



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
*Office of the Commissioner*

August 27, 2025

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** The Honorable Glenn Youngkin  
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable Luke E. Torian  
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable L. Louise Lucas  
Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee

Michael Maul  
Director, Department of Planning and Budget

**FROM:** Kevin Erskine, Acting Commissioner 

**SUBJECT:** Annual Report on Adoption of Special Needs Children

This report is submitted in compliance with Item 329 F.1 and 2 of the 2024 Appropriation Act, which states:

*Items 329 (F.1.) and (F.2.) of the 2024 Appropriation Act provides:*

- (1) *"Out of this appropriation, \$1,500,000 the first year and \$1,500,000 the second year from the general fund shall be provided to implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted."*
- (2) *"Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House*

*Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.”*

Please contact me if you have questions at (804) 726-7011.

KE:kc

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Janet V. Kelly, Secretary of Health and Human Resources



# Annual Report on the Adoption of Children with Special Needs

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# ANNUAL REPORT ON THE ADOPTION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A Report for the Virginia General Assembly

August 1, 2025

## REPORT MANDATE

### Items 329.F. of the 2025 Appropriation Act

- F.1. Out of this appropriation, \$1,500,000 the first year and \$1,500,000 the second year from the general fund shall be provided to implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted.*
- F.2. Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025 Appropriation Act, Item 329.F. provides funding to increase the number of finalized adoptions of children and youth with special needs. These are children with significant behavioral or medical challenges who tend to be older, in foster care longer, and who have had multiple foster care placements.

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) has implemented programs focused on increasing the number adoptions of children in foster care. Faster Families Highway (“the Highway”), a recruitment portal project focusing on recruiting foster families, is demonstrating great success. Since its launch in SFY23, all 120 Local Departments of Social Services (LDSS) have used the online portal to identify appropriate foster families for children in care. **As of April 30, 2025, 5,536 potential foster families have entered “the Highway”; of these, 1,240 were recruited and 221 were approved.**

In response to HB653 (2022 General Assembly Session), VDSS launched the development of the **Resource Family Collaborative** program, aimed at enhancing the recruitment and retention of kinship and non-relative foster families by fostering partnerships among Local Departments of Social Services.

SFY 2025 appropriated funds were also used to continue advancing the work being completed with Adoption-Share and Adoption Resource Exchange of VA (AREVA). VDSS also utilized funding to continue supporting dedicated placement staff and a public relations and marketing expert to support the many Permanency promotional campaigns.

### About VDSS and the Adoption of Children with Special Needs

VDSS partners with LDSS and community organizations to promote the wellbeing of children and families across the Commonwealth. VDSS proudly serves alongside nearly 13,000 state and local human services professionals throughout the state who ensure that thousands of Virginia's most vulnerable citizens have access to the best services and benefits available. Together, VDSS works each day to serve, empower, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

The Division of Family Services implements pilot programs to increase the number of children adopted out of foster care. These initiatives aim to identify a collaborative and focused approach to recruiting families and achieving adoptions for children and youth foster care, and to increase the number of adoptions of children ages six and older who are at risk of remaining in foster care due to special needs.

## DEFINITIONS

### *AREVA*

Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA) is a service offered by VDSS that connects families with children who are available for adoption within the Commonwealth. The purpose of AREVA is to increase opportunities for children waiting to be adopted by providing services to child-placing agencies having custody of these children. Some services provided by AREVA include:

- Maintaining a registry of children awaiting adoption and a registry of approved parents waiting to adopt;
- Providing information and referral services for children who have special needs to link child-placing agencies with other adoption resources;
- Providing ongoing pointed and child-specific recruitment efforts for waiting children;
- Providing consultation and technical assistance on child-specific recruitment to childplacing agencies for waiting children; and

### *OnRamp*

OnRamp is a prospective foster or adoptive parent's access to the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment where the parent learns the requirements for providing care, takes readiness assessments, and has questions answered by an expert. This allows the family to decide if fostering, emergency or respite care is a good fit.

