

Guide for LGBTQIA+ Families in Pittsburgh, PA: Adoption Considerations and Opportunities

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About the Queer Family Planning Project

The Queer Family Planning Project (QFFP) is a community-driven nonprofit in Pittsburgh dedicated to supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals and families on their journey to parenthood. We provide mini grants, affirming resources, peer support, and advocacy to help queer and trans folks build and protect their families with confidence and care. QFFP works to break down barriers and ensure that every family—regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or family structure—can thrive.

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Introduction

Pittsburgh and Allegheny County offer LGBTQIA+ families an increasingly equitable and supportive environment for adoption. However, navigating the adoption process can be complex and confusing at times. This guide provides up-to-date (June 2025), comprehensive guidance on adoption pathways focused on LGBTQIA+ parents' unique considerations. We cover the legal bedrock of adoption and parental rights in Pennsylvania and the U.S., explain second-parent and step-parent adoptions (with tips for proceeding with or without a lawyer), and point to free resources like legal templates and community support. Please use this guide as a roadmap to build and protect your family in Pennsylvania!

(Note: This guide is for general information and resource-sharing; please consult an attorney for specific legal advice. There is a list of LGBTQIA+ friendly lawyers in the Legal Resources and Support section of this document.)

Legal Landscape: LGBTQIA+ Adoption Rights in Pennsylvania and the U.S.

Adoption Law in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania law permits any individual to adopt a child – there is no ban on LGBTQIA+ individuals or couples adopting. In fact, since a landmark 2002 court decision, Pennsylvania has officially allowed same-sex partners to adopt children together or as “second parents” to a child. Whether single or partnered, LGBTQIA+ people have the same legal ability to petition to adopt as anyone else. On the other hand, there is also no state law explicitly prohibiting discrimination by adoption agencies based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This means that while many agencies are LGBTQIA+

friendly, some faith-based agencies might still refuse to work with queer parents (as seen in the 2021 *Fulton v. Philadelphia* Supreme Court case involving a Catholic agency). The positive news is that Pittsburgh-area families have several inclusive agencies available - more on that below.

Evolving Political Climate

Recent years have seen both advancements and challenges for LGBTQIA+ family rights. On one hand, the U.S. government has moved to strengthen protections in child welfare: in 2024, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services enacted rules requiring foster care agencies to provide safe, affirming placements for LGBTQIA+ youth (banning practices like conversion therapy in foster homes). This created a more supportive environment for LGBTQIA+ kids and by extension the LGBTQIA+ adults who foster/adopt them. On the other hand, a number of states (11 as of 2023) have passed “license to discriminate” laws allowing state-funded child placement agencies to turn away LGBTQIA+ prospective parents on religious grounds. Pennsylvania does not have a law like that, and under the current state administration is unlikely to do so – but it’s important to be aware of the national landscape. Federal legislation like the proposed Every Child Deserves a Family Act and the Equality Act have been advocated to bar anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination in adoption and foster care nationwide, but they have not become law yet. In late 2022, Congress did pass the Respect for Marriage Act (RMA), which requires states to recognize valid same-sex marriages from other states. The RMA ensures your PA marriage remains recognized even if you travel in the US or if *Obergefell* were ever overturned. However, it is possible that if *Obergefell* fell, anti- LGBTQIA+ states might try to limit parental rights (for example, refusing to issue updated birth certificates for same-sex parents) despite recognizing the marriage. This again highlights why securing an adoption decree or court order of parentage is so important for LGBTQIA+ families. Overall, the recent trends have been a mix: increasing support within child welfare systems for LGBTQIA+ youth and families, but also cultural and legal battles in some regions. Staying informed through organizations like Family Equality, Lambda Legal, or the ACLU can help you anticipate and respond to any changes that might affect your family.

Why a Court Order Is Essential for Non-Biological Parents

Even if both spouses are listed on a child’s birth certificate, a birth certificate alone does not conclusively establish legal parentage. In Pennsylvania, genetics remain a powerful factor in parentage claims – for example, a sperm donor could be deemed the legal father if a DNA test shows a genetic

link, even if he isn't on the birth certificate. Courts can amend or void a birth certificate listing a non-genetic parent if someone later challenges parentage with proof of biology. In short, **being married to the birth mother or simply being named as a parent on a birth record does not guarantee permanent legal parent status.**

Advocates and legal experts strongly recommend securing a court order – either through a **confirmatory (second-parent) adoption** or a **judicial parentage** decree – to solidify the non-biological parent's rights. Only a court judgment (such as an adoption decree or parentage order) provides ironclad protection: it cannot be undone by a later genetic challenge and must be respected in all 50 states under the U.S. Constitution's Full Faith and Credit Clause. This means a court-ordered adoption or parentage judgment will be recognized across state lines, even in jurisdictions that may be anti-LGBTQIA+ families. Unfortunately, marriage equality (Obergefell), while ensuring equal marriage rights, did not settle all parentage issues – parentage laws vary by state, and some states do not clearly protect a non-biological LGBTQIA+ parent absent a court order.

