

2nd Edition

It Takes A Village

*The AOK Guide to Navigating Your Role
as a Foster Parent in Massachusetts*



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as a Foster Parent in Massachusetts*



*"The fact that the child welfare system is terribly broken
is a compelling reason to engage it,
not a legitimate justification to avoid it."*

-Johnston Moore

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Welcome to This Wild Ride

If you're reading these words, chances are you're a foster parent or interested in becoming one, and you want to be more prepared for the process. You want to know about the rewards, the challenges, and the experience of being a foster parent. You want information that will help you navigate your role and make the best decisions you can for yourself and your children. You came to the right place.

Founded in 2017, All Our Kids, Inc. seeks to empower Western Massachusetts foster and adoptive families to thrive by enriching community connectedness, providing education and resources, and helping the public understand and support our experience. This organization was started by a group of foster and adoptive parents who saw a need for more support, advocacy, and education in the foster/adoption community in Western Massachusetts. Since then, our organization has grown to support hundreds of families a year – online, by phone, and in person. Check out our flyers In the proceeding pages.

We found that by far the most common need of foster parents is for information and guidance. We are often asked:

What should I expect as a foster parent? What am I allowed to do and not allowed to do?

Why is a probation officer calling my house? What is the court process like?

What if I never hear from my child's attorney?

What do I do if I feel like my social worker doesn't value my input?

What is it like to collaborate with birth families?

What options do I have if I'm concerned about a foster child who will be reunified soon?

What resources are available to help me and my family? How do I balance all of this?

I feel like I can't do this anymore. What should I do?

They want to know what they should expect, how to prepare, whether or not their experiences are typical of other foster parents, and what to do when they feel like something is not right. In other words, foster parents want to understand how the system works and how to navigate it. And all of us want to be better armed with empowering information that will help us advocate both for the children in our care, and for ourselves as foster and adoptive parents.

We put together *It Takes a Village* as a way to answer all these questions on a broad scale. Although our focus is on the Western MA region, we are really talking about the state system as a whole. If you're already a foster parent, you know one of our biggest challenges is the lack of consistency within DCF. As such, you'll read caveats in the information we present here because there is no standard practice or typical experience within this complicataed system. That is exactly why we are deeply committed to helping you navigate it. Although kinship and child-specific foster parents have an additional set of needs and concerns we don't cover, they will also find the information contained here very useful.

For ease of use, we've carefully organized the information into chapters with headings and subheadings to help you find what you need quickly, and have provided real quotes from current foster and adoptive families throughout the book. A helpful addition to the Information here Is the online Resource and Support Hub, where you can find all things related to supporting your role as a parent to these children. Just go to: www.FosteringAOK.org/hub

All Our Kids is operated by foster/adoptive parents, for the benefit of other foster/adoptive parents, and we welcome your feedback. Please let us know how this guidebook meets your needs and how we can improve it in future editions. Your wisdom and experience are part of what makes our community strong. Thank you for doing what you do.

With great appreciation,



Dr. Marianna L. Litovich, AOK Founder & Executive Director

Your Personal Resource List

My Family support Worker: _____

My Family Resource Liaison: _____

DCF Medical Social Worker: _____

My KidsNet Office: _____

The Area Office I work with: _____

My local behavioral health crisis team: _____

Other Important Phone Numbers

- **All Our Kids:** 413-530-1422
- **Foster Care Information Line:** 800-KIDS-508
- **Hotline:** 800-792-5200
- **Payment Assistance Line (PAL):** 800-632-8218
- **Adoption/Guardianship Subsidy Unit:** 800-835-0838
- **KidsNet Helpline** (Available 5pm-9am, weekdays; 24 hours weekends and holidays): 800-486-3730
- **MassHealth:** 800-841-2900
- **Adoption Journeys:** 800-972-2734
- **DCF Ombudsman:** 617-748-2444
- **DCF Legal Department Regional Counsel:**
 - Boston: 617-7468-2122
 - Central: 508-929-2175
 - Northern: 978-557-2750
 - Southern: 508-894-3900
 - Western: 413-452-3400



FosteringAOK.org

A community of support for foster and adoptive families in western Massachusetts

Founded in 2017 by a group of foster/adoptive parents, AOK strives to empower our families to thrive by increasing community connectedness, providing education and resources, and helping the public understand and support our experiences. Some of our program offerings are highlighted below.

AOK CONNECT

AOK CONNECT, our private Facebook group, is open only to foster and adoptive families in Western MA. Active daily members receive real-time information and resources from other foster and adoptive families in a supportive online community.
FosteringAOK.org/aok-connect



Community Closet

A beautiful, 1200 sq ft storefront in Agawam, we provide new and like-new clothing, toys, games, books, bags, backpacks, diapers, formula, shoes, small furnishings...and there is no cost to foster and adoptive families!