### *OffRamp*

OffRamp, a component of the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment, provides the pathway for prospective foster and adoptive families to enter the LDSS training and approval process. All LDSS have an opportunity to view prospective families, regardless of the OnRamp they came through, and make the decision to invite families to their pre-service training.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

VDSS is committed to piloting and adopting the most effective foster and adoptive family recruitment strategies to place children and youth in safe, permanent relative, kin, or non-relative adoptive homes. In doing so, VDSS is committed to increase timely adoptions for children and youth that have been in care for 24 months or more, to increase the number of children and youth adopted over the age of 6, and to assist in finalizing adoptions within 24 months of entry into foster care.

## CONTACTS

### *Division of Family Services*

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# Annual Report On The Adoption Of Children With Special Needs

## Section 1: State Fiscal Year 2025 Funding Plan and Results

Due to the complexity of the new initiatives planned and the need for increased capacity to develop new and competitive solicitations for services in state fiscal year (SFY) 2025, some of the proposed initiatives were unable to be implemented or had significant delays. Table 1 shows the initial allocation of appropriated funds to support each aspect of the VDSS funding plan for permanency, family recruitment, or support services for children and youth with special needs in foster care versus the amount spent for each planned initiative in SFY 2025. VDSS is unable to carry over any unspent balances.

*Table 1: SFY 2025 Funding Allocation and Spend by Program*

TYPE OF SERVICE	ALLOCATED AMOUNT	OBLIGATED AMOUNT SPENT*	UNSPENT BALANCE
Dedicated Placement Staff: Family Engagement Coaches & High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators	\$293,297	\$235,023	\$58,274
Kidsave – Weekend Family Miracles	\$443,379	\$443,379	\$0.00
Public Affairs to Support DFS Branding and Recruitment	\$90,000	\$20,650	\$69,350
Recruitment Portal – Faster Families Highway	\$338,600	\$338,600	\$0.00
AREVA Contract Workers	\$134,724	\$81,186	\$53,538
LDSS Resource Family Collaborations	\$200,000	\$0.00**	\$200,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,500,000</b>	<b>\$1,118,838</b>	<b>\$381,162</b>

*\*Invoices for May and June 2025 are pending and may not be included in the above totals at the time this report was submitted.*

*\*\*No funds were expended for the new initiative. SFY 2025 was devoted to developing the scope of work, securing LDSS buy-in, and designing the implementation phase of the program.*



## Dedicated Placement Staff

### High Acuity Placement Coordinators

Initially funded by Governor Youngkin's Safe and Sound Task Force, VDSS hired three High Acuity Placement Coordinators (previously referred to as High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators) in SFY2024. These Coordinators support LDSS in their work to prevent children in foster care from having to stay in the offices of LDSS and finding appropriate placements for those children.

**In SFY 2025, these three High Acuity Placement Coordinators supported 69 agencies in securing placements for over 184 youth.** Many of these children had been in foster care for extended periods of time and are legally available for adoption. Through their work engaging multidisciplinary teams, High Acuity Placement Coordinators were able to ensure that these youth were placed with relatives, family-based homes, or in congregate care.

### Kin First Now Consultant

VDSS continues to pursue filling five regional Kin First Now Consultant (formerly referred to as Family Engagement Coach) contracted positions, working in alignment with the Kin First Now effort. This is a specialized position that requires a high level of skill and experience. At the time of this report's submission, one of these positions is still filled while the other four remain vacant. Due to the recruitment challenges experienced in SFY2024, VDSS elected to reduce the amount of allocated funding and cease recruitment efforts for the remaining positions.

The Kin First Now Consultant and the supporting team **engaged 19 local agencies** and hosted an immersive two-day training to introduce and train the three practice elements that have led to an increase in kinship placements in other agencies. After completing this training, the Consultant remains connected with the LDSS to support the agency's leadership in disrupting traditional practices and successfully transforming the agency culture.

In January 2025, the Kin First Now Consultant and supporting team began outreach events involving a full day of in-person meetings, followed by several weeks of virtual meetings supporting the LDSS in developing and implementing an action plan to activate the three practice elements. It is important to note that these practice elements can be applied across the child welfare continuum, including cases in which parental rights have been terminated and the child is without an adoptive placement.

