



children's services

## Domestic Adoption Policies & Procedures

[lifelinechild.org](http://lifelinechild.org)

## **OVERVIEW OF THE DOMESTIC ADOPTION PROGRAM**

Lifeline provides comprehensive adoption services, domestically and internationally. These services include but are not limited to: counseling of expectant parents, home study services for prospective adoptive couples, post placement services, and reports to the court. In the past ten years, the face of domestic adoption has changed dramatically. Adoptions are not done today as they were when Lifeline had its first adoption in 1981. The role of the expectant parents, the social and spiritual climate, legal issues, and health issues have changed how adoptions take place as well as the services offered to the expectant parents and the prospective adoptive parents.

### **The History of Openness in Domestic Adoption**

Prior to 1980, most adoptions were “closed”. That is, the identities of the birth parents and the prospective adoptive parents were usually kept confidential from one another. In fact, many birth parents were given little information about their children, sometimes not even knowing the sex of the child they had or whether or not the child had been placed for adoption. In the 1980’s, however, this orientation towards closed information began to change.

As fewer women who faced a crisis pregnancy considered adoption a viable alternative, many adoption agencies began to include the birth mother in the decision making process. Confidentiality remained the norm, but allowing her participation in the process became a common practice. Helping choose the family that would adopt her child seemed to benefit the mother, giving her more peace following the adoption. Updates on the child also seemed to help the birth mother be more confident in her decision and would reassure her in the months following the placement that a right decision had been made.

In the last few years, requests from birth mothers to meet the adopting family have increased. Some birth mothers are asking for more contact and updates concerning the child in the months and years following the adoption. There is a broad range of openness possibilities. Openness might include meeting the birth mother without confidentiality being broken, or agreeing to an ongoing relationship between the adoptive parents and the birth mother.

### **Lifeline’s Pregnancy Counseling Ministry**

Lifeline is an expectant parent centered agency. When a woman facing an unplanned pregnancy contacts us, we strive to do everything that we can to meet her spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. Ultimately, our goal is for every expectant parent to hear about the transforming love of Jesus and experience that love first hand through our staff and our adoptive families. Lifeline ministers to each of our expectant families holistically and does not coerce them into making an adoption plan. We want expectant parents to compare and contrast what their lives will look like if they parent or if they make an adoption plan. Just as each expectant parent is a unique individual, the specific needs for services vary as well. Lifeline provides free professional counseling regarding

an adoption plan, and can also help set up proper medical care, provide transportation to appointments, assist in finding shelter, work through budgeting and other life skills, and connect expectant parents with independent legal counsel if needed. We understand the benefit of community and know it is important to empower expectant parents in making community connections with a local church and available resources. We provide services for both expectant mothers and fathers.

Lifeline equips and discipless prospective adoptive families to be able to minister to birth parents by providing education, resources, and counseling regarding birth parent issues so that they are prepared to respond positively to the needs of birth parents and help them to see Christ throughout their adoption experience.

Most of the women Lifeline works with are considering placing their unborn child; however sometimes we have women considering placing their older child. There is not a typical expectant parent. They come from all races, socio economic status, age, social history, etc. However, many times there is history of other difficult circumstances in their life such as mental health history, substance abuse, unstable relationships and support systems and other social factors. This is an incredible opportunity for a prospective adoptive couple to minister to this expectant parent while understanding that the child to be placed in their home may have prenatal trauma from substance use or stressful pregnancy.

Lifeline has minimum contact and correspondence requirements for every adoptive couple. We ask that couples be willing to meet the expectant parent before placement and that couples send letters and pictures through Lifeline for the first thirteen years of the child's life. While these are our minimum requirements, many birth mothers desire even more openness. One family may be willing to share only first names, while another family may be willing to go through labor and delivery with the birth mother. The more flexible a prospective adoptive family is, the more possibilities there are for placements.

## **Adoption Networking**

Lifeline encourages adoptive couples to let their family and friends know that they are adopting. If a family comes in contact with or is approached by a pregnant woman or someone who may need adoption information, families are encouraged to respond appropriately by doing the following:

- Let the person (or person you've come in contact with on behalf of the expectant parent) know that first and foremost that your ultimate concern is the expectant parents' well-being by ensuring that they receive the support and resources they need to make the best choice for themselves and their child.
- Share that you are working with a reputable agency that is committed to caring for expectant parents and providing them with the counseling and support as they consider their options and learn more about what an adoption plan could look like for them.