Securing a court judgment of parentage protects your family in many important ways. It confirms the non-bio parent's full parental authority, including the right to make medical and educational decisions and to be involved in the child's care without question. It ensures the child can inherit from the non-bio parent and access benefits through them (insurance, social security, etc.) as a legal child. It also prevents possibly traumatic litigation over custody or visitation in the event of separation – with an adoption or parentage order in place, any custody dispute will focus on the child's best interests, not on whether the non-bio parent has rights at all. Perhaps most importantly, a court order prevents third parties from attacking the family's legal integrity. For example, a known sperm donor or estranged biological parent cannot later claim parental rights once an adoption has terminated their rights. And if the couple moves or travels out of state, their parent-child relationship remains secure even in jurisdictions that might not ordinarily recognize it.

Even the Pennsylvania Supreme Court has emphasized obtaining a court decree. In a 2025 case, the Court upheld a non-biological mother's parentage and **“specifically recommend[ed] that non-biological parents seek confirmatory adoptions to ensure their parental rights are recognized in other jurisdictions.”** In other words, the highest court in PA agrees that a proactive court order is the safest way to protect LGBTQIA+ families.

TLDR: Non-bio LGBTQIA+ parents should always go through the adoption process to ensure that their families are protected and recognized under the U.S. Constitution.

Legal Guide for LGBTQIA+ Parents in Allegheny County: Confirmatory Adoption & Parentage Orders

LGBTQIA+ couples in Pennsylvania generally have two legal pathways to cement the non-biological parent's rights: (1) a confirmatory (second-parent) adoption through the Orphans' Court, or (2) a court order establishing parentage (sometimes called a parentage judgment) through the Family Division. Both routes result in a legally binding decree affirming the non-bio parent as a full legal parent. However, there are differences in process and when each is used:

- **Confirmatory (Step Parent or Second-Parent/ Co-Parent) Adoption:** This is the most common and recommended method when the family is in agreement and the birth parent consents. In Pennsylvania, once married, an LGBTQIA+ couple can use the streamlined stepparent adoption process to confirm the non-birthing spouse's parentage. The adoption process terminates any residual parental rights of others (such as a sperm donor or absent biological parent) and results in a Final Decree of Adoption, after which a new birth certificate can be issued listing both spouses as the child's parents. Family law attorneys overwhelmingly advise doing a second-parent adoption in any case involving a non-biological parent – even for heterosexual couples using egg/sperm donors – because it is the surest way to secure the future of your child and your family. If your family is intact and everyone agrees, a confirmatory adoption is typically the fastest, most direct path to a court-backed parent-child relationship.
- **Court Parentage Order (Declaration of Parentage):** A parentage order is an alternative route in which the non-bio parent asks a Family Court judge to declare them a legal parent, without going through an adoption proceeding. In some states, updated parentage statutes allow streamlined court judgments of parentage for

non-biological parents. Pennsylvania has no comprehensive statutory scheme for parentage judgments in LGBTQIA+ cases (no gender-neutral parentage statute or Voluntary Acknowledgment of Parentage form for same-sex couples, as some states have). However, Pennsylvania courts have recognized parentage through common-law doctrines in certain situations. Notably, in 2025 the PA Supreme Court adopted the doctrine of “intent-based parentage”, holding that when a couple intended to parent together and took steps like signing fertility contracts, the non-genetic spouse can be deemed a legal parent even without adoption. This legal framework came from a case where the couple’s relationship fell apart before the adoption was completed – the non-bio mom obtained a court order confirming her parentage when her spouse tried to exclude her after birth.

In practical terms, you might pursue a parentage order if an adoption is not feasible. For example, if the birth parent refuses to consent to an adoption or if the couple is in the process of divorce, the non-bio parent may need to petition the Family Division for a court determination of parentage (as in the Glover v. Junior case) to assert their rights. A parentage order could also be considered by couples who find the adoption process overly invasive or upsetting – many understandably feel they shouldn't have to “adopt” their own child. Be aware, however, that the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's new intent-based parentage doctrine is very fact-specific: it requires evidence of the couple's pre-conception plan and agreement to parent together. It is untested how smoothly an uncontested parentage petition would proceed for a married, co-parenting couple in Allegheny County, since most families still opt for adoption in cooperative situations. There is no standardized form or established “parentage petition” process in PA like there is for adoption, so proceeding this way will typically require an experienced attorney to draft a declaratory judgment action and navigate the Family Court.

In summary: If both spouses are on board, confirmatory adoption is generally the preferred and most straightforward route to protect your family. It's a well-trodden path in Allegheny County, and judges are very supportive of these adoptions (often finalizing them in a short, celebratory hearing!). Pursue a parentage order in scenarios where adoption isn't available (e.g. lack of consent, or philosophical objections), or if you want a court judgment without going through adoption formalities. Either way, the end result – a court

decree affirming the non-bio parent's status – will give your family the legal security it needs.

