

The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act and Interethnic Adoption Provisions (MEPA-IEP): A Failed Policy Filled with Unintended Consequences

Summary: The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) has failed both to address racial disproportionality in the child welfare system and to increase the number of foster and adoptive parents of color. The MEPA in its current form prioritizes timely permanency over other factors associated with child wellbeing, such as relational permanency and cultural continuity. The MEPA must be amended to allow child welfare workers to consider the race and ethnicity of children and prospective foster and adoptive parents to determine whether a foster or adoptive family can meet a child’s needs. Recruitment efforts must be enhanced to find families that represent the makeup of the community to better serve children in care. Foster and adoptive parents who do not share a child’s racial, cultural, and/or tribal background should be provided culturally relevant training and other support services to assist in fostering children’s identity formation and connection to their culture.

Background: Historical legislation

Four competing and overlapping perspectives inform what child welfare workers should prioritize when children enter foster care: expedient permanency, cultural continuity, family preservation, and social advantage. Each perspective strives to meet a child’s best interest; however, such a standard is subjective to lawmakers’ assumptions informed by broader society.

In 1980, the *Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA)* was passed. The AACWA required reasonable efforts to be made to maintain original family units and offered new funding opportunities to focus on prevention and reunification. AACWA defined reunification as being in the child’s best interest.¹

The federal Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was created in 1994 to “decrease the length of time that children wait to be adopted; to prevent discrimination in the placement of children on the basis of race, color, or national origin; and to facilitate the identification and recruitment of foster and adoptive parents who can meet children’s needs.”² The original version of MEPA allowed for the consideration of a child’s cultural, ethnic, or racial background during the placement process, as well as

assessment of a prospective foster or adoptive parent’s capacity to meet the needs of foster children with varying backgrounds.

The Congressional Black Caucus fought hard for this provision, only to have it repealed by the Interethnic Placement (IEP) Act in 1996.³ The IEP Act mandated a ‘colorblind’ approach to foster care and adoption placements, prioritizing placement of children in homes with almost no consideration for the race of the child or prospective adoptive parent(s). The intention of the Act was to reduce the time from foster care to adoption (aka ‘permanency’). The result, however, was disregard of children’s racial and cultural continuity in favor of transracial adoption.¹

More recently, the *Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA)* provided three goals for the child welfare system to use as a guide: safety, permanency, and child wellbeing. The implementation of ASFA prioritizes legal permanency—reunification with family, adoption, or legal guardianship—in the shortest time period possible, over other permanency considerations, including family preservation. In the name of timely permanency, individual parental responsibility was emphasized while government support services for biological parents and extended families were reduced.⁴

The goal in the MEPA-*Interethnic Adoption Provision of 1996* of decreasing time to legal permanency for children of color has not been achieved. **Repealing the Interethnic Adoption Provision of 1996 and replacing it with the bill's original language, which allowed for the consideration of a child's background and prospective foster/adoptive parent's capacity to provide cultural continuity for the child, would move the United States child welfare system closer to this goal.**

Section I. The Value of Cultural Continuity for Children of Color

Maintaining children's connection to their race, heritage, and culture is widely accepted as a best practice in child welfare. The Child Welfare League of America's adoption standard states that all children deserve to be raised in a family that respects their cultural heritage.³ Unfortunately, there is currently neither enough prospective families of color nor mandated cultural sensitivity training to prepare foster and adoptive parents to meet foster children's cultural needs. MEPA enforcement efforts have largely focused on prohibiting placement delays, while ignoring mandates requiring recruitment of foster and adoptive parents from racial and cultural groups that reflect the demographics of the children in care.³

During the 1960's and 1970's, some national organizations representing communities of color (such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League) raised the issue of transracial adoption to help reduce the number of Black children lingering without placement options. However, not all organizations supported this decision, and the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) released strong statements arguing that Black children belong with families and communities that could help them develop their cultural identities.⁵ Further, they asserted that White

parents would struggle to help Black children negotiate the racism they will inevitably face in a White-dominated society and the personal development of Black children is jeopardized by transracial adoption.^{5,6}