### Kidsave Weekend Miracles®

The VDSS Division of Family Services (DFS) maintained a partnership with Kidsave International, a nonprofit organization that champions permanency for older kids in foster



care, to implement their Virginia Kidsave Weekend Miracles program. Weekend Miracles is a unique hosting program connecting families who want to adopt a child, become legal guardians, or build lifelong mentorships with older kids in foster care (ages 9-17). Kidsave works with kids who often feel overlooked and are left to age out of care into the world alone.

The Weekend Miracles program includes fun and interactive Meet the Kids events, where families and older kids in foster care get to know each other in a relaxed and engaging environment. Best of all, the program gives the kids a voice and a choice in who they would like to spend more time with, helping create more organic and meaningful connections. These opportunities allow them to develop bonds naturally over time. When both the child and the family are ready, they can move forward to hosting, which is a mentor-like relationship where the adults commit to spending dedicated time with the child twice a month for at least one year. For youth who are open and available for adoption, hosts can help them find a forever family; sometimes the host might be that family. Kidsave will collaborate directly with VDSS, community partners, and LDSS for referrals of youth that would benefit the most from participating in the evidence-informed model.

## **Weekend Miracles Virginia Project – Year Two Update**

The Weekend Miracles Virginia project commenced its second year on January 1, 2025. From July 1, 2024, through March 2025, the Kidsave team focused on the following key deliverables:

- Developing and delivering comprehensive training materials for new staff and Virginia partners covering program management, operations, the foster care system, trauma-informed care, and de-escalation techniques.
- Conducting a structured interview and hiring process to onboard qualified candidates.
- Collecting, tracking, and analyzing leads and inquiries from prospective adult participants and executing a targeted online marketing strategy with campaign tracking and performance analysis.
- Creating educational materials clarifying program requirements for hosts, mentors, and volunteers.
- Establishing workflows for participant documentation, event preparation, post-event consulting, pre/post-match services, and volunteer recruitment, training, and approval.
- Managing event logistics including venue booking, catering, transportation coordination, and volunteer staffing.
- Implementing a process for reviewing youth referrals, maintaining communication with social workers, and tracking match progress.
- Designing and launching a program website encompassing creative briefing, site mapping, content, graphics, SEO strategy, and testing.

## Progress Made

- The program held a soft launch holiday party on December 7, 2024, attended by two youth and five families, that provided critical insights to refine logistics and engagement.
- Established a partnership with Paths for Families to support host family recruitment and approval, which enhanced education about the foster care system and streamlined family onboarding.
- Reviewed 15 youth referrals as of December 31, 2024, with five approved for initial participation; remaining referrals are under review or deferred.
- Received 23 adult applications by year-end.

## Key Metrics Since Project Inception (March 2024)

- 35 youth referred (21 female, 14 male), with 21 attending a “Meet the Kids” event.
- 423 inquiries from interested host families; 37 families recruited and 28 oriented, including five ready to become adoptive hosts.
- 18 families completed cultural competency training.
- Youth referrals originated from multiple counties including Chesterfield, Fredericksburg, Nottoway, Richmond, Franklin, Bristol, Augusta, Louisa, Sussex, Newport News, and Frederick.

## Public Affairs to Support VDSS DFS Branding and Recruitment

In order to support the many VDSS Permanency Unit promotional campaigns (e.g. Foster Care Month, Adoption Month, the ongoing need for foster and adoptive parents, etc.), appropriated funds were used to hire a qualified and highly experienced public relations and marketing expert to assist the VDSS Division of Public Affairs in January 2023.

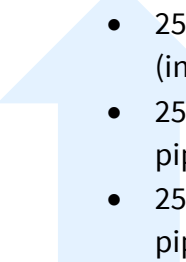
This position is focused on providing project management and oversight, and making strategic recommendations for campaign objectives, messaging, and output and performance measures. This staff member is currently working with the Permanency Team on adoption and foster care media campaigns. He will be developing a comprehensive scope of work for the pending Requests for Proposals to solicit a statewide, multi-phase multimedia marketing campaign to support the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment portal for SFY 2025.