FosteringAOK.org/community-closet

Angel Tickets

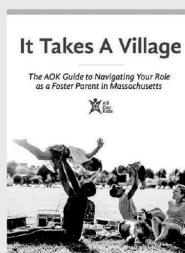
In partnership with the UMass Fine Arts Center and others, the Angel Tickets program provides free entrance for AOK families to local cultural and arts events.

Find more on our website, including our podcast and blog series, individual mentorship and support offerings, menu of opportunities for involvement in foster care, community awareness raising efforts, and more.

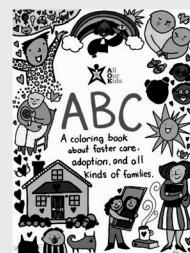
Resource & Support Hub

The Hub brings together over a dozen community partners to provide information, resources, and streamlined access to a network of support services for foster and adoptive families. A hybrid virtual and in-person resource, this exciting new program promises to make a real difference in supporting families.

FosteringAOK.org/hub



It Takes a Village, the only comprehensive guide to navigating the child welfare system in MA, is a must- have resource for all foster families.



AOK's ABC Coloring Book was created in partnership with a local early childhood expert. This unique and vibrant resource helps children see their experiences reflected in the pages they bring to life with color.

Social & Community Events

Fun social events are always free for our families, bring our community together, and give our kids a sense of normalcy and belonging. Community events engage the public to learn more about foster care, and celebrate the strengths of foster and adoptive families.

All Our Kids is a 501c3 nonprofit organization, supported by individual donations. We rely on volunteers and the generosity of the public to maintain our programming and support our families. Donations are tax deductible and always welcome in any amount. Thank you for your trust in us.

An
incredible
new
interactive
resource!

Foster Care Resource and Support Hub

- Documents and information, at your fingertips.
- Streamlined access to local programs/organizations
- Resource Navigator to hold your hand through it all.

Docs & Info:

Working with DCF
Financial
Childcare & Respite
Behavioral Health
Family Support
Medical
Legal
Education
Post-Adoption
Enrichment
Birth Family
51-A & Fair Hearing

Partners

A Home Within
Adoption Journeys
All Our Kids
Community Action
DCF
Friends of Children
Grandparents N' Charge
KidsNet
Legal Expert
MARE
Pathways to Permanency
Rise Above
WillPower Foundation

Stipend calendar, flowcharts, easy access, and more!

www.FosteringAOK.org/hub



The Hub is a partnership among several
local organizations, led by





AOK
Community
Closet

Sat 9a-12p,
Thurs 4-7p
Or by appointment

430 Main St.,
Agawam, MA

New and gently used clothing/shoes for ages premie-
18+, toys, books, bags, décor, gear, and more
at no cost.

The AOK Community Closet is available to currently open foster families, and families who have adopted through foster care in MA.

Foster/Adoptive families can register online or in store.

New or Like New Donations Accepted



www.FosteringAOK.org/Community-Closet

It Takes a Village is the first comprehensive guide to help you navigate the child welfare system in Massachusetts, negotiate your role as a foster parent, make a difference for children in care, and attend to your own needs throughout this fulfilling and challenging journey.

All Our Kids, Inc. has supported hundreds of foster, preadoptive, and kinship families along their foster care and adoption journeys since its inception in 2017. This guide compiles and presents the information and support that families routinely seek from AOK, with empathy and wisdom.

It's a common-sense, no nonsense, guidebook you will refer to again and again as you travel the road of foster parenting. Here you'll find information about:

- The inner workings of DCF, who the players are, and how cases work their way through the foster care system
- An outline of how cases progress through the courts
- How to advocate for yourself within the DCF chain of command
- Facilitating a connection to your children's birth families and siblings
- Caring for your own emotional needs, and those of your permanent children
- Dealing with grief and loss, and other complicated emotions
- What you need to know about census forms, taxes, birth certificates, and social security numbers...

... And so much more!

Drawing from both AOK's work with families, as well as her own 15 years as a foster and adoptive parent, AOK Founder and 2016 Massachusetts Foster Parent of the Year, Dr. Marianna Litovich, has created this guidebook with the goal of informing, supporting, and empowering foster and preadoptive families - those who see the urgent needs of children in foster care and work steadfastly to meet them.



"The most comprehensive map of fostering in Massachusetts I have ever seen."

Melissa Tarjick
Foster/Adoptive Parent since 2000

"A depth of understanding and empathy long overdue."

Susan Crane
Family Resource Worker, Massachusetts Department of Children & Families (Retired)

"It will answer the questions you have and bring many more to light you haven't even considered."

Catherine Twiraga
President, Massachusetts Alliance for Families, Adoptive Parent