Despite the stated intent to prevent discrimination in foster placement and adoption, the MEPA does not include measures to examine whether families of color are prevented from becoming licensed and/or receiving placements. Instead, the adoption process under MEPA benefits adopters who already have power and privilege in society and thus experience few barriers to adoption; namely White, heterosexual, middle class couples;⁶ and results in many of those parents adopting children of color without training and access to other support services designed to meet the racial, cultural, and ethnic needs of the child in their care. While a child's race or cultural background should not, and legally cannot, be the *only* factor used to make placement decisions,² it is in a child's best interest to consider whether a prospective family can meet a child's unique needs for identity and cultural development and continuity.

Research supports the idea that children's development and resilience are affected by trans-racial adoption. A 2011 study indicated that trans-racial adoptees (TRAs) felt different from other Black youth and had to learn how to navigate "acting White" versus "acting Black" in different social spaces.⁷ A 2017 study also indicated TRAs have difficulty being authentically themselves, entering racialized spaces, and feeling a sense of belonging.⁸ TRAs in the study reported feeling pressure to assimilate to White culture.⁸ Assimilation, or being expected to adopt the norms and values of the dominant culture, can have various negative psychological impacts on children.⁹ Assimilation requires that the child develop a new social identity, often meaning they must lose some awareness of their culture of origin. This can make a child feel the need to reject

their cultural communities to be successful, or be rejected by members of either the majority culture or their culture of origin.⁹

Conversely, ethnic socialization, which involves beliefs, practices, and positive messages about one's racial or ethnic heritage, plays a role in the well-being of adoptees. Ethnic socialization plays a protective role for TRAs when experiencing discrimination and parent's participation in socialization practices have led to healthier outcomes for adoptees.^{10,11} Unfortunately, research with TRAs in 2011 indicated that they had little exposure to middle- or upper-class Black families and that their adopted families equated "Black culture" with things like poverty.⁷

Other research also supports the importance of children staying connected to their culture. One study showed that Indochinese refugee children performed better in school and had fewer depressive symptoms when placed in foster care with Indochinese families than those who were placed with families of another culture.⁹ Another study about caring for Muslim children indicates that placement in a Muslim home and/or foster parent education about the religious and cultural practices central to Islam is crucial for Muslim children's wellbeing in care.¹²

The Indian Child Welfare Act, considered the "gold standard" of child welfare,¹³ is a prime example of the importance of keeping children connected to their culture. The ICWA was established in part due to the devastating impact of separating American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children from their tribes and families.¹³ It requires that active efforts be made to prevent the breakup of AI/AN families and help tribal youth maintain their cultural connections and tribal nation affiliation.^{13,14} While ICWA's fundamental application is based upon a AI/AN child's unique political status as a citizen of a tribal nation, ICWA also recognizes the importance of culture as a critical factor in healing of AI/AN children and families. Culture

as a supportive factor in healing is fundamental to other children and families of color and should be addressed in federal policy.

Racial dissimilarity & disparity in foster care and adoption

Prospective families

Despite the overrepresentation of children of color who need placements, there is a persistent lack of foster and adoptive families who have racial and cultural identities similar to children in care. The stated intent of MEPA to develop a pool of foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic background of children in care has not been achieved; demographic dissimilarity between children in care and foster parents persists. Without an adequate pool of prospective foster and adoptive parents of color, and lack of investment in family preservation services, transracial adoption is the main permanency path for children of color languishing in care.