- Educate them about how the matching process works and that Lifeline desires to spend time counseling with expectant parents and gathering information about their desires for a potential adoption placement before the expectant parent looks at profiles and makes a decision about an adoptive family.
- Thank them for contacting you and let them know that you are honored to be considered but want to follow the appropriate steps to ensure the expectant parents receive the care and resources they need first.
- Let them know that the expectant parent is always in the “driver’s seat” and that she has no obligation to choose adoption or a specific family. If she either does not desire the placement or wants to consider other couples Lifeline will respect her decision.
- Provide them with Lifeline’s contact information and encourage them to contact Lifeline so that the expectant parents can get the information, counseling and support they need as they consider adoption
- Offer to personally connect with them a Lifeline representative or ask for their permission for a Lifeline representative to contact them

While we network and promote Lifeline in the community, we do not solicit expectant moms. It is illegal in most states, and unethical for adoptive families to advertise via publication, internet or social media to solicit expectant moms.

Adoptive families are permitted to network in the community and let friends and family know they are adopting. If an adoptive family knows someone who wants to place, they are welcome to refer them to Lifeline for services.

**Types of solicitation can include:**

- Posting on a public website, social media, newspaper or public means of communicating about your plans to adopt a way that encourages a response from a potential expectant parent
- Offering financial assistance of any kind in order to encourage an expectant parent to choose adoption or consider your family for an adoption placement
- Sending your profile to pregnancy centers or other public facilities to solicit a potential expectant parent

**Appropriate Networking:**

- Discussing your plans to adopt with family, friends and acquaintances
- Sharing about Lifeline and ministry to parents with personal and professional contacts
- Connecting Lifeline staff to your network circles such as OBGYNs, nurses, pregnancy resource centers, homeless shelters, etc.
- Advocating for adoption and providing adoption resources (Lifeline brochures, etc..) when natural connections are made

## **Conclusion**

Proverbs 16:3 offers much hope for the Christian. We are told that if we commit our works to the Lord that our plans will be blessed. As an agency, we believe God is sovereign and has a specific plan for every person's life. In that regard, we believe the Lord will direct your path in the way that you should go, if you seek and commit your ways to Him. Pray for the Lord to give you a compassionate heart for birthparents whether or not they choose to place with your family. Pray that the Lord will teach you more about Himself during the waiting times. Pray that the Lord will strengthen your marriage through the adoption journey. Pray that the Lord will send you the right child at the right time. Please know that as a ministry, we are looking forward to partnering with you to further His Kingdom through adoption.

## **QUALIFICATIONS FOR ADOPTIVE FAMILIES**

### **Parenting Ability:**

The adoptive parents (APs) must give evidence of a mutual desire and love for children. They must be able to provide for the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs of the child being adopted. APs should have the ability and desire to minister to their child's birth family.

### **Health:**

Applicants must be in good physical and mental health as determined by a doctor's examination. They must be able to physically and emotionally undertake the responsibility of parenthood. They must pass the medical examination required by the sending and receiving state of their placement.

### **Age:**

The applicants should not be more than 50 years older than the adopted child.

### **Citizenship:**

At least one spouse must be a United States citizen

### **Financial Stability:**

The applicants must have sufficient income to meet any expenses incurred by adding another family member. They must also be able to make reasonable provision for future financial stability. Medical insurance coverage is required.

### **Housing:**

The applicants' home must provide adequate space and living conditions necessary to promote the health and well-being of the family members. Ownership is not required.

### **Working Parents:**

If both parents work outside the home, one of the parents should be able to remain at home with the child for a reasonable amount of time following the placement. (The exact length of time can be discussed with a social worker at the time of the home study. A general rule we suggest is that one parent takes six to eight weeks, usually the allotted amount of maternity leave provided by most companies. FMLA standards require adoptive parents the same amount of leave.) This is to provide for the nurturing and security of the child, while he/she assimilates into the home. When the parent returns to work, there must be a plan for responsible child care so that the security of the child can

be sustained.

### **Prior History of Felony Convictions:**

Criminal background checks will be conducted for each adult member of the family. Any criminal history in your past should be addressed with your social worker prior to moving forward. All prior legal convictions should be disclosed with the agency representative before starting your home study.

### **Marriage:**

A husband and wife should be married at least three years prior to filing an application. APs should show evidence of health and stability in their marriage.