## Recruitment Portal – Faster Families Highway

The Faster Families Highway for Recruitment portal continues to be used in all regions of the Commonwealth to recruit, engage, and select families to increase the pool of prospective foster families. The online public facing portal, provided by Adoption-Share, facilitates the recruitment, training, and approval of resource families for children and youth in foster care

and manages inquiries from prospective foster parents in a more efficient and geographically organized way. All 120 LDSS across Virginia maintained their enrollment status in SFY 2025.

Adoption Share has completed goals for SFY 2025 as evidenced by the following:

- 
- 25% increase in the total number of families in Virginia’s resource family pipeline (interested through approved) from SFY24 (target number of 4,879 by 06/30/25)
  - 25% increase in the total number of families recruited in Virginia’s resource family pipeline from SFY24 (target of 1,048 by 06/30/25)
  - 25% increase in the total number of approved families in Virginia’s resource family pipeline (target of 162 by 06/30/25)

## Adoption Share Training & Support

The Adoption Share Family-Match Director continues to provide LDSS with multiple opportunities for training and support. Adoption-Share continues hosting quarterly Check-In Forums in collaboration with VDSS Regional Resource Family Practice Consultants. During this quarterly forum, open to all localities across the Commonwealth, Adoption-Share focused on effective messaging for strategic recruitment and ideas alongside building community partnerships. These Check-In Forums continue to benefit LDSS, presenting opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, gathering feedback from staff, and sharing suggestions for program enhancements.

### Family-Match Director

The Family-Match Director is an employee contracted by Adoption-Share and is funded through appropriated funds. The Family-Match Director continues to host comprehensive Quarterly Trainings for LDSS. These sessions include an introduction to the Faster Families Highway recruitment tool, a full demonstration of how it works, and time for a Q&A. Adoption-Share believes facilitating these quarterly trainings will continue to be beneficial for LDSS, especially in registering new hires for training on the Faster Families Highway.

The Family-Match Director continues to provide individualized support by phone, email and virtual meetings. Throughout the year, the Family-Match Director provided individualized trainings and consultations to 12 localities each quarter. Additionally, the Family-Match Director continued to send weekly *Tool Kit Tuesday* emails to LDSS system users. This email announces new and existing resources that have been added to the web-based Microsoft platform, which is accessible to LDSS.

### Adoption-Share Conversion Rate Reporting – SFY2025

In SFY 2025, Adoption-Share began reporting conversion rates using data from the Faster Families Highway (FFH) recruitment portal. This tool continues to help localities statewide identify and evaluate prospective foster families from the moment of inquiry by automating

lead generation and information collection, allowing child welfare professionals to focus on qualified candidates.

Adoption-Share conducted a cohort analysis of families who created accounts by region during January–March 2025. The process involves: families creating accounts and completing inquiries and then LDSS recruit and approve families. Factors influencing LDSS engagement include local foster care needs, available resources, and staffing capacity.

### Key Definitions

- Account Registration: 406 individuals registered on FFH in CY 2025, with 209 completing verification.
- Account Creation: Verified registrations excluding incomplete or deleted accounts.
- Inquiry Completion: Families completing the 6-step inquiry process.
- Recruited: Families who completed inquiries and were recruited by LDSS.
- Approved: Families recruited and approved by LDSS.

*\*Note: Data reflects locality input as of March 31, 2025 for actions related to families in the quarterly cohorts. Some information may not have been entered to date.*

*\*\*Field reports approval typically takes 3–4 months.*

### Findings

- Over 80% of Virginia regions exceeded their 2024 average number of families completing inquiries and being recruited in Q1 2025.
- This growth reflects improved local recruitment strategies informed by FFH data insights, supporting more efficient, targeted outreach across 120 localities.
- Conversion rates vary by region based on LDSS participation and recruitment practices.