Tip: Some couples choose to do multiple - for example, signing a Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity/Parentage (VAP) if available, and later doing a second-parent adoption. (Currently, Pennsylvania's VAP process is gendered toward different-sex unmarried parents; same-sex couples typically cannot both sign a PA acknowledgment of paternity form.) If you did sign a VAP at the hospital, know that it is a legal determination of parentage – but most LGBTQIA+ legal advocates still advise following up with an adoption or court judgment for added protection.

Confirmatory Adoption: Step-Parent and Second-Parent (Co-Parent) Adoptions

The terminology can be confusing, so let's clarify:

Step-Parent Adoption

In Pennsylvania, this refers to the spouse of a legal parent adopting that parent's child. It is only available to couples who are legally married. After same-sex marriage became legal in PA in 2014, step-parent adoptions became equally available to same-sex spouses. For example, if one wife gives birth to a child (via donor insemination), her spouse (the non-birth mother) can adopt the child through a step-parent adoption. It can feel burdensome and even insulting to adopt your own child, but it is a critical step to ensure legal parental recognition. A key feature of step-parent adoptions is that the child retains one of their original parents and is gaining a second parent; there is no termination of the existing parent's rights. Any other parental rights (e.g., a sperm donor or ex who is a legal parent) must be addressed – typically the donor has no legal rights if done via a sperm bank, but if a prior partner is on the birth certificate or a known father's rights exist, that person would need to consent or have their rights terminated for the adoption to proceed. We'll touch on that below.

Second-Parent Adoption (Co-Parent Adoption)

This is essentially the same concept as step-parent adoption, but for unmarried couples. A second-parent adoption allows a non-married partner of a child's legal parent to adopt the child without the legal parent losing any rights. Pennsylvania is one of the states that permit this, thanks to the PA

Supreme Court's decision in *In re Adoption of R.B.F.* (2002) which opened the door for same-sex partners to adopt their partner's children even when they were not married. Even today, if you are not married to your partner (by choice or because you're not eligible – e.g., some poly families or other situations), you can petition the court for a second-parent adoption. In practice, many people use “second-parent adoption” as a blanket term for both married and unmarried partner adoptions, but technically if you're married it's a step-parent case in PA. You might also hear “confirmatory adoption,” a newer term some use especially in the context of married LGBTQIA+ couples who conceive via assisted reproduction – it emphasizes that the adoption is simply confirming an already existing parent-child relationship.

The Process in Pennsylvania

The mechanics of a second-parent or step-parent adoption are somewhat simpler than a regular adoption, because the child is already in your home and usually one parent is staying the parent. Here are key points:

- **Consent/Termination:** If the child has only one legal parent (e.g. in donor conception where the donor isn't a legal parent, or an unmarried mother where no father established paternity), the court can proceed without terminating anyone's rights. You as the adopting parent will need the consent of your partner (the existing parent), which is usually a given since you're doing this together. If the child has two legal parents already (for example, your partner had a child with a previous partner who still has parental rights), then that second parent's rights must be addressed. Either that parent must consent to the adoption and voluntarily relinquish their rights, or you would have to pursue an involuntary termination of their rights on grounds like abandonment. Involuntary termination is a serious legal process requiring clear and convincing evidence, and it's beyond the scope of this guide to detail – suffice to say, if you're in a situation where a prior parent is involved, an attorney's help is crucial. Many second-parent adoptions are uncontested because often the child only has one recognized parent to begin with.
- **Home Study and Clearances:** In Pennsylvania, stepparent adoptions typically do not require a full home study or the 6-month pre-placement wait that a regular adoption does. Courts recognize that as a spouse you've already been acting as a parent. You will, however, need to obtain the standard background checks (state police criminal record, child abuse registry check, FBI fingerprint check) and possibly provide

things like physician's statements of health. These requirements can vary by county. By contrast, second-parent adoptions (unmarried) might require a home study by law, because the statute didn't explicitly waive it for unmarried partners. In practice, some Pennsylvania judges have discretion to waive investigative requirements if they find it in the child's best interest (this was part of what the R.B.F. case allowed). So, depending on your county, you may or may not be asked to undergo a home assessment for an unmarried-partner adoption. The trend has been toward treating committed unmarried partners similarly to married ones, but be prepared for potentially a bit more paperwork if you're not married. Either way, the process now is much less cumbersome than in years past – previously, even same-sex spouses had to do onerous home studies; since marriage equality, Pennsylvania has streamlined this in many cases. Check with the Orphans' Court or an attorney on local practice in Allegheny County. Generally, expect to file: a formal Petition for Adoption (stating your relationship to the child and partner, etc.), your clearances, the child's birth certificate, a consent form from your partner (and from any child over age 12, since PA requires children 12+ to consent to being adopted), and possibly an Affidavit of Counseling (some counties require the adopting parent to be briefed on the permanent nature of adoption).

