

NATIONAL ADOPTION CENTER
TIAP Access Grant Request - April, 1995
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Adoption Center will provide Internet access to its existing bulletin board and database system, the National Adoption Exchange (NAE). Public and private adoption agencies, child advocacy organizations and adoptive parent groups will be supported in establishing an Internet connection and in utilizing both the NAE On-Line and other resources available through the Internet.

Through an agreement with NetCom, organizations and individuals wishing to gain NAE/Internet access by using NetCom as their Internet service provider will be provided with NetCruiser software defaulting to NAE's home page at no cost. This will give them instant access to adoption information, without searching, and provide them with a gateway to the wider world of the national information infrastructure.

THE NEED

More than 100,000 children in this country wait to be adopted. They are not the healthy babies usually associated with adoption; they are older or may be brothers and sisters who need a home together. Many have physical, emotional or learning disabilities. These children often wait in foster care for years, deprived of the nurturing of a stable, loving family. Their personal tragedy impacts on all of us. It will cost the government an average of \$20,000 a year to care for each child who remains in foster care.

Matching a child with a permanent family is hindered by the lack of communication across state and even county lines. Adoption workers rarely know about families or children outside their local jurisdictions. When they are unable to locate an appropriate family for a child in the immediate community, he or she remains in foster care. Sometimes, a home is never found.

Adoption workers often lack access to basic adoption practice and policy information. At a time when legislation governing adoption practice is changing quickly, the isolation of adoption workers creates yet another barrier to finding homes for children. For example, a worker may be responsible for finding an adoptive home for a child with cerebral palsy but may be unaware that the child's medical treatment can be financed through an adoption subsidy. Consequently, the worker may view the child as unadoptable. With access to information about subsidies and a national pool of potential families to draw from, this story would have a very different ending.

Currently, there is no easily accessible, low cost method of obtaining comprehensive and current professional quality adoption information. As a result, critical policy information is

not disseminated, successful demonstration projects remain unduplicated, and children continue to wait for adoptive parents.

NAE ON-LINE & TIAP

The National Adoption Center seeks to increase access to a centralized source of adoption information, the National Adoption Exchange (NAE). The NAE, a stand-alone Bulletin Board and database system operated by the National Adoption Center and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has become an important source of information to its current 115 members. Its members include private and public child welfare agencies and adoptive parent groups. The goal of the NAE On-Line project is to increase access by adoption professionals, adoptive parent group members and others in the adoption field to this valuable resource.

NAE offers a unique set of information services including a database designed to match waiting children, particularly those with special needs or from minority cultures, with families approved to adopt. NAE also includes an extensive electronic bulletin board that provides policy and practice information, news, information about specific disabilities, and resource lists. The system also has electronic mail capability, giving social workers with limited time the ability to communicate instantly.

However, not everyone in the adoption field has access to NAE. Limited financial resources and resistance to technology have shaped access. Many states have opted to purchase one NAE membership for a central employee --- generally not the front line caseworker or prospective adoptive parent who may need the information the most. A distinct hierarchy of who has access to this information has developed.

Feedback from adoption workers and adoptive parent groups has been clear. We have received repeated requests to make the NAE accessible through the Internet. Adoptive parent group members tell us that they are already "cruising the Internet", via their computers at home and at work, but not finding the adoption information they need. Adoption agencies indicate that they are much more likely, with support, to utilize an Internet connection with its myriad of other resources, than to allocate limited funds for an NAE membership in its current stand alone-form.

A major goal of NAE On-Line is to reduce the disparities in access to this critical adoption information. Through this project, high quality, critically important adoption information will be made available regardless of financial means or locality. We believe that this is consistent with TIAP's goal of reducing disparities in access to and use of the national information infrastructure.

IMPLEMENTATION

In order to increase access to the unique information supplied by NAE, the National Adoption Center will meet the following objectives:

- * 1. Make the NAE accessible via the Internet.
2. Inform adoption workers, their supervisors, adoptive parent groups and other organizations of this service.
3. Provide training and support to purchase an Internet connection, install software and use both the NAE and the Internet in general.

Objective 1: Make the NAE accessible via the Internet.

A technical advisory committee will be established including experts who are already intimate with the organization and the needs of our users. Methodology and software choices will be evaluated to determine what will best meet the needs of our users.

Establishing Internet accessibility will require both hardware and software upgrades. Based on preliminary research, the tentative work plan for this objective includes:

- Purchasing and installing ^{sun} Pentium server for SCO Unix; digital circuit; router; DSU and ethernet card
- Contracting with an Internet provider
- Installing a 56K line
- Upgrading TCP/IP
- Purchasing a SCO Unix upgrade to Open Server Network
- Installing MMB TEAMate's HTTP server, gopher server, mail access server, Unix mail gateway, telnet software
- Converting existing MMB TEAMate BBS to new system
- Testing the new system

This process will be completed during the first six to nine months of the project. State of the art technology incorporating mainstream products that are easily upgraded will be utilized in response to the issue of potential obsolescence.

