



OKLAHOMA'S JOURNEY TO ADOPTION COMPETENCY

From roots to a flourishing system

Oklahoma's journey began with a realization shared by parents and professionals alike: adoption forms a family in a moment, yet the support that family needs unfolds over a lifetime.

Bonni Goodwin,
Ph.D., LCSW

*Assistant Professor at the Anne
and Henry Zarrow School of Social
Work and Director of the Center for
Adoption and Family Well-Being at
the University of Oklahoma*

Like many systems, Oklahoma could see the outcomes on the surface—finalized adoptions, closed cases—but beneath that surface were roots that had not yet been tended. Families were growing, children were changing, and the systems meant to support them were not always prepared for what emerged over time.



2016

Every Tree Begins Underground

In 2016, an Oklahoma representative attended a presentation on the National Training Initiative in Adoption Competent Mental Health (NTI) at the North American Council on Adoptable Children annual conference. NTI, developed and stewarded by the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) was designed to build mental health and child welfare capacity to better serve children and families impacted by child welfare.

What they heard resonated immediately.

This type of training would be a significant benefit to Oklahoma child welfare and mental health professionals. After sharing with Oklahoma child welfare leadership, the need for adoption competency training and the potential impact of participating in the NTI pilot, all agreed that this training would be a significant benefit to the state. The pressing needs identified by both child welfare leadership and mental health professionals included the specific challenges adoptive parents were facing while seeking post-adoption support.

Adoptive families were struggling to find informed support. Professionals were well-intentioned but often underprepared. And too often, families were being asked to explain adoption to the very systems meant to support them.

When this opportunity was shared with Oklahoma child welfare leadership, the need was clear. Families reported feeling blamed for their children's behaviors rather than supported through the effects of disrupted attachment, loss, and developmental trauma. Some were even advised to return their children to foster care instead of receiving adoption-informed services. The stakes were too high to ignore.

That year, Oklahoma became one of only eight states selected to participate in the initial NTI pilot—marking the beginning of a multi-year collaboration with the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) and NTI, and the first step in what would become a decade-long system transformation.

The soil had been identified. The work could begin.

2016- 2017

Planting the Seed

By 2017, Oklahoma's roots of adoption competency were not only established but also beginning to show early signs of growth. The Oklahoma NTI pilot launched with child welfare professionals, while the mental health version of NTI debuted at a two-day Wellbeing Conference hosted by Oklahoma Human Services (OKDHS) Child Welfare. The conference was deliberately designed to bring child welfare and mental health professionals together in the same space, reinforcing a shared responsibility for child and family well-being.

This dual launch signaled something important: adoption competency would not live in one corner of the system. It would be embedded across it.



2018-
2020

What emerged was the beginning of a professional learning culture—one that acknowledged adoption as a lifelong experience and recognized the need for shared understanding, language, and practice across disciplines.

The seed was planted—not in policy, but in people.

Growing Through Collaboration

As early momentum took hold, attention shifted from pilot participation to sustainability. In 2018, Oklahoma began systemwide conversations about embedding NTI into child welfare onboarding and levels training to ensure adoption competency is accessible across the entire continuum of care.

A state implementation committee—comprising of child welfare champions and mental health professionals—guided this work. Their focus was clear: adoption competency was relevant at every level of interaction with children, youth, and families. With demonstrated impact, NTI secured its place as an ongoing component of workforce development.

"(TAC) strengthened Oklahoma's capacity to provide specialized, adoption-competent mental health services aligned with national standards."

During this period, C.A.S.E. identified Family Hope House as the lead agency to deliver Training in Adoption Competency (TAC) to Oklahoma-licensed providers, expanding access to specialized professional development beyond child welfare. TAC, an advanced clinical training program within the C.A.S.E. continuum of adoption competency programs, strengthened Oklahoma's capacity to provide specialized, adoption-competent mental health services aligned with national standards.

As adoption finalizations increased statewide, leaders recognized the need to strengthen post-adoption supports. OKDHS Child Welfare partnered with the University of Oklahoma's Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, establishing the role of the Statewide Coordinator of Adoption Preservation Services. This partnership—born directly from cross-systems collaboration—marked a turning point from training alone toward service design and implementation.

By 2020, the Statewide Coordinator was engaging mental health leadership across Oklahoma, sharing research and real-world examples that demonstrated how adoption competency could transform clinical assessment and treatment. Coaching cohorts were launched to support professionals in translating training into daily practice, grounding learning in lived casework and shared problem-solving.

Healthy growth naturally reaches outward.



**2021-
2022** ▷

Branching Out

By 2021, adoption competency efforts had expanded into broader professional and organizational conversations. Presentations at the NASW-Oklahoma annual conference elevated the importance of adoption competent mental health services statewide, while internal OKDHS discussions focused on emerging post-adoption challenges.

As children grew older and began processing their adoption experiences more deeply, families reported increasing emotional and behavioral concerns. Leaders identified heightened risks for adoption disruption—driven by stress, trauma, and limited access to specialized services. Adoption competency training emerged as a key strategy for expanding support options and reducing reliance on crisis-driven interventions, reinforcing Oklahoma's alignment with the broader national adoption competency movement led by the National Center and C.A.S.E.