### **Domestic Training:**

Have sufficient training/education to meet the needs of the child and ministry to the birth family. Attend Lifeline's Domestic Mini Conference in Birmingham, AL.

### **Birth Family Ministry:**

Lifeline desires to work with families who see this adoption as not only a ministry to the child, but also an opportunity to minister to the birth family and therefore willingly desire a relationship with the birth family. At a minimum we require AP's to send letters and pictures: 1st year- 4 times; every 6 months up to child's 5th birthday; and annually from ages 5-13. Once a child is 13, it becomes the decision of the child/family if they feel comfortable continuing correspondence. We also require that AP's be willing to meet the birthparent(s) at their request prior to placement

### **Faith:**

We ask families to affirm to our Statement of Faith

## DOMESTIC ADOPTION PROCESS

Each applicant for adoption will be assigned a home study social worker and a domestic specialist. In some cases, this will be the same person. The home study social worker will be your local worker who will conduct the home study, annual updates, and post placement visits. Your Domestic Specialist will walk you through the entire process, from the first phone call, to waiting, matching, placement, and post placement.

### Home Study

A home study is a series of interviews in which the social worker concentrates on collecting information via face-to-face contact with each couple. The home study typically consists of an orientation interview followed by 3 home study interviews.

1. The first interview is a home visit in which the social worker will address each of the qualifications for adoption. This is a joint interview.

2. The next visits are individual interviews and are typically held at the LCS office. Both spouses may come on the same day, if they must travel to get to the office. If they are local, each spouse may schedule his or her own interview at his convenience. The interviews will be autobiographical in nature and will be based on an Autobiography written by the applicant. The social worker will ask that you complete this Autobiography prior to this interview.

3. The third interview will focus on parenting philosophies and plans. Issues such as transracial parenting, applicant's experience and exposure to children, the applicants' parenting received when they were children, values and discipline will be explored.

Following the third interview, each family will watch a video series focused on educating the family on potential risks, grief in adoption, and some of the remaining process. The family will answer some discussion questions related to the video and then be able to discuss these further with the Domestic Specialist.

Education is a very important part of the home study process. Each family in the domestic program is required to attend Lifeline's domestic adoption conference in Birmingham, Alabama. This conference is a two day interactive training which will prepare and equip families for the joys and challenges of domestic adoption.

After the home study process is completed, families will begin the matching process. Most families receive a placement 1-3 years after their home study is approved.

## **Matching, Placement and Post Placement Services Profile**

Prospective adoptive couples will create a profile book to help expectant parents learn more about their family and what her child's life would be like if adopted by them. Family profiles who meet the expectant parents' desires are shown to expectant parent(s) once permission has been granted by the adoptive family. Families are encouraged to wait to develop their profile until after they have attended the domestic conference and completed most of the home study process.

### **Matching**

Lifeline uses a mutual selection process for matching. In most cases, expectant parents choose the adoptive couple for their child. However, the prospective adoptive couples have an opportunity to choose if they wish for their profile to be shown to the expectant parent.

The Pregnancy Counselor does her best to gather as much information as possible regarding each expectant parent's medical and social history. This information is provided to the adoptive parents in the form of a non-identifying information summary with the understanding that there are no guarantees in regards to knowing the full mental, emotional, or physical health history of any birth family. This information summary also includes the expectant parents desires for pre and post adoption correspondence and any other desires of the expectant parents. The prospective adoptive family has the option to decide if they would like their profile shown to the expectant parent based on the information provided. Typically, these information summaries are provided to adoptive families in the third trimester of the pregnancy.

Expectant parents review the profiles prepared by the prospective adoptive couples and choose a family for their child based on these profiles. There are times they may ask further questions or requests meetings with multiple families before deciding.

Lifeline cannot give families any time frame during which they may be selected nor guarantee you that your profile will be selected. Families should prepare emotionally for a 2-4 year wait time, yet prepare financially for a match immediately after home study approval.

When selected by an expectant parent, the prospective adoptive couple will often have the opportunity to meet with the expectant parent prior to the birth of the child if desired by the expectant parent. This is often a time for each party to learn more about each other and talk further about expectations/boundaries.

## **Placement**

There is often a period of time following a birth parent signing consents/relinquishments to an adoption in which they can withdraw their consent. This time period is typically dependent on the state in which the birth parent resides. During this time period, children will often be placed into interim care homes until the withdrawal time has expired. Exceptions can often be made when it is in the best interest of the child and mutually agreed upon by the birth parents, adoptive parents, and agency. In these cases, the adoptive parents will agree in writing to an “at risk” placement and the child can be placed in the prospective adoptive home from the hospital.

