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## ADOPTION

### WHAT IS ADOPTION?

Adoption is the legal procedure by which a child becomes, through court action, part of a family other than that of his or her birth parents.

Adoption is a serious matter for all concerned. It determines the entire future of the child because it permanently severs ties with birth parents and relatives and transfers the child into a new family where he or she will remain permanently. The new family is responsible for providing the child with the care and guidance necessary in life that will determine the kind of adult he or she will become. To the birth parents, adoption usually means relinquishing the child forever without the privilege of seeing the child or being otherwise involved in the child's life. However in some types of adoptions, called open adoption, birth parents retain the right to communicate or visit the child.

Additionally, the birth parents are permanently relieved of all responsibilities of the child's care and financial needs. To the adoptive parents, adoption means providing for and undertaking the care of a child to whom they will have the same obligations to as a child naturally born to them.

Any minor (a person under 18 years) present within the state when the petition for adoption is filed may be adopted. Sibling groups may also be adopted together.

An adult may also be adopted. This pamphlet deals with adoption of minors. The procedure for adults is similar but considerably simpler.

### WHO MAY ADOPT A CHILD?

Adults who live and work in the state, are of good character, and have the ability to nurture and provide for a child may adopt. Single adults, as well as married couples, may adopt. A stepparent may adopt his or her spouse's children.

A person may not be prohibited from adopting solely because of a physical disability unless it is determined that the disability renders the person incapable of being an effective parent. Florida law specifies that homosexuals are not eligible to adopt.

## GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT ADOPTION PROCEDURES

An adoption establishes a legal parent-child relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents. This legal relationship is identical to the legal biological parent-child relationship. Florida law authorizes adoptions for all persons, minors and adults.

A successful adoption is a joyful moment for all the parties involved. Any individual or couple considering adoption should be aware that some adoptions develop complications and they should fully educate themselves on the potential problems and pitfalls. Florida's current adoption law balances the interests of all parties, the biological parents, the adoptee and the adoptive parents. However, the biological parent's rights are primary until that parent voluntarily surrenders their rights or fails to act to protect their rights under Florida Law.

Four types of adoptions exist in Florida: The entity adoption (an agency or intermediary facilitated adoption), the step-parent adoption, the close relative and the adult adoption. Each type of adoption has unique procedure.

A court presiding over any Florida adoption must receive proof that facts exist to terminate the biological parent-child relationship such as a properly executed consent for adoption or legal proof that the parent has abandoned the child or otherwise failed to protect their parental rights under Florida law. For example, although there are exceptions, an unmarried biological father must register his paternity with Florida's Putative Father Registry; otherwise, the court will not require his consent before proceeding to complete an adoption plan. An unmarried biological father must register his paternity prior to the filing of a petition to terminate his rights.

The adult adoption is an exception to this rule. The consent of the biological and legal parents are not required to complete such an adoption, however, the petitioner must provide notice to the biological or legal parents.

A consent for adoption is only valid and binding when executed pursuant to the specific requirements of Florida Law. When a child under the age of six months is placed for adoption, the biological mother may not sign her consent for adoption until forty-eight hours after the child's birth or on her date of discharge from the hospital or birth center which ever time is earlier. In these circumstances, a birth father may sign a consent for adoption at any time after the child's birth.

Additionally, a legal or biological father may sign an irrevocable Affidavit of Non-paternity at any time, before or after the child's birth, relinquishing parental rights. When a child is six months of age or older, the mother and father may sign the consent at any time and their consent is subject to a three day revocation. In either case, once the consents are signed with witness and notary, only the court presiding over the adoption can overturn the consents upon a finding that the consents were taken by fraud or duress.

After a court issues a judgment terminating the biological parent-child relationship, the time frame for completing the adoption differs. In the case of an entity adoption, the adoptive parents are not eligible to finalize their adoption until 30 days after the judgment terminating parental rights or 90 days after placement of the child in their home, which ever event occurs later. In the step-parent, close relative and adult adoption, the adoptive parents are eligible to immediately finalize their adoption. Additionally, in stepparent and close relative adoptions, the adopting parent(s) have the option of proceeding in a unified legal process in which the order finalizing the adoption also simultaneously terminates parental rights. A unified proceeding is typical for adult adoptions.

When pursuing the entity adoption, prospective adoptive parents must decide whether to pursue their adoption through an agency or an attorney ("intermediary"). Prospective Adoptive Parents should only chose an adoption entity that instills in them a significant level of trust. They should fully research the entity's

credentials, obtain references and recommendations and fully understand the procedures and costs. The same law applies to both the agency and the attorney/intermediary adoption.

Step-parent adoptions are common when one biological parent is willing to give up their parental rights to that step-parent. After adoption, the step-parent has all rights and responsibilities of the biological parent. In step-parent adoptions, as with all other adoptions, if the child is twelve years of age or older, he or she must give his/her consent to the adoption and must be interviewed prior to signing the consent.

