

Informational Presentation

- My name is Shari Levine.
- I'm the Director of Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS) and have been with the agency for 26 years.
- I'm also the president of the Coalition of OR Adoption Agencies.
- My most treasured role is as an adoptive mom. Both of my kids were born and raised in open adoptions and we have very close relationships with their birth families.

Background Info About OA&FS

- We are a non-profit agency licensed in OR and WA, with offices in Eugene, Portland and Seattle.
- Over the past 34 years we've placed over 1,500 children in open adoption families and become the experts in open adoption in the NW, and now national spokespeople.
- We welcome diversity: gay, straight, married, single, all ethnicities and religions.

Foster care crisis in OR

- DHS staff work hard to protect children from abuse and neglect, but the system is overburdened.
- In 2010, I helped to clarify the DHS policy allowing at-risk birthmoms the option to proactively plan an adoption with a private agency, before her child is removed.
- This has been utilized by:
 - First time moms who are struggling with addiction, homelessness, domestic violence or mental illness.
 - Moms who've had previous children removed by the state and are pregnant again, and this time she wants to plan an open adoption instead.
 - Moms who have given birth and taken the baby home and are struggling to parent.
- By proactively planning an open adoption, she can choose the adoptive parents and form a lifelong extended family relationship with them. She's actively involved as her child grows and thrives.

- She has a voice in her child's future and keeps them out of foster care.
- In our process family preservation is achieved by adding family and support. The birth and adoptive extended families become the safety net.
- This recognizes the child's need to include their birth family in their life, and the birth parent's need not to be separated from their child.
- We have been doing this successfully for years; it has been a win/win for everyone.

OA&FS Process for Expectant Parents:

- She receives extensive, non-biased all options pregnancy counseling. (90% don't choose adoption and we connect them with the resources they need.)
- She's treated with dignity and respect as she make vital choices
- After reading in-depth info, she hand-selects a family from a pool of 65-85 families, who genuinely want a relationship with her. Our adoptive parents receive intensive training and education on open adoption.
- She meets and forms a lifelong friendship with them. We teach relationship building skills and tools to all parties.
- Together they create a legally enforceable agreement for ongoing visits.
- She's welcomed into their extended family, has an active, honored role in her child's life and is present to watch them grow and thrive.
- They receive lifelong counseling and relationship guidance from OA&FS. This is vital to the success of an open adoption.
- All services are free of charge to expectant parents and their families.
- We do whatever we can to reach out and include the birthfather.
- 95% of the moms we work with struggle with issues related to addiction, homelessness, mental illness, domestic violence, incarceration.
- We work with the same moms as DHS does, just earlier in the process.
- Moms continually tell us they feel heard, valued and respected. They see this process as an empowering choice.

DHS Culture:

- Many moms in the system believe the only type of adoption that's available to them is a DHS adoption. They see this as a process, in which they fail.
- In fact, a mom has to fail for a DHS adoption to happen; but she doesn't have to fail in our strengths-based open adoptions.
- Parenting doesn't have to be an either/or proposition. Currently, reunification is associated with success, and adoption with failure. The mom either wins or loses her child; she's either rewarded or punished and there's no choice in the middle.
- Our open adoptions give struggling moms a choice in the middle. She's not severing ties with her child; she's actively involved in their life.

Differences between OAFS & DHS open adoption:

- The DHS process isn't the mom's choice, with our agency it is.
- By the time the child is adopted, they've spent an average of 3 years in the system. Heavily impacted by ACES.
- After months/years of not meeting reunification goals, the mom's relationship with DHS becomes more adversarial; she feels like a failure.
- When a DHS adoption is imminent, the mom is offered a voluntary relinquishment and a contact agreement to avoid a TPR hearing.
- She's still not choosing a family based on her aspirations for her child. She has no voice.
- DHS adoptions are not a fully open adoption, not based on extended family model.
- Most adoptive parent's seeking a state adoption are wary of contact with the birthmom; the only information they have on the birthmom is negative.
- There's no relationship training or ongoing guidance for the birth and adoptive parents. Often the birthmom fades away.

How SB 814 will Make a Difference?

- Currently DHS allows moms to pro-actively plan an open adoption, but this alternative is not being fully utilized.
- Moms can't access it if they doesn't know it exists.
- There needs to be a transparent conversation with the mom before her child is removed about what her options are: reunification and everything that will entail with the possibility of that culminating in a DHS adoption, or pro-actively planning an open adoption.

- Then she can truly make an informed and empowering choice regarding their child's future.
- She can take ownership of her decision, not feel victimized by the process.
- Through this paradigm shift, we can destigmatize the way these struggling moms are seen so they're not defined by their limitations.
- Maybe she can't succeed at being a full-time parent at this point in her life, but she can succeed as a birthparent, and that means everything to her and her child.
- It's important she knows about this option and can access it as a back-up plan if a state adoption becomes imminent later.

Proposed Trainings:

- Long, successful history of providing free trainings to DHS, CPS and Self-Sufficiency workers statewide. We were recently chosen by the NW trainers for the Understanding Infant Adoption initiative for hospital nurses and social workers.
- We created a free webinar for the OR Health Authority and we're happy to create one for DHS.
- At my presentation at the Child Welfare Council meeting I learned that DHS workers may feel uncomfortable mentioning adoption. They see adoption as insulting because adoption is considered a failure to parent.

We've created a training on how to talk with moms about their adoption options:

Here's some key questions and statements to use as conversation starters in order to insure she's informed about all of her options:

- Do you feel able to parent at this time?
- Do you think you can meet the reunification requirements?
- Here's some information about an alternative to parenting, foster care and state adoption.

We are so excited about expanding our partnership with DHS!