



2017 National Adoption Conference Workshop Abstract

Presenter(s): Rita Soronen

Presentation Title: Wendy's Wonderful Kids – Taking an evidence-based program to scale

Topic Area: Promising practices that adoption exchanges, child welfare agencies, and others in the field are using to develop and support foster, adoptive, and kinship families;

Description:

In working to normalize the notion that unadoptable is unacceptable, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has spent more than a decade implementing child-focused recruitment across North America. Rita Soronen, president & CEO of the Foundation will share the journey of creating, growing, evaluating and now taking to scale a practice model that works on behalf of those children and youth most at risk out of care.

Format: Lecture

Presenter(s) Biography:

For more than 30 years, Rita Soronen has worked on behalf of abused, neglected and vulnerable children, providing leadership for local, state and national efforts working to improve the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, while striving to assure safe and permanent homes for North America's children.

Leading the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, a national nonprofit public charity, since 2001, and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption-Canada since 2004, Ms. Soronen works to find adoptive families for each of the more than 130,000 waiting children in the United States and Canada's foster care systems. Under Ms. Soronen's leadership, the Foundation has significantly increased its grant-making and awareness commitments, while developing strategic signature initiatives that act on the urgency of the issue. In 2015, the Foundation dedicated more than \$17 million to grants and award-winning national awareness activities,

including Wendy's Wonderful Kids, Adoption-Friendly Workplace and the 100 Best Adoption-Friendly Workplaces list, National Adoption Day, poster and PSA campaigns, and Finding Forever Families: A Step-by-Step Guide to Adoption.

In October 2011, independent research results were released from a five-year rigorous research study on the Foundation's signature and groundbreaking program, Wendy's Wonderful Kids. The research proved that children referred to the program are up to three times more likely to be adopted. Since 2005, the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program has grown from seven pilot site grants to more than 200 active sites across the U.S., the District of Columbia and six provinces in Canada, dedicated to aggressively and effectively moving children from foster care to permanent families. More than 6,200 children have been adopted as a direct result of Wendy's Wonderful Kids.

Immediately prior to joining the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Ms. Soronen served as the executive director of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Franklin County, a partner in the national network of more than 900 CASA programs. During that time, she also served as the president of the Board of Trustees of the Ohio CASA/GAL Association and led the passage of specialty license plate legislation benefiting CASA programs throughout Ohio, as well as the design and implementation of model program standards assuring consistent application of effective advocacy for children involved in court proceedings at the local and state levels.

Ms. Soronen is a founding board member and past vice president of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute and a current member of the advisory board, serves on the advisory board of Barco's Nightingale Foundation, and chairs the board of Think of Us. Ms. Soronen is a recipient of the Angels in Adoption Award from the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, the National CASA Association Kappa Alpha Theta Program Director of the Year Award, the Ohio CASA/GAL Association Statewide Leadership Award and was a 2013 recipient of WSNY's 20 Outstanding Women You Should Know. She is a fellow of the Jefferson Fellowship for Executive Leadership and in January 2016, was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Community Leadership from Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. She is a requested national speaker on the topics of children, the child welfare system, and social innovation.

A graduate of the University of Louisville with graduate work completed at The Ohio State University, Ms. Soronen resides in Columbus, Ohio, and has four amazingly talented children.