In 2022, outreach broadened further. The Statewide Coordinator presented at both the Oklahoma Child Behavioral Health Conference and the Center for Child Abuse and Neglect annual conference, engaging providers across the state. That same year, OKDHS Post Adoption Services (PAS), in partnership with the University of Oklahoma and the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support, conducted a comprehensive needs assessment with adoptive parents, adoptees, and adoption workers.

The message was consistent: families often felt abandoned after adoption finalization. Adoption was not an endpoint—it was a lifelong journey—and families needed systems that understood that reality. This feedback directly shaped Oklahoma's evolving post-adoption service model, embedding adoption competency as a foundational principle.

That feedback reshaped Oklahoma's post-adoption service model, embedding adoption competency at its core. Wellspring Retreats expanded to support foster and adoptive parents with tools rooted in attachment, trauma understanding, and caregiver partnership.

As branches multiplied, connection became essential.

2023 ▷

Establishing a Network

In 2023, Oklahoma's adoption competency work coalesced into a formal statewide network. The Oklahoma Adoption Competency Network (OACN) was developed by the Statewide Coordinator and University of Oklahoma social work practicum students, creating new opportunities for shared learning.

OACN launched a Lunch and Learn webinar series covering topics such as loss and grief, attachment, identity, transracial adoption, sensory processing, safe internet practices, and the needs of Indigenous populations. Open to families and professionals alike, these sessions were recorded and archived as enduring educational resources.

That year also marked the formal establishment of the University of Oklahoma Center for Adoption and Family Well-Being, strengthening the agency-university partnership. Wellspring Retreats expanded to include programming exclusively for post-adoptive families, while NTI coaching cohorts deepened collaboration with community mental health partners.

"A statewide PAS Clinical Team was also established, delivering in-home and telehealth adoption-competent services..."

OKDHS PAS created a Post Adoption Services Outreach Unit, shifting toward a preventative model through proactive check-ins with families at key developmental stages. A statewide PAS Clinical Team was also established, delivering in-home and telehealth adoption-competent services and creating new clinical licensure pathways in collaboration with the Oklahoma Board for Licensed Social Workers.

A healthy tree bears fruit.

2024 ▷

The Program in Practice

By 2024, adoption competency was no longer emerging—it was operational.

The University of Oklahoma Center for Adoption and Family Well-Being expanded its capacity with the addition of a Clinical Program Manager. OKDHS partnered with the C.A.S.E. Academy to provide advanced training and consultation to the PAS Clinical Team, while also establishing a first-of-its-kind clinical practicum with the OU MSW program, pairing students with PAS clinicians across the state. Concentration year practicum students were dispatched across the state, paired up with the Clinical Team clinicians, to learn and practice adoption competency in direct service to children and families.

Adoptee-centered events featuring nationally recognized speakers elevated conversations about the lifelong impact of adoption, while cross-systems discussions focused on expanding mental health access for families impacted by child welfare.

The PAS Clinical Team completed its first year of evaluation, delivering more than 500 adoption-competent clinical sessions. Families reported meaningful improvements—often years after adoption finalization—underscoring the enduring and evolving nature of adoption-related needs.

The system was producing outcomes rooted in years of careful growth.

2025 ▶
& beyond

A Tree of Knowledge

By early 2025, Oklahoma's adoption competency system had matured into a deeply rooted, statewide infrastructure.

OKDHS expanded the PAS Clinical Team to five full-time clinical social workers—one per region—while continuing advanced training partnerships and practicum development. OKDHS and the OU Center for Adoption and Family Well-Being continued their collaboration with the CASE Academy for a second year, aiming to deepen advanced clinical practice and support a new cohort of CWPEP clinical practicum students.

Partnership with the National Center supported the integration of NTI into the foundational training system for Oklahoma Centers of Excellence for Foster Care, and efforts were made to develop both a manual for family access to competent mental health services and a statewide Community of Practice focused on adoption, competent consultation, and practice. The Community of Practice, drawing upon champions from the National Center's steering and implementation committees, is poised to provide ongoing consultation, training, and peer support opportunities for mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice professionals, all while centering the perspectives of lived experience experts (i.e., adoptees, adoptive parents, and biological families). Furthermore, plans are underway to establish an adoption-competency-focused ECHO line for specialized consultation and collaboration with foster and adoptive families in Oklahoma. And NTI coaching cohorts have been established for the Enhanced Foster Care unit of OKDHS and among child welfare supervisors, with long-term plans to extend training and coaching to the entire child welfare workforce. The flex funding available through the National Center supported 22 professionals from various mental health agencies and organizations joining together to complete TAC training, and two more TAC trainers were prepared to carry on the ongoing advanced level of adoption competency training in Oklahoma. Perhaps one of the most exciting sustainability efforts in Oklahoma is the development of a Lived Experience for Competence Advisory Council that will meet regularly to review and inform cross-systems efforts in the state to support children, youth, and families impacted by the child welfare system.

The work has grown steadily, season by season.

From Seed to System

Across this decade-long journey, Oklahoma has grown a system that stands today with deep roots, wide branches, and a canopy built through years of listening, learning, and care. Each stage reflects a steady progression toward a flourishing system that continues to evolve in service and support of children, families, and professionals across the state.

And as it continues to rise, it carries forward a commitment not just to adoption itself, but to the lifelong journey that follows. 🌱