

**Department of Human Resources
Social Services Administration
311 W. Saratoga Street
Baltimore, MD 21201**

DATE: May 15, 2012

POLICY DIRECTIVE: SSA# 12-28

TO: Directors, Local Departments of Social Services
Assistant Directors, Services

FROM: Carnitra D. White, Executive Director
Social Services Administration

RE: Instruction for Using the AdoptUSKids Database

PROGRAMS
AFFECTED: Out-of-Home Placement Services - Adoption

ORIGINATING OFFICE: Child Welfare Practice and Policy

ACTION REQUIRED OF: All Local Departments

REQUIRED ACTION: Initiate Usage of the AdoptUSKids Database

ACTION DUE: May 31, 2012

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BACKGROUND

It has been determined that usage of two databases, i.e. the Maryland adoption Resource Exchange (MARE) and AdoptUsKids, to identify permanent families for children is cost prohibitive. Therefore we have decided to vacate the MARE database by 5/31/2012. Thus the Social Services Administration has elected to discontinue use of the MARE database. Identifying permanent families for children efficaciously continues to be a mandate for all local departments. Therefore caseworkers in the local departments will utilize the AdoptUSKids database program to accomplish matching and all photolisting. By 5/31/12, local departments will cease using the MARE database and the database will be closed.

The Social Services Administration (SSA) will maintain its partnership with AdoptUSKids (AUK) for photolisting services that include the creation and insertion of the state adoption photolisting on the Department's website. AUK also provides 24/7 management, support and monitoring service to the Department for photolisting.

PURPOSE

Local Department of Social Services staff will be using the AdoptUSKids (AUK) database in combination with other tools to identify families for children. AdoptUSKids (AUK), a federal partner that provides recruitment services for families, trains and offers technical assistance to states, and supports adoptive families, has a database that is the most sophisticated online recruitment and matching tool in the United States.

Among the vast array of database tools, the AUK database allows individual states to use this system to:

- photolist children publicly;
- photolist children privately in a section of the database accessible only to other caseworkers;
- match families with children;
- register and match families; and
- Provide families with self-registration and search options as long as they are approved and affiliated with a licensed child placement agency.

These functions are discussed in detail in the Registering, Editing and Matching Section of this policy. In addition, AUK provides technical support for photolisting to Maryland and other states.

Effective immediately, staff must make full, ongoing use of the AUK database in combination with other strategies in efforts to identify permanent placements for children who will not be adopted by relatives or their foster parents. This includes:

- **Registering and matching all children with a permanency plan of adoption unless they have a committed adopted resource with a signed adoption agreement that contains a firm timeline for finalization in place;**

- Registering children whose parental rights have not been terminated using a “placeholder” image instead of a photograph; and
- Periodic follow-up of cases by editing and matching for children and families entered.

Resource families whose primary interest is adoption should be registered on AUK for matching with Maryland children. Those families who only wish to adopt (and not provide ongoing foster care) must give local department staff sufficient time to search for Maryland children with whom the families might be compatible. The suggested time frame for such a search is one year. Refer to the *Approval and Use of Families Interested in Adoption Only* section of this policy for additional information. This stipulation is included in this policy directive and is compatible with the current applicable regulation, COMAR 07.02.12.12 – Placement for Adoption. The regulation requires identification and placement of children with adoptive families under certain circumstances.

COMAR 07.02.12.03 Placement for Adoption;
E. Selection of an Adoptive Home for a Child.

(2) When a child is in need of an adoption placement, the local department shall take the following steps to recruit adoptive families who can meet the child’s individual needs:

(c) If no appropriate local department approved family resource is identified within 15 working days of the change in the permanency plan, provide a strengths-based narrative, as described in §E(3) of this regulation, to [the Maryland Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE)] *AdoptUsKids* to identify prospective adoptive families; ...