Studies indicate that the characteristics of prospective adoptive parents do not match children waiting in care. As of 2020, 45% of children waiting to be adopted are White, 22% are Black, 22% are Hispanic, and 11% are categorized as "other."¹⁵ According to additional 2020 data at the time of adoption, almost 83% of adoptive parents identified as White, around 11% identified as Black, less than 2% identified as Latinx, and less than 1% identified as American Indian.^{16,17}

Outcomes for foster children of color

The MEPA has not been successful in achieving its goal of eliminating discrimination in foster and adoptive placements.⁵⁶ Black children continue to be overrepresented in foster care, experience longer stays in care, and are less likely to be adopted.³ Black children are 1.5 times more likely to enter foster care than the general population¹⁸ and are less likely to find permanent families.¹⁹ Black children also spend more time in care than all other racial groups.¹⁸

After MEPA was implemented, transracial adoptions increased, but the likelihood of Black children being adopted got worse. While the overall adoption rate of Black children declined by 22% between 2005 and 2019, transracial adoption of Black children has increased by 32% since 2007.²⁰ Successful family reunification also declined for Black children during this time period.¹⁵

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth also enter foster care at disproportionate rates. As of 2018, AI/AN youth represented 1% of the general population, but 2.6% of foster youth.¹⁸ AI/AN children are less likely to be adopted than their White counterparts,²¹ and of the AI/AN children who do get adopted, 56% are adopted to individuals outside of their community.²² Although AI/AN children who are members of federally recognized tribes are eligible for protections under ICWA, AI/AN children who are not eligible for enrollment, such as those who are members of state recognized tribes, and U.S. Citizens who are members of Canadian First Nation tribes, are not eligible for protections under the ICWA. Other indigenous children in the United States are also dependent upon implementation of MEPA, such as Native Hawaiians. These subgroups of indigenous children should have their need for cultural continuity assessed prior to and during placement.

While Latinx youth are represented in foster care at similar rates to their proportion of the population, they still experience inequities within the foster care system.²³ Latinx children spend more time in care than White children and have the highest rate of transracial adoption at 46% of adoptions.²⁰

Family Recruitment & Training

Diligent recruitment of families of color

The MEPA requires that states make diligent recruitment efforts to ensure prospective foster and adoptive families reflect the racial and ethnic background of children in care. This

requirement is immensely important in ensuring that both cultural continuity and timely permanency can be achieved simultaneously. At present, the MEPA does not provide clear-cut guidelines for what “diligent” recruitment entails. What guidelines there are talk little about race and ethnic background. The MEPA also does not provide federal funding for recruitment, and the law identifies no avenues for enforcement to ensure states are complying with the provision.^{3,6,19}

Most states are not meeting MEPA’s standards for diligent recruitment. Thirty-four states received a Child and Family Services Review (CSFR) rating of “needing improvement.”²⁰ Only sixteen jurisdictions received a “strength” rating.²⁰ Seventeen states’ Diligent Recruitment Plans (DRPs) didn’t contain information about training staff to work with diverse communities or about nondiscriminatory fee-structures.¹⁵ Additionally, thirteen states did not have strategies to address language barriers.¹⁵ States are not required to provide data on the racial and ethnic makeup of current or prospective foster and adoptive parents in their CSFRs.

Barriers for prospective families of color

The MEPA prohibits discrimination based on race, yet it fails to address institutional inequities and barriers for families of color. Families of color face many barriers to fostering and adoption including agency policies, lack of access to child welfare staff of color, lack of training, and lack of outreach.²⁴ Black families have reported the following:²⁵

- Social workers do not understand cultural beliefs or parenting styles
- Feeling isolated and tokenized during foster parent trainings
- Being expected to educate White foster/adoptive parents about the cultural needs of children of color

Additionally, the cost of adoption can be a barrier for families. Adoption costs can include home study inspections, court fees and attorney costs.²⁶ States are limited to providing up to \$2,000 to cover these fees.²⁶

Nondiscriminatory fee structures are crucial given the wealth gap that persists between White households and households of people of color.²⁷

Under-utilization and support for kin & family preservation

In addition to diversifying the pool of prospective foster and adoptive parents, it is important to utilize preventive solutions to child welfare system involvement such as relative (kinship) care and reunification supports. Kinship care has been shown to reduce placement instability for Black children, who experience a disproportionate rate of out-of-home placement.⁵⁵ Given current and historical under-investment in communities of color, families of color are more likely to live in under-resourced service deserts, which can create barriers to receiving family preservation and reunification services.

