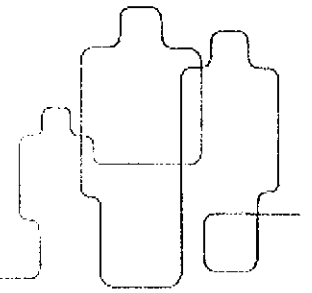




YOU CAN HELP A VERMONT CHILD — FROM A DAY TO A LIFETIME

www.projectfamilyvt.org

June 22, 2009



Vermont Supreme Court
C/o Chief Justice Rieber
109 State Street
Montpelier, Vermont 05609

Dear Chief Justice Rieber,

My name is Wanda Audette. I have served as the Director of Adoption for the Lund Family Center over the past 14 ½ years. I am also a parent by birth and adoption. I have assisted with 1344 adoptions over this period of time. I am writing to you in hopes that I may spark your desire to learn more about what it takes to create a healthy adoption that can last a lifetime. I ask that consideration be given to meeting with me before any decision is made to move the adoption finalizations away from the Probate Courts and into the Family Courts.

For many years the Lund Family Center has been sought out by several state foster care systems for the placement and adoption services of older children in foster care. In 2000 the Lund Family Center and the Adoption Unit of DCF wrote a grant proposal to the Federal Adoption Opportunity Grant Committee to address the increasing needs of Vermont children who were languishing in foster care with no permanent family or connection. Over the past nine years and two grants later we have made significant progress on the length of time children wait for permanency and adoption services. We call this program Project Family.

Project Family is a complex service delivery system which helps the DCF district offices to locate and home study a child's relative in state or out, for potential placement and if needed adoption services. Project Family also provides home study services to any Vermont family who is interested in adopting a child in foster care. Project Family is also responsible for the finalization of all DCF foster child adoptions. All of the services Project Family provides are at no cost to the family. After four years the Vermont legislature was so impressed with the outcomes of the partnership that it has funded the program through DCF every year. I would love a chance to talk with you in more detail of what has been accomplished and what Project Family hopes to accomplish in the future.

One of the major accomplishments of the DCF/Lund partnership is the length of time a child waited for adoption services. Prior to Project Family a child often waited 26 months for the finalization of their adoption. When added to the average length of time for reunification to be tried and when unsuccessful for the child to be freed for adoption a

child who entered foster care at age 2 would be about 6 years old at the time of legal adoption. Everyone agreed this was too long. Project Family has dropped the length of time a child waits for adoption finalization to 6.7 months.


I have sat in Probate Court with many a family and their extended family and friends waiting the few minutes for the Probate Judge to enter the room. This day is one of the most important days in their family's history. The families like to savor it with lots of photos, balloons, flowers and gifts. This family's adoption is the ONLY activity taking place at that moment. They have the hallways, restrooms and courts attention all to themselves. This is a very personal experience. Because this is one of the primary functions of the Probate Courts they are extremely efficient in processing the paperwork, both before and after an adoption, but more than that they are warm and receptive to the happy excitement of both the parents and children.

In my role as the Co-Director of Project Family and as a former foster/adoptive parent I have also had the opportunity to sit through many Family Court proceedings. My experience has been court calendars that are so backed up I have waited for over 4 hours for the case I am on to actually get in front of the judge. In the meantime there are others involved in other custody cases waiting in the same area for their turn in front of the judge. This violates the adoptive family's right to a confidential and private adoption. It also creates a hardship on children, many of whom have special needs that make waiting in a not so child friendly atmosphere difficult. Another concern is that for many children going into the Family Court Building triggers their previous trauma of going to court where their birth parents may have been upset and crying or angry.

I am concerned that adding more work to the Family Courts will exacerbate the court scheduling problems. It currently takes the Family Court Judges 6.8 months after a TPR petition is filed to the actual writing of an order. One of the factors we discovered in expediting adoptions is that the sooner a family can claim a child as their very own the sooner the child's healing can begin. The finalization day is the first day of the rest of these children's lives.

Passion runs deep in those of us who have dedicated our personal and professional lives to adoption. I am hopeful that you will take the opportunity to meet with me and hear my concerns about moving the adoption process to the Family Courts.

Sincerely,



Wanda Audette
Director of Adoption
Lund Family Center
Co-Director of Project Family

Cc: Honorable Brian Burgess