Figure 1: Conversion Rates – OffRamp and Completed Inquiries

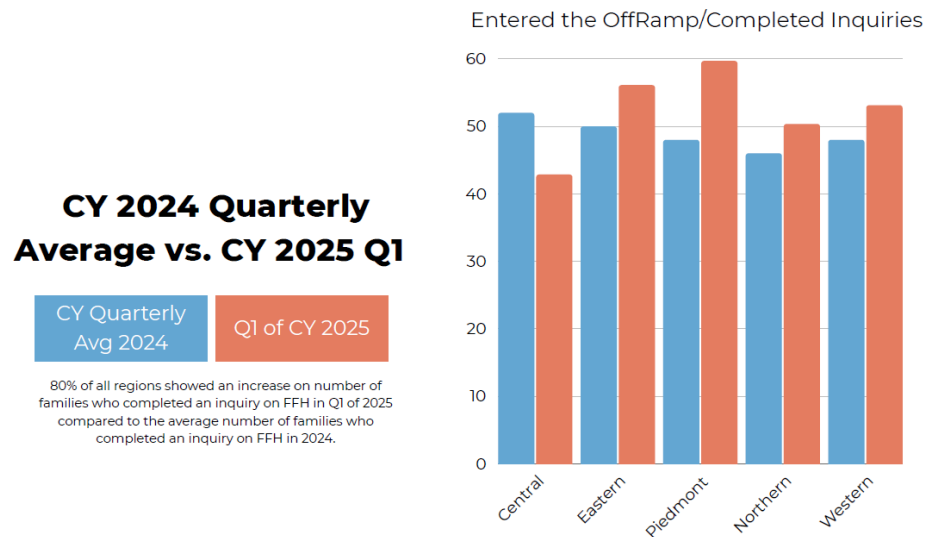
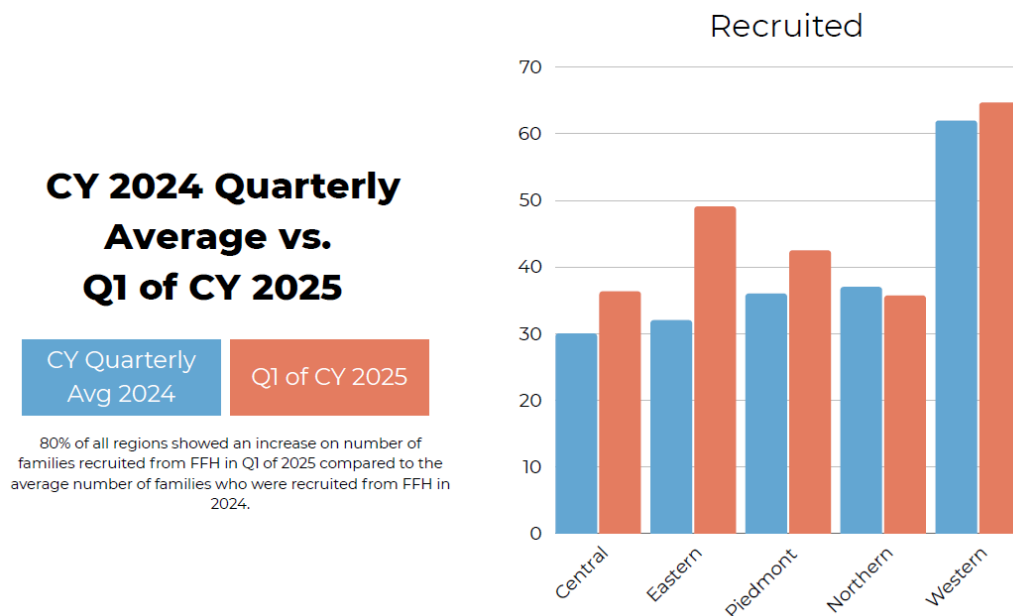


Figure 2: Conversion Rates – Recruited



## Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA)

VDSS continued to support AREVA using appropriated funds. More details about AREVA can be found in the 2023 report.

