

COMMENTARY

President Clinton's challenge to his own administration to double the number of adoptions from foster care is a welcome nod to the role of two-parent families in raising children. The president said too many children wait "far too long" to find permanent homes, and charged Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala with finding ways to make adoption easier.

Whether he intended it or not, Mr. Clinton has attacked an insidious myth, one that dehumanizes and threatens countless children every day — the notion that some children are simply "unadoptable." It is the assumption that, because some children are not wanted by their biological parents, they are wanted by no one.

We see this myth fueling the tragedy of abortion. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a family-planning research group based in New York City, at least 13 percent of all women choosing abortion do so because they believe their unborn child suffers from some mental or physical disability. So who would want them?

We see this myth undermining an already troubled foster-care system, where thousands of children are officially classified "unadoptable" by their caseworkers. Children acquire this label for many reasons — because of emotional problems, physical handicaps or the color of their skin. In part because of this tag, 15,000 children turn 18 each year while still in foster care.

Across the country, however, there are countless men and women defying the "unadoptable" label. "There is a home for every child," says Brit Eaton, executive director of an organization called Adopt a Special Kid (AASK) Midwest. Her organization, which uses the Internet to match foster children with willing families, is one of a growing number of private organizations finding permanent homes for so-called special-needs children — older children, sibling groups, the severely disabled, the emotionally damaged, or those with life-threatening diseases.

Many government adoption officials believe the chances of these children getting adopted are slim or nil. Others are simply too swamped to spend the time looking for appropriate families for the children. "They are overloaded," says Mrs. Eaton. "The social worker will tend to forget about the child if they are in an adequate foster-care situation."

But not her group. Working with county social-service agencies, AASK maintains a database on foster children and recruits families from across the country to match with waiting children. It now has 973 children and 1,032 families in its database. It averages 100 assisted placements a year; since its founding 12 years ago, it has matched more than 1,200 families.

The key to the agency's success, however, is its human touch: Twenty-two families in 14 states across the country serve as volunteer recruiters. All AASK field representatives have adopted special-needs children, many have adopted more than 10, and 95 percent have

Every child a wanted child

adopted transracially. These volunteers provide both screening before the adoption and support afterward.

The private groups bring an urgency to adoption that is too often lacking in state-run agencies. Consider James Michael Jenkins, a racially mixed baby addicted to methadone, heroin and cocaine. He had been abandoned at birth and had tested positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. The hospital that was his home failed to find a foster family for him.

That is, not until Joy Jenkins, a nurse at the hospital who wanted to adopt a baby, came by one day. Joy and her husband Jim soon found themselves in love with the little guy, adopted him, and established an organization to help other children like him. For eight years, Jim Jenkins has been running the Children With Aids Project, mostly full-time, with minimal compensation.

The Jenkins focus on recruiting families and referring them to adoption agencies on a case-by-case basis. The project has recently taken off through the Internet. Jim says their Web site has received more than 250,000 visitors from around the world. The Jenkins have helped at least 60 children find homes since they began eight years ago.

Or consider KIDS Exchange, an adoption effort matching Down's syndrome children with willing families. Literally a kitchen-table operation, the 20-year-old organization has orchestrated at least 3,500 adoptions of Down's syndrome children. In all that time, founders Janet and Louis Marchese say they have never seen a family regret adopting a child.

The work of these private groups is a plea for the children that parents are aborting everyday. And their efforts put to shame a foster-care system that is failing to find homes for tens of thousands of children. They have exposed the "unadoptable" myth for the destructive lie that it is. "There is no such thing as an unadoptable child," says Maureen Hogan, executive director of AASK's advocacy office in Washington. "We can say that without qualification."

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