- **Court Hearing:** Once your paperwork is in order, the court will schedule a hearing. In Allegheny County, these adoptions are handled by the Orphans' Court Division of the Court of Common Pleas. The hearing itself is usually short and sweet – often the judge will invite you to say a few words about why you're doing the adoption and may even allow photos. It's not an adversarial setting; it's a celebration of legalizing the family bond. After the judge signs the decree, you'll request a new birth certificate for the child with both parents' names (and you can change the child's last name at this time if desired). Note: Pennsylvania adoption records are sealed, so the court file is confidential – a consideration for those who may not be “out” widely. But since this is a family court matter, privacy is maintained.

Many LGBTQIA+ parents complete second-parent adoptions without issue in Allegheny County. If cost is a barrier, know that these adoptions (because they are uncontested) can often be done fairly affordably. Some attorneys even offer reduced fees for LGBTQIA+ family adoptions, and a few national organizations (like Family Equality or Lambda Legal) maintain lists of lawyers who might do pro bono or sliding-scale work. There are also cases of do-it-yourself success here (more on that next), but given the paperwork and

coordination required, using an attorney for a step-parent or second-parent adoption is usually worth it. It's a one-time process that secures a lifetime of security.

Starting the Confirmatory Adoption or Court Parentage Order Process Without a Lawyer

Adoption is a legal process, and hiring a knowledgeable attorney – especially one experienced in LGBTQIA+ family law – can make it much smoother. That said, not everyone can afford a lawyer, and some straightforward adoptions (like an uncontested step-parent adoption) might be manageable on your own. Below are some guidelines and resources for beginning the process without an attorney:

Educate Yourself on Requirements

First, get familiar with Pennsylvania's adoption laws and required procedures. Remember, any adult (single or married) may adopt in PA, and second-parent adoptions by LGBTQIA+ partners are explicitly legal by case law. If the birth parent(s) will consent, the process is simpler; if not, an involuntary termination proceeding is needed (where legal help is strongly recommended). Adoptions are handled by the Orphans' Court in the county where the child lives or where the adopting parent lives. In Allegheny County, new adoption petitions are filed with the Department of Court Records, Orphans' Court Division.

Step-by-Step Confirmatory Adoption Process in Allegheny County

1. **Confirm Eligibility:** Confirmatory adoption in Pennsylvania is available when you are legally married to the child's parent. The adopting step-parent must generally be an adult (18+) and usually a resident of or have a connection to Allegheny County for local filing. If the child is 12 or older, the child's written consent to the adoption is required. Ensure the family situation allows the adoption – typically, the child can have no more than two legal parents.

2. **Obtain Required Clearances:** Pennsylvania law requires prospective adoptive parents (including step-parents) and all adult household members to undergo background checks. You must obtain a Child Abuse History Clearance, a Pennsylvania State Police criminal record check, and an FBI fingerprint clearance. Begin these early, as results can take a few weeks. Save the clearance certificates; they must be filed with your adoption petition.

Allegheny County (like most PA counties) mandates these clearances for stepparent and second-parent adoptions. You should have official clearance certificates to attach to your petition or provide to the court. Visit the PA DHS website for instructions on obtaining these clearances (they can often be requested online). Additionally, gather the child's birth certificate (a certified copy) and, if you are a stepparent by marriage, a copy of your marriage certificate – these may be required as exhibits in your filing.

If the child is 12 years of age or older: Pennsylvania law requires that the child consent to the adoption in writing. Prepare a simple consent form for the child to sign (the consent must indicate the child understands and agrees to the adoption). This signed consent will be filed with your petition. If the child is under 12, no written consent is required, but the judge may still talk to the child to ensure they are comfortable with the adoption.

3. **Obtain Spousal/Partner Consent:** If you are married to the child's parent (stepparent scenario), your spouse must consent to the adoption (unless they are formally joining as a co-petitioner). In practice, the legal parent (your spouse or partner who is the child's current parent) will usually either join in the adoption petition or provide a signed consent affidavit confirming they agree to their spouse/partner adopting the child. This step is legally required because the spouse/partner will remain a legal parent after the adoption. Prepare a short consent statement for them to sign (if they aren't going to be a co-petitioner). This document should identify them as the child's mother or father and clearly state that they consent to the adoption by you (the stepparent or partner). You will include this with your filing.
4. **Address the Other Parent's Parental Rights:** The other biological/legal parent (not your spouse/partner) must be dealt with before an adoption can occur. Determine whether that parent will

consent to the adoption or if you must pursue termination of their parental rights:

- a. **If the other parent is willing to consent:** Obtain a written consent to adoption from that parent. Under PA law, a parent's consent cannot be signed until at least 72 hours after the child's birth (if the child is an infant), but for an older child this is not an issue. The consent must be voluntary, unconditional, and in writing – it should explicitly state the parent's intent to relinquish all parental rights and allow the adoption. It's good practice to have the consent notarized and witnessed by two adults. Once signed, the birth parent has 30 days to take back their consent under Pennsylvania law. After the 30-day period, their consent becomes irrevocable. (They cannot waive the 30-day revocation period, so you must wait out the 30 days).