(3) The [MARE] *exchange* narrative shall be a strengths-based narrative that:

(a) Is respectful of the child’s confidentiality concerns regarding the child’s:

- (i) Identifying information;
- (ii) History; and
- (iii) Current behavioral issues; and

(b) Provides an accurate description of the child’s:

- (i) Personality;
- (ii) Recreational interests; and
- (iii) Ties to birth relatives.

F. Child Specific Recruitment Efforts

(3) When difficulty in locating an appropriate adoptive family for a child is anticipated, the child shall be listed with [MARE,] *AdoptUsKids*, and other adoption exchanges before the 15th working day mandatory deadline in order to extend the parameters of the search as early as possible.

Upon approval, references in regulations to MARE will be corrected in the revised regulations.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR
REGISTRATION, EDITING, PHOTOLISTING, AND MATCHING ALL CASES IN AUK

- **Obtaining Access to the AUK**

Access to AUK is issued by Social Services Administration Out-of-Home Services/Permanency staff. After a supervisor or caseworker requests access, the SSA staff will register the local department user on AUK using the user's name, telephone number, and GroupWise email address. The email address serves as the user's AUK logon name. The SSA staff creates a temporary password and assigns an AUK level of access. After creating access to AUK, the SSA staff notifies by email the local department user about provision of access and provides initial user access instructions.

Tutorials and resource information for AUK are located in the database at www.adoptuskids.org. Details regarding accessing this information are in the Resource Information section of this policy directive.

- **Children's Cases In AUK**

Registering Children's Cases

- (1) After logging on the AUK database, the user will click on "Register a Child or Siblings".
- (2) The user will be asked to enter the child's photolisting or profile information including:
 - (a) background information, disabilities, narrative, contact information and, profile access;
 - (b) complete checklists for information on risk factors and disabilities;
 - (c) a photo for legally free children or a placeholder image for children with legal risks.
- (3) The user will display child risk factors and disabilities. Full details on risk factors and disabilities are available to all child and family workers registered on AdoptUSKids, and are only available to registered families at the user's discretion. Users have 3 options for displaying this information to registered families.
 - User chooses to not display any information about disabilities to registered families;
 - User may choose to display only overall levels without specific details, resulting in families seeing that a child has for example "emotional disabilities" but will not any specific details such as "loss issues" or "reactive attachment disorder";
 - User may choose to display all disability and risk factors information, including overall levels and specific details.

To achieve matching, a user simply clicks on “Find a Family for This Child”. To narrow or broaden matching search, click on the “Modify search criteria” link. The modification tool allows the user to defined specific aspects, such as geographic location or a specific disability of the child.

Updating Children’s Cases

In keeping with established practice and policy, cases must be updated every six months in AUK so that case information is accurately reflected when matching occurs. For the cases in which casework assignments are unclear, supervisors must perform the updates. Caseworkers must update the case status and all other sections of the case for which updating is appropriate. **Again when updating the narrative, caseworkers must list at the bottom of the narrative the first and last name, email address and telephone number of the staff person serving as contact for the case.** In most instances the contact will be the assigned caseworker.

- **Family Cases**

In order to match families with children in the AUK database, resource families must also be registered.

Registering Family Cases

- (1) The user will click on “Register This Family” be asked to provide the following information
- (2) For the question “Grant Family Access”?, the answer is “No”
- (3) Provide standard background information including
 - a) name(s), date of birth, gender, race, primary and secondary languages;
 - b) marital status and date of marriage;
 - c) income source and occupation;
 - d) children that are currently living in the home and information for them including
 - o birth month and year
 - o gender and race
 - o child’s status in family
 - o child’s disabilities
 - o contact information
- (4) Provide family home environment including
 - a) residence address;
 - b) home study completion and/or update date;
 - c) number of children in the home and number no longer at home; and
 - d) pets
- (5) Provide full details on risk factors, disabilities and behaviors the family is willing to accept using checklists.
- (6) Write narrative that is a brief introductory statement about the family.