In permanency planning, the MEPA indicates a clear preference for stranger placement compared to family preservation. While the Act prohibits denying a prospective parent the ability to foster or adopt due to the parent or child's race, color, or national origin, the Act does not expressly prohibit an agency from denying family reunification or kinship supports due to their identities.

In addition, the MEPA does not mandate recruitment nor licensing of kinship caregivers as a priority in planning for permanency or as part of a state's diligent recruitment efforts. The foster care system relies heavily on kinship placements, but does not support kin as it does foster parents who are unrelated to the child.

The majority of kinship caregivers are families of color: in 2013, 61% of kinship caregivers in the United States identified as Black.²⁸ Most kinship caregivers of children in the legal custody of the state are unlicensed and thus do not receive foster care maintenance payments. In Washington state, for example, only 7.5% of kinship caregivers are licensed,²⁹ and in 23

states, over half of kinship caregivers do not receive maintenance payments.³⁰

In addition to the lack of monthly assistance, unlicensed kin caregivers have a more difficult pathway to creating permanent families for the children. Legal support is typically not provided for unlicensed kinship families to pursue adoption or guardianship, which can require a family to pay for a private attorney.³⁰

Training

When a parent is fostering or adopting a child transracially, training plays a foundational role in ensuring that parents are prepared to meet the needs of the children in their care and respond to discrimination the child may experience. Research has shown that foster children adopted by parents who received post-placement training had significantly less emotional and behavioral problems.³¹ In a survey of 173 foster parent trainers across the country, over half of trainers identified a need for more culturally relevant training materials that prepare foster parents to care for children from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic backgrounds and children who identify as LGBTQIA+.³² The MEPA does not mandate that parents who adopt transracially receive any training or guidance to meet the children's unique needs. In fact, the MEPA suggests that families cannot be prepared differently based on their race and the race of the child.

Child welfare workforce development

Training on cultural humility

It is essential that the child welfare workforce is well-trained on cultural humility, privilege and bias, institutional racism, and identity formation.³³ When social workers are adequately trained to respond sensitively to communities with identities different than their own, agencies report higher retention rates and social workers experience more career satisfaction.³³ Although not the only strategy to address racial disproportionality and inequality within the child welfare system, well-trained

agency staff provide better support for children and families from diverse backgrounds.

Training on implementing the MEPA

Following the introduction of the MEPA, the government issued little guidance on how to apply the mandates to practice, and few workers had been trained on the new regulations.¹ In 2000, a national survey found that 61% of child welfare staff received no training on the effects of considering race in permanency planning.¹ Many professionals report fear of raising any considerations of race during placement given the perception that MEPA prohibits any discussion of race at all.

Recruitment and retention of social workers

One challenge in ensuring that the child welfare workforce is adequately trained is the high turnover rate of caseworkers. According to a 2018 study, an average state has an annual turnover rate of 14%-22% for caseworkers and 20% for supervisors.³⁴ In addition, caseworkers do not represent the demographics of children in care. CPS social workers are predominately White (58%), while Black and Latino caseworkers make up 24% and 15% of the workforce respectively.³⁵

The necessity and cost of a college degree increase the difficulty of recruiting and retaining social workers of color.³⁶ Students of color borrow at a higher rate, graduate with the highest amount of debt, and default on their student loans at a higher rate than their white peers.³⁷ Students of color can face barriers in paying back their student loans in lower paying careers such as social work.

