

# The Palm Beach Post

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JUPITER

## Did Florida's adoption system fail Jupiter teen forced to live in a locked garage room?

*on system provides little support to new families, especially ones that need trends and children adapt, counselors say.*



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Palm Beach Post

Published 6:00 a.m. ET June 5, 2022

JUPITER – The state of Florida may hold the hand of adoptive parents before they're paired with a child, but once parental rights are transferred, adoptive families are on their own.

The lack of mental health resources, parenting support and access to behavioral counseling services leaves families to their own devices to handle issues — much like families who live with their biological children.

And that system is destined to fail, according to adoption attorneys and counselors who try to help parents understand how adoption will turn their world on its head.

This dearth of support is playing out in Jupiter, where an adopted 14-year-old and the teen's siblings are now in the custody of the state as their parents face aggravated child abuse and false imprisonment charges. Both have pleaded not guilty.

Timothy and Tracy Ferriter were arrested Feb. 8 after police found evidence they locked their adopted child in an 8-by-8-foot garage room for up to 18 hours at a time. The family had adopted the teen, who told police they were physically assaulted by their parents, just before the child turned 2 years old.

The Palm Beach Post is not identifying the teen by name or gender.

As the Ferriter parents appear in court and more details come to light about what led to their arrests, social workers, adoption attorneys and child advocates in Jupiter and far from Palm

Beach County are beginning to learn about how the family became so fractured.

The interviews with children done by police open a small window into what life was like inside the Ferriter family's home: It included a culture of surveillance and mistrust, and often resulted in different treatment by the couple toward each of their four children.

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▶ Jupiter parents say adopted teen locked in garage room had attachment disorder. What that means

▶ ‘They were in such a rush’: After arrests, Florida couple demolished garage room where teen lived

## **Adoption records of Ferriter teen sealed**

Because adoption records are sealed, Charlotte Danciu, a Boca Raton-based adoption attorney, said understanding the Ferriter teen and the family's history is difficult.

After an incident in Arizona where the teen ran away, Tracy Ferriter told law enforcement that the teen was adopted at just 17 months old.

At the couple's first court hearing after their arrests, attorney Nellie King alluded to a "history of sociopathy" with the teen. She has not said publicly whether the child was seeing a mental health care provider, although Tracy told Pima County Sheriff's deputies in Arizona that they were receiving counseling.

After 35 years working in adoption law, Danciu said adoptive families often desperately need support they can't get automatically through the adoption system.

"The availability of mental-health services for children is similar to adults. It's very poor," Danciu said. "When you adopt a child, if you don't financially qualify for services, you don't get any. There aren't any free ones."

But it's unlikely the Ferriter family qualified for free services.

They lived in a house in Jupiter's Egret Landing neighborhood they bought for \$710,000, and Timothy Ferriter was working as a podcast host and producer for a show he started in June 2021 about business and health care.

The most recent episode of The Antegrade Flow Show came out the day after he was arrested Feb. 8.

Even if extreme behavioral issues arose with the Ferriter teen, Danciu explained that there is no legal way to end the adoption.

Once adoptive families have been granted parental rights, adoptions are set in stone.

“When a child is adopted, all legal relations are severed, so the child is going to be treated as if (they were) born to them,” Danciu said of adoptive families. “You can’t ‘bring them back,’ because there’s no one to bring them back to. You’d be charged with child abandonment.”

## **What goes into adoption in Florida? Inside the home study process**

In Florida, the adoption process requires 10 steps that include orientation, classes on adoption and parenting, and a home study — all designed to ensure a successful adoption for the family and the child.

Regardless of whether the Ferriters had adopted their child through the state or privately, they would have had to undergo a home study that includes wide-ranging background checks on all adults living in a home and contacting personal references from employers, school officials and from friends and family.

The home study also includes a visit to the family's home, where “the worker will likely ask you about your reasons for wanting to adopt, your financial situation, and your parenting style and philosophy. If you are married, you may be asked about the strength of your marriage,” the Florida Department of Children and Families’ website says.

The point of a home study is to determine how a family functions and how the adopted child will fit into that family.

In addition, adoptive families working through the state are required to take an education course titled the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting, or MAPP.

The program touches on common issues that arise for adoptive families and includes education on interracial adoptions.

The state requires that both members of married couples looking to adopt through the state take the \$500 course, but the combination of face-to-face classes, reading assignments and homework can be completed in as little as two days in expedited programs.

And the training itself is criticized by those who work in the adoption industry.

Kevin Slack, an adoption consultant and counselor, said he offers a training program geared toward adoption, because the MAPP educational program is best designed for foster parents, who temporarily host children they don't intend to make part of their families long term.

He said one of the main differences is that adoptive families must be ready to problem-solve on their own.

“It's not like foster care, where you've got a social worker who is going to tell you how to handle things and how to behave,” Slack said of adoption. “You really have to work within the family.”

## **Delays in adoption timelines cause lost learning**

In the adoption process, time moves slowly.

And Slack has concerns about the amount of time between training a family to prepare them for adoption and an actual match to a child.

“From the moment they get the home study to until they're matched, it can be a year and a half,” Slack said. “All this training can be forgotten by then and people fall back to their behaviors.”

To add to that, Danciu said the program doesn't go nearly as far as it should in training parents to handle cultural differences with their adopted children, whether those differences be racial, religious or related to past trauma.

“There's no statutory requirement for cultural education, and I don't think there is enough training,” Danciu said.

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