Next step with a consent: After obtaining the signed consent and after 30 days have passed with no revocation, you will file a Petition to Confirm Consent and Terminate Parental Rights as part of your court case. This petition asks the court to formally terminate that parent's rights based on their consent. (This usually leads to a brief hearing, described in Step 9, but the consenting parent does not need to appear in person as long as they signed the consent)

- b. **If the other parent does NOT consent or cannot be located:** You will need to file a Petition for Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights. In this petition, you request that the court terminate the other parent's rights without their consent, due to legal grounds such as abandonment or unfitness. Common grounds in Pennsylvania include the parent's failure to perform parental duties (e.g. no meaningful contact or support for at least 6 months) or evidence of abuse/neglect, etc. You must detail the specific statutory grounds under 23 Pa.C.S. §2511 for termination.

5. **Due Diligence if parent is absent:** If you do not know the other parent's whereabouts, you must make a diligent search for them before the court will terminate their rights. This means taking steps like checking last known addresses, contacting relatives or friends, searching online or public records, and even checking the Pennsylvania Putative Father Registry if paternity is at issue. Document all efforts you make. If the parent still cannot be found, the court will

likely require you to publish a legal notice in designated newspaper(s) to serve notice of the termination proceeding. (You would typically file a motion for alternative service by publication, including an affidavit describing your search efforts, and obtain a court order to publish notice.)

6. Prepare the Adoption Petition (and Related Documents):

Next, prepare your formal **Petition for Adoption** to file with the Orphans' Court. Because there is no pre-made Allegheny County form, you must draft this petition yourself (or adapt a template). The petition should include all information required by Pennsylvania adoption statutes and local rules. Key details to include are:

- a. **Identifying information:** The name, address, age, and marital status of the petitioner (and spouse if joining), and the name, date of birth, and residence of the child.
- b. **Relationship to child:** State that you are the child's stepparent (married to [Name of legal parent]) or the domestic partner of [Name of legal parent]. Mention how long the child has been in your care or living with you (if applicable).
- c. **Parental status:** Identify the child's current legal parents. Acknowledge that one parent (your spouse/partner) will retain their rights, and explain the situation of the other parent. For example, "the child's father, [Name], is the biological father; he has consented to this adoption" or "...has abandoned the child and a petition to terminate his parental rights is filed concurrently." If one parent is deceased, note that with the date of death (attach a death certificate). If the child had only one legal parent to begin with (e.g. the other parent was never established), clearly state that no other parental rights exist – however, still describe efforts to identify any potential father if applicable (for instance, "father unknown; no father is listed on the birth certificate, and no paternity acknowledgment or claim has ever been filed"). York County has excellent examples of the forms that need to be filled out.
- d. **Consent and clearances:** Indicate that your spouse/partner consents to the adoption (or joins in the petition). State that the child over 12 consents (if applicable) and attach that consent. Also mention that you have obtained the required clearances

(PA child abuse, state police, FBI) – some petitions list the dates/results of these checks, or you can simply note that clearances are attached as exhibits.

- e. **Best interest statement:** Include a statement that the adoption is in the best interest of the child. Briefly explain how the adoption will benefit the child (e.g. providing stability, two legal parents, etc.).
- f. **Name change (if desired):** If you intend to change the child's name as part of the adoption, state the new name you request. For example, "Petitioner requests the child's name be changed to ____, upon entry of the Final Decree."
- g. **Relief requested:** Conclude by asking the court to grant the adoption and declare you as the child's legal parent, with all rights and responsibilities, and to issue a new birth certificate reflecting the child's new name (if changed) and parents.
- h. **Verification:** Pennsylvania requires that petitions include a verification – a signed statement by the petitioner that the facts in the petition are true to the best of your knowledge, subject to penalty for unsworn falsification. Be sure to sign and date the verification at the end of your petition.

Tip: Because **Allegheny County doesn't supply sample petitions**, it can help to review samples from other PA counties (just be sure to adjust for Allegheny specifics). For example, York County's official adoption packet provides templates for the adoption petition and other forms (though some procedural details in that packet are specific to York.) Some of the required forms can be found at [The Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania website](#). If possible, have another person or an attorney review your draft for completeness.

- 7. Prepare the Termination Petition or Consent Packet: In addition to the adoption petition, prepare the appropriate petition regarding termination of the other parent's rights (from Step 5):
 - a. If you have a **Consent** from the other parent: draft a **Petition to Confirm Consent and Terminate Parental Rights**. This petition will reference the written consent that the parent signed and state

that more than 30 days have passed without revocation. It will ask the court to terminate that parent's rights forever, so the adoption can proceed. Attach the original Consent form as an exhibit. (Some counties require a separate filing number for this petition; in Allegheny, you will generally file it under the same adoption case – the Adoption Department will guide the scheduling of the consent confirmation hearing.)

