



Understanding Infant Adoption 7

District of Columbia Adoption Guide for Healthcare Providers & Staff

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Disclaimer: This resource guide is intended for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. It is not a substitute for consultation with hospital legal counsel or a licensed adoption attorney. Adoption laws and procedures vary by jurisdiction and are subject to change. Healthcare providers and staff are strongly encouraged to seek professional legal guidance to ensure compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

Introduction to Adoption

What is Adoption?

Adoption is a legal process in which biological parents (also referred to herein as “placing parents” or “birth parents”) relinquish their parental rights to their child, allowing the child to be placed in the care of adoptive parents. However, adoption is more than just a legal agreement; it is a life-altering experience that reflects a commitment to a child's love, care, and well-being.

Healthcare providers should have a basic understanding of the three main types of adoption to offer informed support for their patients:

- **Private Adoption:** This is a direct arrangement between birth parents and adoptive parents, often through a licensed adoption agency or attorney. In a private adoption, the birth parents have voluntarily relinquished their parental rights to the child, and the child is placed directly into the legal and physical custody of the adoptive parents. Most private adoptions are “open adoptions,” meaning there will be ongoing contact between the birth parents and adoptive parents. Private adoption is the most common type of adoption that healthcare providers encounter when working in mother-baby and neonatal units.
- **Adoption from Foster Care:** This occurs when a child in state foster care is legally available for adoption after a court has terminated the parental rights of the birth parents. Foster care adoptions often involve

older children. Every state has laws and regulations governing foster care and adoption, which are managed by the state's public child welfare agency. If the child is placed for adoption in another state, compliance with the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) is required.

- **Intercountry Adoption:** The process by which a child born in one country is adopted by a family in another country. The State Department serves as the oversight authority for intercountry adoption in the United States.

For expectant mothers, the adoption journey is filled with complex emotions and culminates in a life-changing decision. The private adoption process allows mothers to create an adoption plan at any point during their pregnancy or after giving birth. In this journey, healthcare providers play a crucial role, providing neutral care and support, facilitating fully informed decision-making, and making ethical referrals to adoption providers. Your role in this process is integral in ensuring the well-being of all patients considering this option.

Important Terminology

The biological parent signs adoption consent or relinquishment, authorizing the court to terminate her parental rights:

- Before adoption consents are signed, refer to the biological parent as an “**expectant parent**” or “**parent.**”
- A parent making an adoption plan for their child is called a “**placing parent.**”
- After adoption consents are signed, refer to the biological parent as a “**birth parent.**”

Support for Patients Considering Adoption

Expectant parents should have access to a variety of support resources from the moment they begin considering adoption through the completion of the process and beyond. Below is a summary of some of the available services and providers that patients can access to find appropriate support.

➔ Pregnancy Options Counseling

Many non-profit organizations in Colorado offer pregnancy options counseling for expectant mothers. The purpose of this counseling is to help women consider their available options during pregnancy. It is important to note that not all pregnancy centers provide the same services. For instance, some pregnancy resource centers do not offer information or referrals for abortion. However, most centers typically provide services such as pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, maternity clothes, parenting assistance, resource referrals, parenting classes, and counseling. Generally, these organizations do not charge fees unless they also operate a licensed medical clinic on site.

➔ Ethical & Effective Referrals

Empowering patients in their decision-making process is key. When making a referral to an adoption provider, it's important to present at least three options. This allows the patient to understand the range of services available and choose the one that best suits her needs. See the Understanding Infant Adoption curriculum handouts [Questions for Healthcare Practitioners to Ask Adoption Agencies and/or Attorneys](#) and [Questions for Patients to Ask Adoption Agencies and/or Attorneys](#) for suggestions.

➔ Choosing an Adoption Provider

The Internet is full of adoption providers offering help to expectant parents, but not all of these entities have your patients' best interests at heart. It's essential to understand the different types of adoption professionals available:

- **Licensed Adoption Agencies:** Adoption agencies are licensed by the state to provide adoption services to expectant/birth parents and adoptive families. These services can include social work, home studies,

adoption education, pregnancy counseling, adoption matching, and post-placement care. Agencies work to ensure that social and emotional challenges are addressed through social work and counseling, while also ensuring compliance with adoption rules and regulations.