If a prospective family accepts placement of a child outside of their state of residence, the prospective couple must remain in the state in which the birth parent resides until they have received ICPC clearance. Lifeline will assist families with this process.

## **Finalization**

Adoptive families will need an attorney to finalize their adoption. Lifeline encourages families to utilize the attorneys in each state in which we have a relationship. These attorneys are experts in adoption law and have often provided consultation to Lifeline on the case throughout our relationship with the birth parent. Attorneys will assist families in filing their adoption petition. These petitions will need to be filed as soon as possible after placement of the child, typically at least 30 days after placement of the child unless instructed otherwise by the attorney and and/or extended by the court.

Before the adoption can be finalized, the prospective family will receive post placement visits, typically at least 2 prior to finalization, but dependent on each state’s minimum standards. These visits are a time for the family and their social worker to check in with each other. The social worker will provide further education to the family. Information from these post placement visits will be used for the final recommendation of Lifeline to the court through the court post placement report.

## Texas Inquiry Orientation

The following information is required for Texas residents by Texas regulations.

### Services Available

Lifeline provides the following services: pregnancy counseling to birth parents who inquire, including options counseling; placement services to birth parents who choose adoption; home studies and process support to prospective adoptive parents, both domestically and internationally; post-placement services and post adoption services to the adoption triad. Professional counseling services are available within the states of Alabama and Georgia.

### Fee policies and Payment Procedures

Fees are not charged to clients receiving pregnancy counseling. Prospective adoptive parent fees are generally paid as clients move through the process and are not paid until services are rendered. Fees paid for services rendered are non-refundable. Payments may be made by check or paid online with applicable credit card surcharges. Fees are considered delinquent after 30 days.

### Agency Requirements and Procedures

Please use this link to review Lifeline's adoptive parent qualifications, policies and procedures. <https://lifelinechild.org/beforeyouapply/>.

### Legal Procedures/Legal Counsel

Adoptive parents have the right to independent legal counsel. IR/H-3 visas: For families who will finalize abroad, the domestication of the adoption is highly recommended by Lifeline. To do so, contact a local attorney, who will file the necessary documents in the appropriate venue. Parents will retain the attorney directly and will be responsible for the attorney's fees and court costs. Domestic and IR/H-4 visas (families who will not finalize abroad must finalize in the US in their state of residence): Families will need to contact a local attorney, who will file the necessary documents in the appropriate venue. Parents will retain the attorney directly and will be responsible for the attorney's fees and court costs. If the adoptive parents were given custody while in-country by the Central Adoption Authority or appropriate local authority, then all that is necessary from Lifeline is a signed copy of the required post placement reports. If Lifeline was given custody by the Central Adoption Authority or local authority, then Lifeline must provide official written consent to the adoption.

## **Adoption Registries**

Lifeline has a program designed to reunite domestic adoptees and birth families. International adoptees should contact Lifeline and request information on adoption registries available at that time from his or her country of origin. The Texas Vital Statistics Unit (VSU) Voluntary Central Adoption Registry (CAR) is part of a voluntary mutual consent registry system mandated during the State of Texas' 68th Legislative Session in 1983. It enables a domestic adult adoptee, birth parent, or sibling to place his or her name on the registry and to locate other family members who are also registered. There are private, online registries available through a web search.

## **Client Appeal Process**

As a client, you have the right to appeal agency actions and decisions that affect you, be aware of the appeal procedures and how to report agency violations of minimum standards to the state licensing department. The appeal process protocol includes the opportunity for the client to submit a written appeal and to receive a review of the appeal by designated staff and the Texas Agency Administrator, when appropriate.

## **Reporting**

The following are available for review upon your request: the rules of Texas Administrative Code Chapter 749, Minimum Standards for Child Placing Agencies, Lifeline Children's Services' state compliance status reports and agency policies. To report agency violations of state minimum standards, contact: The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services - Statewide Intake at 1-800-252-5400. The Intercountry Adoption Accreditation and Maintenance Entity may also be contacted. To report complaints on Social Workers, contact: The Texas State Board of Social Work Examiners, Complaints Management and Investigative Section, P.O. Box 141369, Austin, Texas 78714-1369 or call 1-800-942-5540.