Ultimately, adoption agencies and groups will have access to the whole universe of information available via the Internet. This includes a number of other child welfare items as well as the National Adoption Exchange.

Objective 2: Inform adoption workers, their supervisors and adoptive parent groups of this service.

Thorough marketing will be undertaken to ensure that potential users are made aware of the system. Current members will be told in advance through the NAE itself. NAE On-Line will be announced through direct mail to adoption agencies and adoptive parent groups. It will be described in the NAE newsletter and other adoption and social service publications. Staff will demonstrate NAE On-Line at key adoption conferences. The service will also be announced

via the on-line services, such as CompuServe, Prodigy and America Online.

The NAE Marketing Specialist will talk to potential users individually and introduce them to the benefits of accessing NAE On-Line and the Internet in general. The Adoption Center's Communication team will create a brochure to support marketing activities. These ongoing activities will begin in the sixth month of the project.

Objective 3: Provide training and support to purchase an Internet connection, install software and use both the NAE and the Internet in general.

A national Internet service provider, NetCom, has agreed to create a customized version of NetCruiser software, which will open directly to NAE's home page, for distribution. NetCom

will waive the \$25 start-up cost for any adoption agencies or groups that choose to go on-line through this project. With NetCom as a partner, the Adoption Center will assist with installing software for Internet access free of charge for interested adoption agencies and groups.

Building on nearly a decade of assisting users in accessing the NAE, staff will then provide training to both new and sophisticated users. An initial orientation about the Internet and NAE On-Line will be conducted by phone; in person demonstrations will take place at conferences. A simple user manual will be created and distributed. A newly hired Technical Coordinator/Trainer (described below) will be actively available training new agency staff and group members as well as ongoing troubleshooting.

Experience has proven "telephone training" to be an effective and efficient model of reaching this geographically diverse audience. The Adoption Center staff has trained all of the NAE members throughout the country by telephone, with great success.

STAFF & ORGANIZATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The Organization

The National Adoption Exchange, operated by the National Adoption Center since 1982, was one of the first applications of computer technology in the field of adoption. The development of the NAE was made possible by a federal grant to provide an automated data bank of waiting children and families. The Adoption Center's management of the NAE over the past ten years has made it sensitive to the needs of users. Because of this pioneering and innovative use of computers, adoption organizations frequently seek the Adoption Center's expertise in developing their own internal exchange systems.

The Adoption Center's technological capabilities have grown with the times. Currently, 115 agencies are active users of the NAE. In 1994, the Adoption Center received another federal grant to make photos and descriptions of children waiting for adoption available through the Internet and assist families who view these photos in their pursuit of adoption. A TIAP grant will bring broader and deeper access to adoption information to the professional

adoption community.

As a result of working on these grants, the staff's technological knowledge is current and we have a strong pool of technical consultants to draw on. In addition, managing the NAE has given the Adoption Center much experience in marketing a telecommunications system and responding to the needs of users in a field that has been slow to adopt technology.

The National Adoption Center was nominated for the international Computerworld Smithsonian Award for innovative use of computer technology and is currently one of five finalists in the highly competitive government/non-profit category. The work of the Adoption Center and its staff has been acclaimed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the American Bar Association, The World Institute of Black Communication and the Better Business Bureau of Greater Philadelphia. The Adoption Center has a strong reputation built upon 23 years of bringing the issue of waiting children to the public through the media and finding families for over 5,700 "hard to place" children.

The Adoption Center has a proven track record, through past federal, state and privately funded projects, of providing quality and timely services and materials. The Adoption Center has successfully developed cooperative relationships among members of the adoption community nationwide, and is in a strong position to take a leading role in promoting information sharing within this community.

The Staff

MariAnne Clarke, Deputy Executive Director, will serve as the Principal Investigator for this project. Mary Ehart, NAE Administrator, will serve as the Project Manager for NAE On-line. Both long term staff members have extensive experience in assisting adoption professionals in applying technology, and provided leadership in the original design and subsequent evolution of the current National Adoption Exchange. Ronica Houston, NAE Marketing Specialist, will apply her success at marketing the current system to promoting NAE On-Line. Brief biographies are attached. (Please see Attachment A.)

The Technical Coordinator/Trainer, to be hired, will be responsible for managing the transition of the NAE to the Internet. The Technical Coordinator/Trainer will also support users in establishing their Internet connection and provide technical assistance regarding setup via telephone. This staff person will then train users, by phone and in person, compile a simple users' manual and provide ongoing support.

