



471 JPL Wick Drive  
PO Box 4538  
Harrisburg, PA 17111

**OFFICE** 717.236.8570  
**FAX** 717.236.8571  
**WEB** [www.familydesign.org](http://www.familydesign.org)

**Testimony of:**

Brenda L. Lawrence, MSW  
Executive Director  
Family Design Resources, Inc.  
[blawrence@familydesign.org](mailto:blawrence@familydesign.org)

**Submitted to the**

US House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Human Resources

**For the hearing on:**

Improving Programs Design to Protect At-Risk Youth  
June 16, 2011

Chairman Davis and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Brenda Lawrence, executive director of Family Design Resources, Inc. (FDR). Thank you for the opportunity to offer information to bolster understanding of the critical need for federal funding to strengthen post-adoption services and supports to families and children.

Family Design Resources is a private, non-profit social service consulting agency that provides program management, technical assistance and training for Pennsylvania's Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN). FDR, in partnership with Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries and under the authority of Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children Youth and Families, administers the broad-based programs of the network, including comprehensive post-adoption services. A step-by-step approach puts our state's families in touch with the services they need to ensure permanency and prevent re-entry to the child welfare system.

Families can initiate the process by calling our SWAN Helpline. The information and referral specialists explain the services, assist the family in choosing an agency to work with and then submit the referral for service. This leads directly into the assessment of that family's needs. An assessor visits the home, talks with the entire family to build on family strengths and recommends possible services. In the words of one family served, "We were at the end of our rope! Having the caseworker come to our home helped us to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Help had finally arrived."

Referrals are made for one or any combination of three services—case advocacy, respite and support group. Each provides relief in distinct ways by connecting families to case advocates, other families and respite caregivers. A case advocate, for example, helps the family learn about and access services in the community, provides support and expertise.. One family shared with our Helpline staff, "Our caseworker was helpful, caring and non-judgmental. She was the first person who really believed us about the behaviors our son was exhibiting. She was our guide towards resources that could help support our entire family."

The support group service is designed to support families by fostering relationships with other families in similar circumstances, forming a community of support and mentoring, and providing information and educational materials. One family expressed the help they received in this way: "Finding support from other families who are going through the same struggles is what keeps me going. It means I am not alone."

Respite services support the family by developing resources that help alleviate the pressures of parenting special needs children. A respite provider offers a safe environment for the child while the family takes a short break by going out for the night or enjoying a weekend away. Respite is flexible and can occur inside or outside the home. Our services also allow for a family to choose their respite providers, providing a higher level of assurance to the family. SWAN has served families for whom respite was a lifeline to hope. According to one family, "I was ready to return my child to CYS. The situation had become desperate for our entire family. Respite gives us the much needed refreshment to rejuvenate, regroup and continue to strengthen our family."

At the time we designed the initial post-permanency programs for Pennsylvania's families in 2002, support groups were meeting but were not funded, and respite and case advocacy services were not available. The limited research available at the time and a gap analysis that we performed to understand the overall needs of our state's families helped to lay a strong foundation for the design of a comprehensive program. Current research continues to support the need for flexible, tailored post-adoption services in the areas of case advocacy, respite and support groups.

As evidenced by the testimonials I've shared today, post-adoption support can change fear, anxiety, frustration, despair, hardship and burnout to hope, trust, confidence, preservation, adaptability, cohesion and most importantly, permanence. And isn't that what we're all really aiming for?

Thank you for the opportunity for me to share the positive experiences of Family Design Resources and the families we serve. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about Pennsylvania's approach to post-adoption support.