Updating Family Cases

Active family cases must be updated every twelve months in AUK or as often as necessary when significant changes occur. Caseworkers must update the case status and all other sections of the case for which updating is appropriate. For cases in which casework assignments are unclear, supervisors must perform these updates

Our priority is to utilize Maryland families for Maryland children. In determining families' interests, be it foster care, adoption, or both, staff will continue the practice of discussing with families:

- (1) the types of children in need of foster care and adoption;
- (2) general Out-of-Home procedures as they relate to foster care, and children and resource families transitioning to adoption;
- (3) legal issues; and
- (4) pre-and post-placement services for children and the families who adopt them.

Maryland's demographics highlight the need for foster care and adoption family resources for children who are older than 9 years of age, members of sibling groups, or have special needs such as physical health disabilities or diseases, mental health disabilities or diseases, educational challenges, and psycho-social challenges. Given that not all foster families adopt children in their care with a permanency plan of adoption, there remains a need for families willing to adopt but who do not want to provide foster care. Therefore, families wanting only to adopt will be registered on AUK by the caseworker.

Matching Family Cases

After registering cases, caseworkers for resource families should try to match their cases in the following descending order of priority:

- (1) With children's cases approved by their local department;
- (2) With Maryland children registered in AUK whose cases are in various Maryland local department;
- (3) With children in other states in the general Maryland region, such as Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Delaware after a period of 12 months searching for Maryland children.;
- (4) With children from all other states.

To achieve matching, a user simply clicks on "Find a child for this family". To narrow broaden a matching search, click on the "Modify search criteria" link. The Modification tool allows the user to define specific aspects, such as geographic location or a specific disability a family will accept.

The families who wish to adopt only (and not provide ongoing foster care) must give local department staff sufficient time to search for Maryland children with whom the families might be compatible. The recommended time frame for such a search is

one year. Families interested in adoption only who wish to adopt children older than 9 years of age must avail themselves to provide foster care for children with permanency plans of adoption if the families are selected for adoptive placement for children in that age range.

- **Approval and Use of Families Interested in Adoption Only**

COMAR states that we are to use families who only wish to adopt as resources in finding permanency for children. Refer COMAR 07.02.12.03- Placement for Adoption. The thrust of this regulation is that local departments will select families who can best meet the current and long range needs of the children needing adoption permanency.

While the dual approval process as it relates to adoptive placements is generally incorporated in regulations, local departments must make better use of the resource families who are solely interested in adoption. Though foster parents adopt the majority of the children available, not all foster parents adopt. The families interested only in adopting represent a valuable resource for all children. An old adage but still good rule of thumb is to rule families in, not out of the process. The National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids quick tips sheet, *Improving Recruitment Outcomes: 11 Things a Practitioner Can Do*, emphasizes

It is important that the practitioner realizes that the most ordinary, and sometimes unusual, people have grown into amazing resource parents with training and support. Most of the time parents present themselves to the agency for an altruistic purpose. They have passion and emotion about this. Our challenge is to learn how to maintain that passion and turn it into informed and sustained commitment.

Other Requirements:

- Maryland families who are interested in adoption only and wish to be considered for children in the age range 0-9 years must be available to provide ongoing foster care.
- Maryland families who are interested in adoption only who want to be considered for children in other states must be identified in an Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) request for either a home study and/or an adoptive placement by the Interstate Compact Office for the state that has responsibility for a particular child.

- **Responding to Inquiries made in AUK about Children**

When families anywhere in the United States view photolistings, they may inquire about specific children featured in several ways.