- **Licensed Adoption Attorneys:** Attorneys play a vital role in the adoption process. Ideally, the adoptive parents should have their own attorney, and the expectant or birth parents should be represented by a separate attorney. This ensures that everyone's rights are protected and that there are no conflicts of interest. Attorneys in Colorado are licensed by the Colorado State Bar Association.
- **Unlicensed Adoption Intermediaries:** Some adoption providers are not licensed to offer adoption services. Unlicensed adoption intermediaries are also referred to as “advertisers,” “matchmakers,” “brokers,” or “marketers.” They solicit expectant and adoptive parents for their services through online ads and other marketing tactics and collect substantial matching fees from hopeful adoptive parents. Working with an unlicensed adoption provider can complicate the process for expectant mothers trying to find suitable adoptive parents for their children and can prevent them from getting adequate support and guidance. It is very appropriate to ask an agency to see a copy of their state-issued child-placing agency license.

More than half of the states in the U.S. have laws prohibiting the use of unlicensed adoption intermediaries, but such laws are frequently overlooked. In the District of Columbia, only a licensed child-placing agency may place a minor for adoption or engage in the business of placing a minor for adoption. See [District of Columbia Adoption Laws](#), below, for further information.

- **Out-of-State Adoption Providers:** With the increasing use of the Internet in the adoption process, patients may choose to work with adoption providers located outside of the District of Columbia. It's crucial to ensure these out-of-state providers are licensed to provide adoption services and that they work cooperatively with a District of Columbia-licensed adoption agency and attorney to ensure that the placing parents receive local support before, during, and after adoption. This not only ensures legal compliance but also the safety and well-being of the patient and the child.

➔ Choosing Prospective Adoptive Parents

The process of selecting adoptive parents requires careful consideration. Expectant parents often have a specific vision of the type of family they wish to find for their child. A District of Columbia-licensed child-placing agency or attorney can assist expectant parents in identifying potential adoptive families that align with their desired characteristics. Once the expectant parent has reviewed profiles of suitable prospective adoptive parents, she should have the opportunity to meet with them in person whenever possible before making a final decision.

Expectant parents should create a list of questions to ask prospective adoptive parents to ensure they find the right family for their child. However, compiling this list can be overwhelming. See the handout [Questions for Patients to Ask Adoption Agencies and/or Attorneys](#) for suggestions.

Support After Adoption

Birth parents often experience grief and a range of intense emotional and psychological effects after placing a child for adoption. It is important to provide them with mental health support during this time. Support following adoption can take various forms, including individual counseling, group therapy, and support groups.

District of Columbia Adoption Laws

Adoption is a complex legal process. Violating state laws can jeopardize the safety of all parties involved, as well as the child's permanency. Below are frequently asked questions regarding the District of Columbia's adoption laws.

Does the District of Columbia allow independent (non-agency) adoptions?

Yes. The District of Columbia allows independent (non-agency) adoptions, often referred to as "private" or "independent" adoptions. In these cases, the adoption is arranged directly between the birth parents and the adoptive parents, typically with the assistance of an attorney rather than a licensed adoption agency.

Does the District of Columbia allow unlicensed adoption facilitators?

No. Unlicensed adoption facilitators are prohibited in D.C. [D.C. Code. § 4-1405\(a\) \(2025\)](#)

Does the District of Columbia require that placing parents have separate legal representation?

The laws in the District of Columbia do not address this issue.

Are adoptive parents allowed to pay an expectant mother's living expenses?

Yes. Adoptive parents may pay for the birth mother's reasonable living expenses, including food, shelter, clothing, medical care, counseling, living, and transportation. [D.C. Code § 4-1410 \(2025\)](#)

When can the placing parents sign the adoption consent or relinquishment?

