

## MAJOR NEW REPORT ON BIRTHPARENTS FINDS FLAWED STEREOTYPES, PRACTICES

NEW YORK, November 19, 2006 - Parents who choose adoption for their infants do not have their rights and needs sufficiently addressed in U.S. law and practice - largely because of basic misconceptions about who these women and men are - and they invariably fare better when they have ongoing information about and/or contact with the children they place into new families, according to an unprecedented report by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

This report, "Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birthparents in the Adoption Process," represents the most thorough, intensive and sophisticated effort to date to understand contemporary infant adoption, particularly as it relates to the least-understood and most-stigmatized participants in the process: the women and men usually termed "birthparents."

### **The principal findings in the 68-page report include:**

- There are more adoptions in America today than is commonly understood. The Institute estimates over 135,000 annually; 13,000-14,000 of these involve voluntarily placed infants.
- Women placing infants today differ vastly from the past. Only about 1/4 are teens; the main group are women in their 20s who graduated high school, and many have other children.
- Contrary to stereotypes about them, birthmothers rarely want anonymity and the vast majority meet their children's adoptive parents. Few "closed" adoptions take place today, and a growing number are open arrangements involving regular contact.
- Most states do not legally require prospective parents to receive counseling or information about their rights with which to make informed choices on whether to place their children.
- Birthmothers in "closed" adoptions or who felt pressured to relinquish struggle most with chronic grief. Research suggests more information/contact brings greater peace of mind.

"Mothers after childbirth are in a very vulnerable state, and this is one of the most important decisions of their lives," said Susan Smith, the Institute's Program and Project director and author of the study. "We need laws and practices that protect their rights and interests."

### **Among the Institute's main recommendations are:**

- Birthparents should have basic rights, including to informed, pressure-free decision-making; to their own legal representation; to counseling about options (including parenting) and about the impact of adoption; and to adherence by all parties to agreements with them. These rights/responsibilities should be in documents that all practitioners provide and sign.
- All states should establish legally enforceable post-adoption contact agreements. And, since research clearly indicates the vast majority of birthmothers want and would benefit from more information about the children they placed, all states should change their laws to allow adults who were adopted to have access to their original birth records.
- A parent should be legally afforded at least a few weeks after childbirth before her adoption decision becomes irrevocable; the exact times for signing a relinquishment and for being able to revoke it should also reflect that other considerations - most notably including the needs of adoptive parents and the best interests of children - be addressed. But it is clear that longer and more uniform periods are needed.
- Birthfathers' rights should get stronger protection in law and practice, including mandating their identification whenever possible and notifying them of pending adoptions. In states where putative father registries exist, serious flaws in their current use need be remedied.

The body of research about the era when adoption was highly surreptitious and stigmatized demonstrates a negative impact on many birthmothers' lives, particularly by causing chronic grief, difficulties in intimate relationships, and complications in the parenting of subsequent children. But the Adoption Institute offers this caveat: In today's more-open and honest adoption climate, many women and men make successful

post-adoption adjustments and feel pride and confidence about their choices. So, in addition to needing more competent and current research on birthparents' needs and adjustment issues, greater understanding is also required of those who adjust well and of which processes help them to do so.

"Adoption's history of secrecy has left us with too little accurate information with which to shape the most ethical and humane laws, policies and practices," said Adam Pertman, the Executive Director of the Adoption Institute. "With this project, we have set out to change that reality and, we hope, to instigate improvements in the lives of millions of people."

The Adoption Institute is the pre-eminent research, policy and education organization in its field. Its mission is to provide leadership that improves laws, policies and practices - through sound research, education and advocacy - in order to better the lives of everyone touched by adoption. It is a nonprofit entity that is independent of any interest group or cause.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please call Adam Pertman at 617-332-8944 or 617-763-0134, or email him at [apertman@adoptioninstitute.org](mailto:apertman@adoptioninstitute.org). "Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birthparents," along with other reports produced by the Institute, are on its award-winning website, [www.adoptioninstitute.org](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org).