Through AREVA, VDSS continued to participate in Virginia’s Kids Belong’s “I Belong Project” (IBP) which is a joint initiative, diligent recruitment, and adoption program. IBP, in collaboration with Regional Resource Family and Permanency Practice Consultants, coordinated child specific video and photography events focused on children with finalized termination of parental rights and who were currently placed in congregate care. In SFY 2025,

there were 4 IBP sessions that took place throughout the Commonwealth near congregate care facilities where these children were placed. VDSS Regional Permanency Practice Consultants worked with LDSS to identify eligible children for video filming events and supported efforts to coordinate transportation to and from the locations of the sessions. In total, 41 children in need of adoptive families participated, which resulted in 831 family inquiries during calendar year 2024.

AREVA also continued the annual promotion of recruitment campaigns in November's National Adoption Month. AREVA collaborates with LDSS, Virginia's Kids Belong, CBS Channel 6, and WSLC Channel 10 to promote recruitment initiatives for youth available for adoption. The 2024 campaign partners were Jewish Family Services and Connecting Hearts of Virginia. In November 2024, over 200 inquiries were received.

In calendar year 2024, there were a total of 1,895 inquiries from child and youth registrations completed or initiated by AREVA. AREVA continues to work collaboratively to expand promotional efforts for youth awaiting adoption and plans to develop and provide resources to increase LDSS responses when inquiries are received from the public. VDSS's AREVA contracted employee continues operating as an AREVA liaison between LDSS, VDSS, and Kidsave Weekend Miracles for seamless referrals and family recruitment.

## **LDSS Resource Family Collaborative**

In SFY 2025, VDSS began developing the Resource Family Collaborative program, a partnership initiative designed to strengthen recruitment and retention of kinship and non-relative foster families. This effort responds to HB653 (effective 2022), which directed VDSS to “establish and implement a collaborative local board placement program to increase kinship placements and locally approved foster homes.”

The program will provide state general funds to LDSS to foster collaboration across local boards. The goal is to prioritize placing children with family first, or with local non-relative families when kinship placements are unavailable.

## **Key Program Requirements**

Collaborations must expand regional capacity to keep children within their communities and family systems by sharing non-relative resource families and jointly approving kinship families.

Collaborative agreements must include plans to share resource families and coordinate recruitment and training efforts. Strategic recruitment will focus on families able to care for older youth, children with special needs, and those in congregate care.

Services must effectively engage, assess, and train kinship foster parents to meet the needs of children placed with them, supporting immediate placement with relatives or fictive kin and ensuring children remain in or near their home communities.

VDSS will begin accepting grant applications from LDSS on June 15, 2025, with the program anticipated to start on October 1, 2025.

## **SECTION 2: STATE FISCAL YEAR 2026 FUNDING PLAN**

For SFY 2026, VDSS has determined how best to use these appropriated funds to maximize resources and continue the support of services for youth with special needs in foster care and increase permanency for the more than 800 youth with special needs in need of an adoptive home. Table 3 lists the specific initiatives VDSS will implement or continue in SFY 2026. VDSS will continue to explore innovative efforts to increase permanency for children in foster care. In the SFY2025, expenditures were monitored and reported bi-monthly to ensure a higher spend of allocated funds were spent by the end of the fiscal year. Additionally, the Permanency Team plans to continue meeting weekly discussing progress towards implementing SFY 2026 initiatives.

**Table 2: SFY 2026 Appropriated Funding Plan**

<b>TYPE OF SERVICE</b>	<b>ALLOCATED AMOUNT</b>
High Acuity Placement Coordinators & Kin First Now Consultant	<b>\$154,743</b>
Kidsave Weekend Miracles	<b>\$475,208</b>
Public Affairs to Support DFS Branding and Recruitment	<b>\$90,000</b>
Recruitment Portal – Faster Families Highway	<b>\$338,600</b>
AREVA Contract Workers	<b>\$134,724</b>
Statewide Permanency Conference and Strategic Planning	<b>\$306,725</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,500,000</b>



## **APPENDIX A: LEGISLATIVE MANDATE ITEMS 329.F. OF THE 2025 APPROPRIATION ACT**

### **Items 329.F. of the 2025 Appropriations Act**

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2. Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.