The adoption process is complicated, thus it is very important to consult an attorney when contemplating any type of adoption.

#### HOW CAN AN ADOPTABLE CHILD BE LOCATED?

A child generally may be placed for adoption by an agency or an intermediary. Agencies may be private or public. All private agencies are licensed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The only public child placing agency is DCF. Private adoptions are handled by an intermediary. Only lawyers may act as intermediaries and the proposed adoption must be reported to the court. The adoption of a child across state lines must first be approved by the DCF Interstate Adoption Compact Administrator. All of the restrictions concerning who may place a child for adoption and the requirements for reporting of the proposed adoption are to protect the best interests of the child, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents, as well as to prevent “black market baby business.”

#### HOW DOES AN AGENCY OR INTERMEDIARY HELP ADOPTIVE PARENTS?

An adoption agency will perform a home study of the prospective adoptive parents to assure that the child’s best interests will be served by being placed in their home. Home studies in Florida are conducted by social workers and mental health professionals. The agency also will provide education and counseling to assist the adoptive parents in becoming ready for the child and providing a good, nurturing home for the child.

A private intermediary does much the same thing, but uses the services of an agency or a licensed, private social worker to perform the home study. No child can be placed in the adoptive home until the home study has been successfully completed.

Additionally, prior to placing the child, the agency or intermediary must have acquired the consent of the required parties. Thereafter, the child is placed in the adoptive home and the placement is monitored by the agency for at least 90 days, and there must be monthly contact during that time of which at least one contact must be made in person. The agency social worker maintains contact with the adoptive family to assure that the child’s best interests are being protected and promoted, and that the bonding between the child and adoptive family is going well.

When the child is placed in the adoptive home through an intermediary, the same private or agency social worker who performed the home study generally provides post-placement services. The counselor will visit with the adoptive family on at least two occasions to make sure the child and adoptive family are bonding well and that the child’s best interests are being promoted.

#### WHO MUST CONSENT TO THE ADOPTION?

Unless the consent is excused by the court, the proper written consent for adoption must be received from:

- a. The birth mother.
- b. The birth father, if:
  1. The minor was conceived or born while the father was married to the mother;

2. The minor is his child by adoption;
3. The minor has been established by court proceeding to be his child;
4. He has filed an affidavit of paternity pursuant to s. 382.013(2)(c); or
5. In the case of an unmarried biological father, he has acknowledged in writing, signed in the presence of a competent witness, that he is the father of the minor, has filed such acknowledgment with the Office of Vital Statistics of the Department of Health.

(c) The minor, if 12 years of age or older, unless the court in the best interest of the minor dispenses with the minor's consent.

(d) Any person lawfully entitled to custody of the minor if required by the court.

(e) The court having jurisdiction to determine custody of the minor, if the person having physical custody of the minor does not have authority to consent to the adoption.

#### WHAT IS THE ADOPTION PROCEDURE AFTER PLACEMENT?

After a child is placed for adoption with an adoptive family, the adoptive family will desire to have the adoption finalized. To do this, the adoptive family must file a petition for adoption with the clerk of court. This is generally filed in the county in which the termination of parental rights took place. The petition must be filed within 60 days of the termination of parental rights judgment. The matter cannot be heard for final hearing until the child has been with the adoptive family at least 90 days. The exception to this 90 day rule is for relative adoptions.

The petition for adoption is generally prepared and filed through an attorney. If the child was placed through an intermediary-attorney, generally that same attorney handles the preparation and filing of the necessary legal papers for the finalization of the adoption.

#### WHAT IS NECESSARY TO FINALIZE THE ADOPTION?

The adoption is “finalized” at a final hearing. The adoptive parent(s) must be present, but may be given permission to appear telephonically. The favorable final report of the agency or social worker must be filed with the court. The attorney handling the adoption will prepare the necessary papers for the court’s consideration and present the necessary testimony and evidence to the court. Assuming that all requirements of the statutes and court have been met, the judge will sign a final judgment of adoption. The final judgment of adoption awards the adoptive family parental rights of the child(ren).

#### WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE ADOPTION?

As a result of the final judgment of adoption being granted, the adoptive family permanently assumes all parental rights and responsibilities for the child, with the birth parents’ parental rights and responsibilities previously being terminated. The first effect of this is that the child’s name is generally changed to whatever the adoptive family desires. This is accomplished with the vital statistics office of the state in which the child was born. The paperwork for this is prepared by the attorney or agency. The original birth certificate is sealed and not readily available again to anyone. A new birth certificate is prepared which shows the adoptive parents to be the child’s natural parents and states the child’s new name. This new birth certificate is mailed to the attorney or agency and forwarded to the adoptive family.

Once the new birth certificate is received by the adoptive family, they may apply for a new Social Security number, a passport for the child, and open accounts on behalf of the child.

For all legal intents and purposes, the child will be considered the natural child of the adoptive family. Further, the adopted child will stand on an equal footing with all other children that may then be or later come into the adoptive family, regardless of whether the other children are biologically born or adopted to the family.