Proposed Solutions & Best Practices

1. Allow for the individualized consideration of race and culture at placement

In addition to legal permanency, federal law must also recognize and prioritize relational and cultural permanency for children in care. A

child's best interest includes consideration of their racial identity and cultural socialization. In line with the 1994 Act program instruction, **agencies must be allowed to consider, on an individualized basis, "the child's cultural, ethnic, and racial background and the capacity of prospective foster or adoptive parents to meet the needs of a child of this background among the factors in determining whether a particular placement is in a child's best interests."** In addition, a child should be assessed for "any needs related to race, ethnicity and culture as soon as the child comes into contact with the child welfare system."²

In order to achieve this, **the Interethnic Adoption Provision of 1996 must be repealed, and the word "solely" must be re-inserted into the MEPA statute:**³⁸

- section 471, subdivision 18, paragraph A: "deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or a foster parent, **solely** on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the person, or of the child, involved; or"
- section 471, subdivision 18, paragraph B: "delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, **solely** on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child, involved;"

2. Create a national data portal for child welfare data

To understand and address racial disproportionality in child welfare, the Center for the Study of Social Policy recommends that **child welfare agencies publicly report longitudinal data related to racial disproportionality.**³⁹ The Children's Bureau already collects and reports on Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) data, but state level data is not publicly accessible. **A national database and public dashboard** would allow researchers and child welfare professionals to

understand and compare racial disproportionality across states and allocate resources appropriately.

Promising practices

At least seven states to date have passed legislation requiring their child welfare agencies to report information on their progress in reducing disproportionality.⁴⁰ The California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) is considered a best practice in reporting child welfare disproportionality data. The CCWIP maintains an open data portal for both professionals and the public to view key indicators about youth outcomes in the child welfare system. The portal allows users to filter by demographics and calculates a “disparity index” to compare the outcomes of any two groups. CCWIP staff also help child welfare professionals interpret the data. CCWIP could be used as a model for a nationwide data dashboard, and support for application of this information. The estimated annual cost for California’s statewide data reporting effort is about one million dollars.⁴¹

3. Require Racial Equity Analysis as part of Child and Family Services Plans (CFSPs)

All policies have some impact on racial and cultural equity. Most states are not meeting the MEPA’s diligent recruitment requirements and federal efforts have not adequately addressed the impact this has had on families and children of color. Racial equity tools are increasingly utilized at the state level to ensure issues of equity are being addressed. **States and territories could be required to conduct a racial equity (also known as disparate impact) analysis as part of the title IV-B Child and Family Services Plan to demonstrate how the state is addressing racial equity and cultural needs in the selection and provision of services.**

CFSRs are conducted periodically by the Children’s Bureau to review state child welfare systems and ensure they are complying with

federal requirements.⁴² CFSRs provide the opportunity to identify racial inequities. States that are not adequately addressing racial disproportionality and children’s cultural needs would require a Program Improvement Plan in order to come into compliance with federal guidelines.⁴²

Promising Practices

Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Texas, and Washington have all passed legislation requiring equity analysis in child welfare.⁴³ In 2001, Minnesota specifically mandated a study of outcomes for Black children in the state’s child welfare system with the goal of creating recommendations to address disparities.⁴³ Washington, Oregon, and Texas created task forces to address racial disproportionality in child welfare systems in 2007, 2009 and 2011, respectively.⁴³ Washington legislation also requires an annual report from the secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services that includes any measurable process made towards reducing racial disparities in the state’s child welfare system.⁴³

4. Report youth racial demographics and tribal affiliations

Tribal affiliations

Currently, AFCARS and NCANDS only provide demographic options for indigenous children who are citizens of a federally recognized tribe. **Additional tribal affiliation options are needed for indigenous children not covered by ICWA,** such as Canadian First Nation and Native Hawaiian children. Washington and Michigan’s state policies build upon the minimum federal ICWA standards by collecting tribal affiliation data for Canadian First Nation youth. Mandating collection of this information nationwide would allow agencies to consider children’s tribal or Native Hawaiian heritage even if they are not protected under ICWA.

Country of origin

Many children, especially Latinx children residing in territories, have sustained cultural and/or familial connections to another country.

Data could be collected on children’s country of origin, if applicable, to allow agencies to help children maintain their cultural connections.

Youth who exit to permanency

AFCARS does not currently collect data on the **racial demographics or tribal affiliations of children who achieve permanency**. This information could identify possible disparities in permanency outcomes.

