



Understanding Infant Adoption 7

North Dakota 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 where 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 North Dakota 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 North Dakota are licensed by the North Dakota 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. Only North Dakota-licensed child placement agencies may place a child or arrange for an adoption. See [North Dakota 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 North Dakota. It's crucial to ensure these out-of-state providers are licensed to provide adoption services and that they work cooperatively with a North Dakota-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 North Dakota-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.

North Dakota 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 North Dakota's adoption laws.

Does North Dakota allow independent (non-agency) adoptions?

Yes. North Dakota does allow 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 North Dakota allow unlicensed adoption facilitators?

No. North Dakota does not permit unlicensed adoption facilitators. Only North Dakota-licensed child placement agencies may place a child or arrange for an adoption. Anyone who willfully violates this law is guilty of a class C felony. [N.D. Cent. Code § 50-12-17 \(2024\)](#)

Does North Dakota require that placing parents have separate legal representation?

The laws in North Dakota do not address this issue.

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

Yes. Adoptive parents may pay expectant mother's uninsured medical expenses, counseling, legal services, transportation and living expenses needed to maintain an adequate standard of living which she is unable to otherwise maintain because of loss of income or other support resulting from the pregnancy. Payments may cover these expenses during the pregnancy-related incapacity, but not for a period longer than six weeks following the delivery. [N.D. Cent. Code § 14-15.1-06 \(2024\)](#)

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

Consent may be given any time after the birth of the child in the presence of the Court or other individual authorized to take acknowledgements. [N.D. Cent. Code § 14-15-17 \(2020\)](#)

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

Yes, but only if a court finds that withdrawal of the consent is in the child's best interests. [N.D. Cent. Code § 14-15-17 \(2020\)](#)

Are post-adoption contact agreements legally binding in North Dakota?

This issue is not addressed under North Dakota law.

What legal rights do birth fathers have in a North Dakota adoption?

In all states, including North Dakota, 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 North Dakota adoption attorney for guidance.

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

If you witness violations of North Dakota 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 | Department of Health and Human Services | https://www.hhs.nd.gov/cfs/cps |
| Licensed Attorney | State Bar Association of North Dakota | https://www.sband.org/page/file_a_complaint |
| Unlicensed Adoption Facilitator | Local Law Enforcement | |

Child Protection in North Dakota

Child Protective Services Referrals

Medical and mental health professionals, childcare workers, law enforcement officers, licensed social workers, family service specialists, clergy, and others are considered mandated reporters. (N.D. Cent. Code. §§ 50-25.1-03 (2023))

Contact the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Protection Program to report incidents of abuse, neglect, or exploitation to the proper state child protection agency. Contact information for the Child Protection Program can be found here: <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/cfs/cps>.

Child Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation Definitions under North Dakota Law

Under North Dakota law, a child is any person under the age of 18. [N.D. Cent. Code §§ 50-25.1-02 \(2023\)](#)

- **Child Abuse:** Occurs when a parent, adult family or household member, guardian, or other custodian of any child, who willfully inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon the child mental injury or bodily injury, substantial bodily injury, or serious bodily injury. [N.D. Cent. Code §§ 14-09-22 \(2023\)](#)
- **Neglected child** means a child who, due to the action or inaction of a person responsible for the child's welfare is without proper care or control, subsistence, education as required by law, or other care or control necessary for the child's physical, mental, or emotional health, or morals. This is further defined as the following, among other specific definitions:
 - Has been placed for care or adoption in violation of law
 - Has been abandoned
 - Was subject to prenatal exposure to alcohol misuse or any controlled substance in a manner not lawfully prescribed by a practitioner
 - Is present in an environment subjecting the child to exposure of a controlled substance, chemical substance, or drug paraphernalia

[N.D. Cent. Code §§ 50-25.1-02 \(2023\)](#)

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 more information about Baby Safe Haven in North Dakota, visit <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/cfs/safe-haven>.

- **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 North Dakota?

The infant must be under the age of one year. [N.D. Cent. Code §§ 50-25.1-15 \(2023\)](#)

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

The parent of an infant under the age of one year, or an agent of the parent with the parent's consent may relinquish the infant. [N.D. Cent. Code §§ 50-25.1-15 \(2023\)](#)

Who are the designated Safe Haven/Safe Surrender providers?

In North Dakota, a parent may relinquish the infant for a Safe Haven/Safe Surrender through a hospital or an on-duty staff member at an approved location. If the infant is less than 60 days old, he or she may be left in a newborn safety device, at an approved location (hospital or other designated location) in an unharmed condition. [*N.D. Cent. Code §§ 50-25.1-15 \(2023\)*](#)

The Department of Health & Human Services has designated the following as approved locations: the hospital where the baby was born, hospital/emergency rooms, local public health units, human service zones, law enforcement centers, regional human service centers, long term care nursing facilities, children's advocacy centers, and 911 EMS responders. <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/cfs/safe-haven>

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.

North Dakota does not have a state registry. The mother of a child and a man claiming to be the genetic father of the child may sign an acknowledgment of paternity with intent to establish the man's paternity. [*N.D. Cent. Code §§ 14-20-11 \(2023\)*](#)

Those seeking to establish parentage may learn more about options and procedures at <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/vital/establishing-paternity>.

North Dakota Adoption Service Providers

Licensed Private Adoption Agencies

In North Dakota, adoption agencies are licensed by the state Department of Health & Human Services. The following licensed agencies focus on domestic infant adoption with counseling and/or services available for expectant parents. A full listing of state-licensed agencies is available online at <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/cfs/adoption-program/adoption-agency-lcpa-listing>. Some agencies are licensed in multiple states.

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

- **All About U Adoptions**
9 Willow St
Burlington, ND 58722
Phone: (701) 355-6430
coleen@aauadoptions.org
<http://www.aauadoptions.org/>
- **Catholic Charities North Dakota**
5201 Bishops Blvd Ste B
Fargo, ND 58104-7605
Phone: (701) 289-2549
Fax: (701) 356-7993
Contact Form: <https://www.catholiccharitiesnd.org/fargo>
<https://www.catholiccharitiesnd.org/pregnancy-services>

- **Christian Adoption Services**

3220 S 18 St Ste 8E

Fargo, ND 58104

Phone: (701) 237-4473

Fax: (701) 356-5098

info@casfamily.org

<http://www.christianadoptionsservices.org/>

Licensed Adoption Attorneys

This listing reflects the current North Dakota fellows of the [Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys](#) and 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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Resources

- [Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys](#)
- [AdoptChange](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway: State, Territory, and Tribal Resources](#)
- [North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services: Adoption Program](#)
- [North Dakota Legislative Council: North Dakota Century Code](#)
- [State Bar Association of North Dakota](#)

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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