- (1) The family may initiate an inquiry in AUK after matching themselves with a featured child by clicking on the “Make Inquiry” button in the child’s

photolisting. An alert is sent to the child's caseworker in the caseworker's view of the child's case and a note is made in the family's profile about the alert for the given child. (Families who register on AUK have limited access to information in a child's profile, including, the narrative, background information and disabilities). After receiving the alert, the contact person will go to the child's case in the AUK database, click on "Open Inquiries" and read the information submitted by the family. The caseworker may respond using a built in canned response or create a more specific message in the fields in the dialog box created for a response. Caseworkers should visit the AUK database to check inquiries at least weekly.

- (2) The family may initiate an inquiry by clicking the "Contact Us" button while viewing a child's profile on the DHR public website at the "Children Awaiting Adoption" link. This link is on the home page of the website. In clicking "Contact Us" the family's email inquiry is sent to SSA . these inquiries are then forwarded to caseworkers.
- (3) Maryland families and families from other states may contact SSA by telephone or by regular email after viewing a child on AUK or the DHR websites. The content of these inquiries is then sent to the children's caseworkers by email.

The expectation is that caseworkers will respond to inquiries from families and from caseworkers within five working days of receipt of the inquiries. When responding, families should be encouraged to have their caseworkers contact the children's caseworkers regarding the children they are interested in.

CONCLUSION

By May 31, 2012 local department staff will:

- update information in cases already in the AUK database;
- register new cases for children with a plan of adoption and new cases for resource families approved who have not been matched with children in your local department caseload;
- register new cases for families who wish to adopt;
- attempt matches in the AUK database; and
- photolist all children legally free with a plan of adoption unless there is a firm plan for the child to be adopted by the current foster parent.

APPENDIX A

Resource Information

- AUK database resource material on registering, editing (updating), matching, photolisting and managing cases may be accessed at www.adoptuskids.org.
- Tutorials are accessible in the left side menu of the home page or on “My Home Page”. They contain instructions with slide views.
- The “FOR PROFESSIONALS” menu item at the top of the home page contains a variety of resource areas. Click on the following:
FOR PROFESSIONALS → National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention → Resource Guides and Curricula for Child Welfare Staff → Child-Specific Recruitment Resources. There you will find very helpful publications including

Lasting Impressions: A Guide for Photolisting Children and

Finding a Fit that Will Last a Lifetime: A Guide to Connecting Adoptive Families With Waiting Children.

- Other AUK training handouts are available on the web link. Out-of-Home Services/Permanency central office staff is available to assist local department staff obtain the additional training material.

An additional tool available to caseworkers in their efforts to achieve optimum permanency for youth is the practice guide, **UNPACKING THE POWER OF NO.**

Of major concern is the need for caseworkers to have discussions continuously with all children but particularly with youth about adoption when they reject adoption as their permanency plan. Studies reveal periodic re-visitation of the subject results in many children giving themselves permission to take a chance on growing up in a safe and stable family structure. A good guide for the discussion of adoption is a power point presentation for caseworkers entitled, “Unpacking the Power of No”. It was prepared by the West Virginia Supervisory Committee in collaboration with the Hunter College School of Social Work located at

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/ppt/Unpacking_the_No.ppt.

APPENDIX B

Example of Photolisting Narrative (An introduction to the child)

JASON

14 YRS.

Meet JASON, a handsome lad in need of an adoptive family. In Lawrence's world, football and track and field activities spell happiness. Last school year, he won a trophy for excelling in football.

A good student with lots of potential, Jason wants to pursue a career playing professional football. His life does not totally revolve around sports though, as he also enjoys video games and gravitates to arts and crafts, as he likes to draw and create objects with his hands. During this past summer he had a great time at camp because, in his words, "I met new people and made many new friends."

The family that becomes part of Jason's life will need to provide love and encouragement and allow ongoing contact with his younger birth sisters who have been adopted. He is not totally sure he wants to be adopted but does want adults in his life he can count on. In the end, Jason will become part of a family that is flexible, active and willing to provide Jason with unconditional love.

If you wish to be considered as an adoptive family for Jason, contact: Mr. or Ms. Caseworker, email address, and telephone number.