- b. If you are filing for **Involuntary Termination**: draft a **Petition for Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights** (often titled "Petition for Termination of Parental Rights of [Name]"). In it, provide the facts supporting whatever ground(s) you are alleging under 23 Pa.C.S. §2511 (e.g. "Respondent has failed to perform parental duties for over 6 months by having no contact and providing no support..."). Also include information about the efforts made to locate the parent or the notice given. You will ask the court to terminate [Name's] parental rights to [Child], so that the child may be adopted by you.

Note: If the other parent is simply *absent and not responding* but has not formally consented, this is the petition you file. The court will set a hearing to decide if the statutory grounds are met.

8. **Scheduling:** Along with the termination petition, you will need to prepare a proposed **Order for Hearing** (to schedule a hearing date) and eventually a **proposed Final Decree** terminating the parent's rights for the judge to sign. Some counties have blank decree forms; if not, you can draft a simple decree (captioned with the court name and case, stating the parent's rights are terminated and the child is freed for adoption by the petitioner, etc.). Pennsylvania's Unified Judicial System website does provide generic final decree forms (e.g. a "Final Decree" form pacourts.us) which you might adapt for termination and for the adoption finalization.
9. **File the Petitions and Forms with the Court:** Once all documents are prepared, you are ready to file your case. In Allegheny County, adoption filings are made **in person** at the Department of Court Records, Orphans' Court Division (this is effectively the Clerk of Orphans' Court). The filing office is located on the 1st Floor of the City-County Building, **414 Grant Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15219**.

- a. **What to file:** You will be filing a packet of documents. Typically, this includes the Adoption Petition (with all required attachments such as the child's consent if 12+, spouse/partner consent, copies of clearances, etc.) and either the Consent Termination Petition or the Involuntary Termination Petition (with the other parent's consent form attached, or with an affidavit of diligent search if applicable). Also include your proposed Order for hearing(s). Each document should have the case caption (e.g. "In Re: Adoption of [Child's initials], a minor, Orphans' Court of Allegheny County, O.A. No. ____"). If the child has a different last name now than what you intend, use the current legal name in the caption and mention the desired name change in the petition.
- b. **Filing fee:** Pay the required filing fees when you submit the documents. As of 2025, Allegheny County's fee schedule lists **\$280.25** for an adoption petition filing (plus a small additional fee for recording or automation; for example, there is a \$15.00 filing/recording fee on top of the base amount). Fees are subject to change, so confirm the current amount with the Clerk or check the latest Orphans' Court fee schedule on the Allegheny County website. If you are filing a separate termination petition, ask if an additional fee applies or if it's covered in the adoption case fee – typically, one adoption case fee covers both the termination and adoption petitions, since they're handled together. Be prepared to pay by cash, money order, or certified check (call ahead to see which payment forms are accepted; some offices may accept credit/debit cards).

10. Opening the case: The Clerk will assign an **Orphans' Court case number** (for example, "O.A. #____ of 2025" for the adoption). Make sure to keep this for reference. In Allegheny County, the adoption case and termination matter are usually kept confidential (adoption files are sealed), so only you, parties, and your counsel (if any) will have access. Once filed, the case will be forwarded to the Orphans' Court Adoption Department for scheduling.

11. After filing: Verify with the clerk if there are any local cover sheets or additional forms needed. (Allegheny may use a Family Court/Orphans' Court cover sheet or the statewide Orphans' Court Form A-01 to notify

the Department of Human Services of the case – the clerk will fill this out if needed. For instance, Form A-01 is a notice for the dependency docket, used mostly if the child had a prior dependency case. In most private adoptions, this is not applicable unless the child was involved with CYF.

12. **Serve Notice to the Other Parent and Interested Parties:** Once your petitions are filed and a hearing date is scheduled by the court, you must provide legal notice to the necessary parties:

a. **Notifying the other parent** (whose rights are to be terminated):

The court will issue a Citation or Order scheduling the termination hearing (whether it's to confirm consent or involuntary termination). You are required to serve the other parent with that order (and usually a copy of the petition) so they are informed of the proceeding. Service in Pennsylvania can typically be done by personal service (e.g. sheriff or process server hand-delivers the documents) or by certified mail with restricted delivery (adult signature). Check Allegheny Orphans' Court local rules or ask the clerk which method is required for termination cases – many courts require personal service if the person is in Pennsylvania. The notice will inform the parent of the time and place of the hearing and warn that the court may terminate their rights at that hearing if they fail to appear. *(If the parent has already consented and their consent is being confirmed, they still must receive notice of the consent confirmation hearing, but in practice many such parents choose not to attend, which is acceptable as long as they were served).*

b. **Publication** (if applicable): If you had to get permission to publish notice because the parent's whereabouts were unknown (from Step 5), ensure you publish the notice in the newspaper(s) as ordered, and do so in the timeframe required (the court order will specify how many times and how far in advance to publish). You will need to obtain proof of publication (affidavits from the newspapers) to present to the court to show that notice by publication was completed.

c. **Notifying the child (if 12 or older):** Children over 12 must be notified as well (often the court will have the child sign a consent which suffices, but formally they should receive notice of the

hearings – in practice, since the child is usually in the household, this may be accomplished by handing the documents to the child or by the child's guardian acknowledging notice).