Youth in kin placements

Generations United recommends AFCARS report upon the number of **children in unlicensed kinship homes who do not receive foster care maintenance payments, as well as the racial breakdown of these children** to reveal possible racial disparities in resource allocation and outcomes.⁴⁴

5. Fund research on culturally adapted interventions & ensure benefits are distributed equitably

The federal government should fund a rigorous, culturally relevant study to evaluate the effectiveness of blind case reviews, kinship placement, and other promising interventions to reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. In addition, the Child Welfare League of America recommends the federal government **award research demonstration grants for researchers to develop a tool to reduce racially biased decision making in the child welfare workforce.**

To ensure benefits and services are distributed equitably across states, the HHS Office of Civil Rights could provide guidance that **title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires states to ensure that families of color do not receive disproportionately less services or subsidies.**

Promising interventions

Child welfare agencies have implemented several promising interventions to address racial bias and disproportionality, but to date there has been no rigorous evaluation of the

comparative effectiveness of these interventions. Versions of differential or alternative response, family team decision making (FTDM), cross-system collaborations, and blind case review come up often in the research literature but lack definitive evidence of their effectiveness.^{39,45}

For example, in October 2020, after a 2018 analysis of strategies utilized by counties that reduced racial disproportionality in their child welfare agencies, New York mandated that all child welfare agencies across the state implement a blind case review process to reduce biased decision making.^{45,46} Blind case reviews require a committee of caseworkers to make decisions about whether to remove a child from a home based only on non-identifying details of the case, excluding information such as name and race.

Anti-bias tools exist in related fields and could be used as a model for a child welfare focused tool – for example, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) recently created an anti-bias tool for juvenile judges that could be adapted for the child welfare workforce.⁴⁷

6. Provide funding for & enforce state diligent recruitment plans

State and tribal child welfare agencies need funding, clear direction, training protocol, and incentives to implement best practices for diligently recruiting families from diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.

Diligent recruitment plans must include:¹⁹

- Data on how the racial/ethnic background of licensed foster/ adoptive parents differs from the demographic of children in care,
- strategies to reach those communities that are under-represented based on the data,
- how the state is using family finding, kinship searches, and other tools to reach adults already in the child’s life,
- widespread dissemination of information to targeted communities,

- strategies to ensure all prospective parents have access to the home study process,
- procedures for timely search for adoptive parents for a waiting child, and
- strategies to address linguistic barriers and non-discriminatory fee structures.²⁵

Data Informed Recruitment

Uniform collection of demographic data for both foster and adoptive parents should be mandated across the child welfare system.⁴⁸ Additionally, **this data should be made available to the Federal government** so that it can monitor diligent recruitment practices more effectively, and conduct additional reviews if states are not making progress. **Recruitment data should be public and accessible for transparency and accountability.**⁴⁸

Promising practices

Many states are already collecting information from potential and current licensed foster and adoptive families regarding race, ethnicity and culture of origin, but this data is not reported to the federal government. States who scored “strong” on their recruitment plans often collected and reported data on the characteristics of children waiting to be adopted.¹⁵ Some states also use data to track characteristics of current foster and adoptive families in order to identify gaps in characteristics and to address recruitment inequities.¹⁵ Additionally, many states' Diligent Recruitment Plans already include characteristics of youth waiting to be adopted.⁴⁸

7. Preferential adoption and guardianship for kinship caregivers

In addition to recruitment of new foster and adoptive parents, more consideration needs to be given to kinship caregivers as an option for permanency. If a kinship or relative caregiver expresses a desire to foster or adopt a child, the MEPA should mandate that **kinship caregivers be preferred for foster placement, adoption and guardianship and provided assistance with becoming licensed and pursuing legal permanency with their kinship child.**⁴⁸

Additionally, the MEPA should be amended to expressly **state that a child or family's race, color, or national origin cannot be used to deny a family reunification services, kinship navigation supports and/or adoption or guardianship subsidies.**