Placing parents may sign the adoption consent at any time after the child's birth. Consent must be signed and acknowledged before an officer authorized by law to take acknowledgments (i.e. notary), before a representative of a licensed child-placing agency, or before the Mayor of the District. [DC Code § 4-1406 \(2025\)](#)

Can placing parents who have consented to an adoption change their mind and revoke their consent?

In independent adoptions facilitated by an attorney, consent is deemed irrevocable once the Petition for Adoption is filed with the court. In an adoption facilitated by an agency, consent may be withdrawn within 14 days of signing. [DC Code § 4-1406 \(2025\)](#)

Are post-adoption contact agreements legally binding in the District of Columbia?

Yes. [D.C. Code § 4-361 \(2022\)](#)

What legal rights do birth fathers have in a District of Columbia adoption?

In all states, including the District of Columbia, birth fathers' legal rights in adoption depend on various factors, such as their legal relationship with the child's mother and their actions before and after being notified of the adoption proceedings. Birth fathers who wish to understand and enforce their legal rights should consult with a District of Columbia adoption attorney for guidance.

What to do when you suspect a violation in your hospital?

If you witness violations of District of Columbia law in your hospital or healthcare clinic, you should immediately file a report. Where you file the report will depend on the type of entity or individual who has committed the offense. If you are witnessing repeated offenses, alert your healthcare administration office.

Type of Entity	Where to Report	Contact Information
Licensed Adoption Agency	District of Columbia Department of Health - Licensing and Regulatory Administration	(877) 672-2174 (202) 442-5955 https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/doh-complaint-incident-report-form-please-allow-moment-webpage-load

Type of Entity	Where to Report	Contact Information
Licensed Attorney	DC Bar, Office of Disciplinary Counsel	https://www.dcbbar.org/attorney-discipline/office-of-disciplinary-counsel/filing-a-complaint
Unlicensed Adoption Facilitator Unlicensed Adoption Advertising	Office of the Attorney General	(202) 442-9828 https://oag.dc.gov/consumer-protection/submit-consumer-complaint consumer.protection@dc.gov

Child Protection in the District of Columbia

Child Protective Services Referrals

Physicians, psychologists, medical examiners, dentists, chiropractors, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, or persons involved in the care and treatment of patients, social service workers, and mental health professionals are among the many professionals defined as mandated reporters in the District of Columbia. [D.C. Code § 4-1321.02 \(2025\)](#)

Child Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation Definitions under the District of Columbia Law

Under D.C. law, a child is any person under the age of 18. [D.C. Code § 4-1341.01 \(2025\)](#)

- **Abused**, when used in reference to a child, means any of the following:
 - Infliction of physical or mental injury
 - Sexual abuse or exploitation
 - Negligent treatment or maltreatment[D.C. Code § 16-2301 \(2025\)](#)
- **Neglect**: In relation to a clinical care setting, 'Neglected child' means any of the following applies to a child:
 - Who has resided in a hospital located in the District of Columbia for at least 10 calendar days following their birth, despite a medical determination that the child is ready for discharge from the hospital, and the parent has not taken any action or made any effort to maintain a parental, guardianship, or custodial relationship or contact with the child
 - Who is born addicted or dependent on a controlled substance or has a significant presence of a controlled substance in their system at birth
 - In whose body there is a controlled substance as a direct and foreseeable consequence of the acts or omissions of the child's parent
 - Whose parent, guardian, or custodian has failed to make reasonable efforts to prevent the infliction of abuse upon the child

- Who is without proper parental care or control, subsistence, education, or other care or control necessary for their physical, mental, or emotional health

[D.C. Code § 16-2301 \(2025\)](#)

The D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) Contact Information

Contact the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency to report incidents of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. CFSA takes reports of child abuse and neglect 24 hours a day, seven days a week: (202) 671-7233.

Safe Haven/Safe Surrender Laws and Process

Safe Haven/Safe Surrender laws are designed to prevent the abandonment and endangerment of infants by providing a safe and legal way for parents to relinquish unharmed newborns. These laws allow parents to safely surrender their infant directly to a designated provider, while generally protecting them from criminal liability and prosecution. Additionally, these laws ensure that the relinquishing parent can remain anonymous. It is important to note that Safe Haven/Safe Surrender laws are intended for use in extreme circumstances and are not a substitute for the resources provided in the public child welfare system or private adoption processes.