- d. **Guardian ad Litem or counsel:** In some adoption cases, especially contested terminations, the court may appoint a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) or attorney to represent the child's interests. If that happens, you must also serve that GAL with all filings. (For most uncontested stepparent adoptions, a GAL is not typical, but it can occur if the judge finds it necessary.)
- e. **Proof of service:** After serving the other parent (and any other required parties), file an affidavit of service with the Orphans' Court before the hearing, showing when and how the parent was served (or attach the return receipt green card if by certified mail). This is critical – the judge will not proceed with termination unless proper notice was given, or legally sufficient attempts (and publication) were made.

13. **Attend the Parental Rights Termination Hearing:** This is usually the first court hearing, held before an Orphans' Court judge. The purpose is to end the rights of the other parent, clearing the way for the adoption. Here's what to expect:

- a. **If it's a Consent Confirmation:** Neither you nor the consenting parent need to present evidence of unfitness, since the parent has agreed. The judge will review the signed consent to ensure it meets legal requirements and that the 30-day revocation period has passed. The judge may ask if the consenting parent is present (generally they do not have to be, as long as they were notified). If all is in order, the judge will sign a decree terminating that parent's rights voluntarily. This effectively relinquishes the parent's rights and frees the child for adoption by you. *(Note: If the consenting parent does appear and wishes to confirm their consent on the record, the court will take their testimony briefly to ensure it's voluntary. But again, this isn't required if the written consent is valid.)* The consented parent's future child support obligations end once the decree is signed, but any past due support remains enforceable even after termination.

- b. **If it's an Involuntary Termination:** The judge will hold a more formal proceeding. You (or your attorney, if you have one) will need to present evidence and testimony to prove the grounds for termination. This may involve you testifying about the other parent's lack of involvement, and possibly other witnesses or documents to support your case (e.g., proof of no contact, failure to pay support, criminal history of abuse, etc., depending on the grounds). If the other parent appears, they have the right to contest and present their own evidence or reasons why their rights should not be terminated. The judge will consider whether termination meets the legal standards (including that it's in the child's best interest). If the judge is satisfied, they will issue an order terminating the parent's rights involuntarily. If the judge denies the petition (i.e. does not find sufficient grounds), then the adoption cannot proceed unless the situation changes or the parent later consents. In most uncontested abandonment scenarios – e.g. a parent who hasn't been heard from in years – the court will grant termination if the procedural requirements (notice, diligent search) are all met.

Important: The law in PA also requires that the court address Alternatives to Termination (often referring to the availability of an adoption plan) and that a terminated parent is informed of the Putative Father Registry (if applicable) at the hearing. If you've filed everything correctly, the court will handle these formalities. Once the decree terminating parental rights is signed, that parent is no longer the legal parent of the child and cannot contest the adoption further. The child is now free to be adopted by you.

14. **Attend the Adoption Finalization Hearing:** The final step is the adoption hearing, where the court formally approves the adoption and issues the final decree. In Allegheny County, the timing of this hearing may vary. Often, in stepparent cases, the court will schedule the adoption hearing on the same day as the termination (immediately after the termination matter is concluded) or on a soon-following date. In other cases, you might get a separate date a few weeks later. The Adoption Department will notify you of when to appear for the finalization.

15. At the adoption hearing, the judge will typically:

- a. **Verify the remaining requirements:** They may ask you (the adoptive parent) some basic questions – confirming your name, your relationship to the child, and that you understand this adoption gives you all parental rights and responsibilities. If the child is present (sometimes children come to the final hearing, especially younger kids for a celebratory moment), and particularly if the child is older, the judge might speak to the child to ensure they are on board and perhaps to explain that they will now have two legal parents. If the child is 12 or older, the judge will confirm the child has signed a consent. The judge may also ask the legal parent (your spouse/partner) to affirm that they consent and that they understand their partner will now be an equal parent.
- b. **Review any report or investigation (if applicable):** In most stepparent or second-parent adoptions, no home study or investigator's report is required (the court treats it as a relative adoption). Allegheny County does not routinely require a home investigation for stepparents. However, if any brief inquiry was ordered (sometimes an abbreviated background check by a social worker), the judge will have that report and will review it. Generally, if you've already provided your clearance certificates and the situation is straightforward, there is no additional investigation.
- c. **Grant the adoption:** Assuming everything is in order, the judge will announce that the adoption is granted. You and the judge (and child, if appropriate) will sign the **Adoption Final Decree** – this is a formal court order declaring that you are now the child's legal parent, that the child shall henceforth be known by their new name (if a name change was requested), and that the parent-child relationship is created by law. This moment finalizes the adoption.