8. Mandate culturally relevant adoptive parent training

MEPA legislation should mandate that **all foster or adoptive parents receive pre- and post-placement training on meeting the cultural needs of the children in their care,** understanding their own power and positionality in society relative to their child, building on their understanding of historical and complex trauma, and learning strategies to address the racism, discrimination, and stigma their child may face. Any training should have the flexibility to be adapted so that it is culturally relevant in the local context. The federal government should **fund an evaluation on the effectiveness of culturally relevant training for foster parents** and how training prepares foster and adoptive parents to parent transracially.⁴⁹

Promising practices

There are several evidence-based, trauma-informed, culturally relevant training models for foster and adoptive parents.⁵⁰ One example is the KEEP Program, which is a post-placement 16-week training that provides parents adaptable information about how to best serve the children in their care.⁵¹ KEEP training helps foster parents understand historical and complex trauma and trains parents to embrace and sustain a child's identities.⁵² KEEP is designed to help foster and adoptive parents address any discrimination or racism a child may experience. Strategies include group dialogue, parental communicative exercises, and at home implementation of what was learned at each session.⁵³

The KEEP program manual is designed to be adaptive and flexible across cultures.⁵³

Stakeholders and a KEEP group facilitator meet prior to training to discuss the specific needs of the community. A subgroup of stakeholders then modifies the manual to fit the unique cultural needs of the community. KEEP promotes retention of foster families that are representative of all races, genders, and sexual orientations,⁵¹ and can be used for all populations. It has been implemented in states such as California, Tennessee, Montana, New York, and many tribal nations.

9. *Train child welfare staff & recruit caseworkers of color*

The child welfare workforce should be provided training on anti-racism, cultural humility, and implementation of the MEPA, including diligent recruitment of families who reflect the demographics of children in care. Training must go beyond surface-level rhetoric, offering concrete strategies to combat institutional racism embedded in the field.

Current state practices in workforce training

The Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare surveyed 12 states in 2014 to better understand the strategies states used to promote racial equity in the child welfare system.⁵⁴ One promising practice is the **Knowing Who You Are (KWYA)**⁵⁴ training, which equips child welfare workers with the strategies they need to cultivate children’s racial and ethnic identity development. KWYA focuses on helping social workers understand the importance of racial identity and how it impacts children when this is not addressed, while providing concrete strategies for applying this knowledge day to day. This training is offered across several states including Idaho, New York, Oregon and Texas.

Workforce recruitment

One way to recruit and retain social workers of color is by incentivizing participation in the workforce through student loan repayment and forgiveness programs. The federal government should **fully fund the loan forgiveness program**

enacted as part of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act and fix the ten-year loan forgiveness program so that child welfare professionals can access these funds.

Summarized Recommendations

To reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system and ensure children’s culture and identity are considered at placement, we recommend the following changes to MEPA:

1. Re-insert the word “solely” into the MEPA statute so that workers may consider a child’s race and ethnicity on an individualized basis
2. Create a national data dashboard that includes AFCARS, NCANDS, and licensing/recruitment data from all states broken down by race
3. Require Racial Equity Analyses as part of Title IV-B Child and Family Services Plans (CFSPs)
4. Collect and report racial demographics and tribal affiliations of children who achieve permanency and children in kin placements
5. Fund a rigorous, culturally sensitive evaluation of promising interventions to reduce racial inequities and bias in the child welfare system & ensure equitable service provision
6. Enforce Diligent Recruitment Plans in a uniform manner and provide federal funding for states to promote diligent recruitment of families of color
7. Prioritize kinship caregivers for foster placement, adoption, and guardianship and provide licensing and legal support; increase parity between kinship and non-relative foster families
8. Fund and require a post-placement foster and adoptive parent training program to increase parent retention, skills, and stability in the home, and
9. Provide training on anti-racism and MEPA implementation for child welfare staff and increase efforts to recruit and retain caseworkers of color.

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