- **For Immediate Assistance:** Call or text the 24/7 Safe Haven Crisis Helpline at 1-888-510-BABY (2229)

What are the age restrictions for a Safe Haven/Safe Surrender relinquishment in the District of Columbia?

A newborn may be surrendered. The term 'newborn' means an infant whose parent refuses or is unable to assume the responsibility for the infant's care, control, and subsistence; who is surrendered by that parent; and who a licensed physician or other person authorized to accept the surrender reasonably believes is 14 days old or younger. [D.C. Code § 4-1451.01 \(2025\)](#)

Who can relinquish the infant under Safe Haven/Safe Surrender laws?

Except when there is actual or suspected child abuse or neglect, a custodial parent who is a resident of the District of Columbia may surrender a newborn in accordance with this chapter. [D.C. Code §§ 4-1451.01 and 4-1451.02 \(2025\)](#)

Who are the designated Safe Haven/Safe Surrender providers?

An authorized receiving facility, including a hospital or other place authorized by the mayor, may accept a newborn for surrender. [D.C. Code § 4-1451.01 \(2025\)](#)

Putative Father Registry

A putative father is a person who claims to be the father of a child and wants to establish paternity. The purpose of a registry is to allow an unmarried father of a born or unborn child to register his name so he will be notified before the child is placed for adoption. The father does not have to be listed on the birth certificate to register.

The District of Columbia does not have a putative father registry. Those seeking to establish parentage may learn more about options and procedures at <https://oag.dc.gov/parentage-and-paternity-unwed-parents>.

District of Columbia Adoption Service Professionals

Licensed Private Adoption Agencies

In the District of Columbia, adoption agencies are licensed by the state Department of Health - Licensing and Regulatory Administration. The following licensed agencies focus on domestic infant adoption with counseling and/or services available for expectant parents. A full listing of child placing agencies licensed in D.C. is

available online at

<https://dchealth.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doh/publication/attachments/Child%20Placement%20Agencies%20Directory%2008-2024.pdf>. Some agencies are licensed in multiple states.

Contact ascc@adoptioncouncil.org with any additions, corrections, or updates.

- **The Barker Adoption Foundation**
7979 Old Georgetown Rd 1st Fl
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: (301) 664-9664
info@barkerfoundation.org
<https://www.barkeradoptionfoundation.org/>
- **Cradle of Hope Adoption Center**
1629 K St NW Ste 300
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: (202) 466-0973
info@cradlehope.org
<https://cradlehope.org/>
- **Paths for Families**
508 Kennedy St NW Ste 300
Washington, DC 20011
Phone: (202) 526-4802
Fax: (202) 526-4803
Contact Form: <https://pff.mapcrm.info/eform/view.php?id=615>
<https://pathsforfamilies.org/>

Licensed Adoption Attorneys

This listing reflects the current District of Columbia-licensed fellows of the [Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys](#). This list may not be representative of all attorneys in the state working in the field of adoption law. Some attorneys hold licensure in more than one state.

Contact ascc@adoptioncouncil.org with any additions, corrections, or updates.

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<https://www.stockhamlaw.com/>

Resources

- [Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys](#)
- [AdoptChange](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway: State, Territory, and Tribal Resources](#)
- [Council of the District of Columbia - Code](#)
- [DC Child and Family Services Agency](#)
- [Washington, D.C. State Bar](#)

About the Adoption-Sensitive Clinical Care Project

It is critical that expectant parents who may wish to place a child for adoption have access to appropriately trained staff and comprehensive supports throughout the adoption process. The federally-funded Adoption-Sensitive Clinical Care Project and the Understanding Infant Adoption curriculum are being administered by [National Council For Adoption](#) (NCFA), [The Adoption & Foster Care Clinic](#), [Spaulding for Children](#), and [University of Washington School of Social Work](#) for the project period 2024-2026.

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