This is true with respect to wills and estates or later if the adoptive parents divorce. Thus, except for the biological realities, it is as though the child was born to the adoptive family initially.

#### WHAT IS THE ADOPTION REGISTRY?

The Department of Children and Families maintains an Adoption Registry for the benefit of adopted children. At or about the time that the birth parents sign the consent for adoption, the initial election to be on the registry or not is also generally made by a signed statement. If the birth parent elects to be listed on the registry, then that parent's identity may be released to the child after the child attains the age of 18 years. The birth parent who elects to be on the registry should keep the registry advised of name and address changes, so current information can be supplied to the child. On the other hand, if the birth parent elects not to be on the registry, no information will be given to the child by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) after the child attains age 18.

A birth parent may change his or her mind concerning the registry as time passes. A birth parent may go on or off the registry as many times as necessary until the child attains the age of 18.

After the child attains the age of 18, if he or she desires to learn the identity of the birth parents, the child may inquire of the Adoption Registry. If the birth parent is listed, then that information will be given to the child. If the birth parent is not listed, it is because no authorization was given to DCF to release this information and no identifying information will be released. Unless the child makes an inquiry, no information is extended from the registry.

If the birth parent is listed on the registry and the child makes an inquiry, the decision of whether or not the child desires to contact the birth parent lies with the child.

Section 63.054, Florida Statutes has provided for the establishment of a Putative Father Registry in the Office of Vital Statistics (OVS), Florida Department of Health (DOH). The purpose of the registry is to permit a man alleging to be the biological father of a child to assert his parentage, independent of the mother, and preserve his rights as a parent. This registry may also expedite adoptions of children whose biological fathers are unwilling to assume responsibility for their child. For purposes of this provision registrant means an "unmarried biological father." The information provided is not designed to be legal advice. Questions concerning paternity, presumptions of paternity, or rights and responsibilities of a parent should be directed to an attorney.

If an unmarried biological father fails to take the actions that are available to him to establish a relationship with his child, his parental interest may be lost entirely, or greatly diminished, by his failure to timely comply with the available legal steps to substantiate a parental interest.

#### A MAN IS PRESUMED TO BE THE BIOLOGICAL FATHER IF:

- 1) he was married to the mother at the time of the child's birth or conception;
- 2) the mother was not married at the time of the birth and the man acknowledged paternity at the hospital at the time of the child's birth;
- 3) the mother was not married at the time of the birth and the man acknowledged paternity subsequent to the birth by filing a Consenting Affidavit Acknowledging Paternity, DH 432, with the Office of Vital Statistics and the record has been amended to reflect him as father OR
- 4) paternity has been established by a court order.

An unmarried biological father must contact the Office of Vital Statistics, Florida Department of Health to register his paternity. A man may register his paternity prior to the child's birth, but no later than the date a petition to terminate his parental rights is filed with the court. All information concerning the registry is provided in each branch office of the Department of Health as well as on the Office of Vital Statistics Web site.

#### INFORMATION FOR COMPLETING CLAIM OF PATERNITY FORM

A Claim of Paternity may be filed any time prior to the birth; however, a claim of paternity may not be filed after the date a petition is filed for termination of parental rights.

By Filing DH Form 1965, Claim of Paternity, the registrant expressly consents to submit to DNA testing upon the request of any party, the registrant, or the adoption entity with respect to the child referenced in the claim of paternity. The registrant may, at any time prior to the birth of the child for whom paternity is claimed, execute a notarized written revocation of the claim of paternity previously filed & upon such revocation, the claim of paternity shall be deemed null & void.

If the Court determines that a registrant is not the father of the child, the court shall order the department to remove the registrant's name from the registry.

It is the obligation of the registrant or, if designated an agent or representative, to notify and update the information contained in the registry in Vital Statistics of any change of address or change in designation of an agent or representative.

Vital Statistics will notify the registrant, in writing, of their receipt of a Claim of Paternity or a Revocation filed on a Claim of Paternity.

Pursuant to S. 63.541, Florida Statutes, information in the registry is confidential and may only be released to:

- a) an adoption entity, upon filing of a request for a diligent search of the Florida Putative Father Registry in connection with the planned adoption of a child,
- b) the registrant unmarried biological father upon receipt of a notarized request for a copy of his registry entry and,
- c) the court, upon issuance of a court order concerning a petitioner acting pro se in an action under this chapter.

Florida Law requires a fee of \$9.00 for filing and indexing a claim of paternity.

#### CITIZENSHIP

Adoption of a child from another country is governed by federal law. Residents of Florida must comply with Chapter 63 home study requirements, and follow the instructions of the Bureau of Citizen Services of the Department of Homeland Security.

Children adopted abroad by parents who are present at the foreign court hearing become United States citizens when they enter the United States of America. Parents who are not present at the foreign court must file formal adoption proceedings in Florida to complete their adoption and for the child to become a United States citizen.