Partners

The National Adoption Center has many long-standing partners both in the adoption community and in the computer industry. These partners will support the Adoption Center in the development of NAE On-Line.

1. Technical Advisory Committee

This project will be guided by the expertise of a technical advisory committee composed of

experts who have a high level of familiarity with our work and the needs of our users. For example, KPMG Peat Marwick, a leading accounting firm with representation on the Adoption Center's Board, will provide technical expertise. Richard Maturo, of the Mental Health Policy Resource Center in Washington, D.C., will provide specific knowledge. Mr. Maturo has successfully completed a similar project in the field of mental health. His detailed knowledge of our current system, which he installed, as well as user needs will assure smooth progress of the project. The committee and staff will consult with users as the technical and training model is developed and implemented.

2. Adoption Community

Relationships between the Adoption Center and potential users of NAE On-Line -- members of the adoption community -- are many and strong. The Adoption Center has been a leader in the field for over 20 years and has worked closely with public and private adoption agencies, child advocacy organizations, adoptive parent groups and the children themselves. A list of the current NAE users and letters of support are appended. (Please see Attachment B.) These NAE members provide steady feedback regarding the "friendliness" of the NAE.

WHO WILL BENEFIT

Target Population

This project, National Adoption Exchange On-Line, will benefit the adoption community nationwide. This includes thousands of staff at private and public adoption agencies ranging from case workers and adoption supervisors at the local level to administrators and policy makers at the state level. Since the majority of the children without families are African American children and children with special needs, there will be a particular emphasis on agencies that serve these populations of children.

NAE On-Line will also benefit members of adoptive parent groups who are seeking to adopt again or need information and resources to assist them in parenting their adopted child. Difficult to find resources and information about disabilities will be available since many of the adopted children have special needs.

Other anticipated users include child advocacy organizations, mental health professionals, speakers and writers, some of whom already have Internet access.

Finally, the 115 current NAE members will benefit. This group includes a cross section of the above population with a concentration of public adoption agencies.

Benefits

Members of the adoption community will be significantly more informed and better able to move children through the system to their ultimate goal of adoption. For example, one of the major barriers to interstate adoption -- lack of procedural knowledge -- will be removed thereby expanding adoption opportunities for waiting children.

In addition, innovative and successful program models will be nationally distributed for the first time so that adoption workers throughout the country may repeat the success stories of a few remarkable agencies. The latest updates on practice, policy and legislation will be at the fingertips of all who need to keep abreast of the changing trends in the adoption field.

Benefits of the new system to users include:

1. Access to critical adoption information not accumulated anywhere else.
2. Cost efficiency (Local rather than long distance telephone rates, Internet access versus stand alone product, etc.)
3. Internet start up assistance will be provided by this project.
4. For many users, establishment of an Internet connection and access to the array of information available through it for the first time. NAE On-Line will serve as an introduction to the national information infrastructure.

Technical assistance will include:

1. Advice on selecting a modem and an Internet service provider.
2. Distribution of Internet access software.
3. "Hand holding" via telephone during setup of modem and installation of software.
4. Default to NAE On-Line's home page for simple access.
5. Training regarding use of NAE and the Internet.

An informal survey of adoption agencies found that the majority of agencies have at least one computer but most do not yet have Internet access. Members of parent groups tell us that they have Internet access but cannot find the adoption related information they need and cannot afford the long distance cost to access NAE in its present form. The working conditions of both groups will be served by putting NAE on-line and assisting with Internet access.

EVALUATION

The anticipated outcomes of National Adoption Exchange On-Line are:

1. The numbers of users accessing NAE will increase to at least 200 during the first year of operation. All users will receive start up assistance and training as needed. The number of users will continue to climb in subsequent years.
2. There will be a greater diversity in users.
 - A. The majority of current users are public agencies. Many more private agencies and parent groups will become users.
 - B. The majority of current users are at the state level. As a result of NAE On-Line, several thousand locally based adoption workers will have access.
3. Overall, the National Adoption Center will assist hundreds of users in accessing the critical information contained in NAE and in entering the national information infrastructure through their newly acquired Internet connection.

These outcomes will be used to measure the success of NAE On-Line. Progress of the project will be closely monitored by the Project Manager and the Principal Investigator. The project will be monitored and evaluated by the Program Planning and Review Committee of the Board of Directors.

NAE On-Line will open national communication lines in the adoption community. Professionals and adoptive parent leaders will have new opportunities for dialogue with colleagues and a greater arena for problem solving. Children without parents will have greatly expanded opportunities to find permanent families.