16. The judge's staff or the clerk will provide you with certified copies of the Adoption Decree. **Congratulations** – at this point, the stepparent or second parent adoption is complete! The child now has two legal parents (you and your spouse/partner). Any prior parent's rights have been extinguished, and your name can be added to the child's birth records.

17. Post-Adoption Tasks (**Birth Certificate and Records**): After the adoption, you will want to update the child's legal records:

- a. **Birth Certificate:** Pennsylvania's Department of Health will issue a new birth certificate for the child reflecting the new parentage. In a stepparent/second-parent adoption, the new birth certificate will list you as a parent (and typically the remaining original parent, unless you changed the child's parentage entirely). The court usually sends a report of adoption to the state automatically. Ask the Clerk or judge's staff about the process in Allegheny County. In many cases, you fill out a form with the child's birth information and new name/parents at the final hearing. A few weeks after the decree, the Pennsylvania Division of Vital Records will mail you the amended birth certificate (there may be a small fee for the new certificate). If you don't receive information on this at the hearing, you can contact the Division of Vital Records with a certified copy of the decree to request the new birth record.
- b. **Social Security and Documents:** Once you have the new birth certificate or decree, you can update the child's Social Security record (if their name changed) and any other legal documents (passport, school records, etc.) with the new name or parent information. The adoption decree is typically sufficient proof in the interim to change these records.
- c. **Original birth parent – Act 101 agreements:** If there was an arrangement for post-adoption contact with the former parent (sometimes through a voluntary agreement under Act 101), ensure that any such agreement was approved by the court and follow it as agreed. (Act 101 agreements are voluntary and not required; they are more common in private adoptions of infants. In a stepparent adoption, you may or may not have a contact agreement with the former parent. If one exists, it must have been presented to the court before finalization for it to be enforceable.)
- d. **File storage:** Keep multiple certified copies of the adoption decree in a safe place. The records in Orphans' Court are sealed, so you will use those certified copies whenever proof of the adoption is needed.

18. **Unmarried Couple Considerations:** You should prepare a short statement or petition explaining why you cannot marry at this time (the “cause” for not being married). This might be a paragraph in either the adoption petition or a separate motion. For example, if marrying would cause a significant loss of benefits for one partner, or if you have a sincere personal or religious objection to marriage, or any other compelling reason, outline that. The recent court ruling (*In re M.E.L.*, 2023) requires judges to make a finding of “inability to marry” before allowing the adoption to proceed without termination of the legal parent’s rights.

Work on this with care – it could be as simple as: “Petitioner and Mother are unable to marry at this time because [e.g., Petitioner is still legally married to a former partner and the divorce is pending], and therefore seek relief under the exception for co-parent adoption.” If you truly have no legal barrier but simply prefer not to marry, understand this may not satisfy the court; you might need to consult an attorney for how best to present your situation. (This is a developing area of law – as of late 2023, advocates note it’s “unclear” how strictly courts will interpret “cause shown” in each case.)

Resources and Forms for Allegheny Confirmatory Adoptions

- **Allegheny Orphans’ Court Contact:** If you have questions during the process, you can contact the Adoption Department of the Allegheny County Orphans’ Court at 412-350-5550. The main office is at 1700 Frick Building, 437 Grant St., but filings go to the Clerk at 414 Grant St. (City-County Building). Office hours are typically Monday–Friday 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM.
- **Allegheny County Orphans’ Court FAQ:** The court’s FAQ confirms that no self-help forms are provided and advises referencing court rules when preparing petitions [alleghenycourts.us](https://www.alleghenycourts.us). (This guide has summarized those rules for you.) It also provides the filing location and procedures for objections (not usually needed unless a birth parent contests) [alleghenycourts.us](https://www.alleghenycourts.us).

- **Pennsylvania State Adoption Forms:** Pennsylvania's Unified Judicial System provides some **statewide Orphans' Court forms** that are relevant to adoptions. You can find them on the UJS website under *Orphans' Court Forms* pacourts.us. Notably, you might use: **Final Decree of Adoption form** pacourts.us (if you need to draft the decree for the judge to sign), and **Notice of Hearing** forms. The “**Notice of Parental Rights to Provide Medical Information**” form (A-05) pacourts.us is given to terminated parents so they can supply family medical history if they wish – the court may handle this, but be aware of it. These forms are PDFs you can download and fill in.

Note on Sample Documents: I've created example forms on ChatGPT and templates to help illustrate the adoption process—these can be found in *Appendix 1*. These are not intended as legal advice and may not be appropriate for every situation. They are simply examples based on best practices and publicly available resources. It's always best to review your documents with a licensed attorney before filing.

- **Sample Petitions and Instructions:** For guidance in drafting documents, refer to sample packets from other counties: for example, Chester County's Adoption Packet and Montgomery County's adoption forms checklist montgomerycountypa.gov. They include examples of Reports of Intention to Adopt (often not required in stepparent/relative adoptions), Petitions to Terminate, and Adoption Petitions. While formatting might differ slightly, the core content is usable statewide. Always tailor any sample to Allegheny County (correct county name, parties, and facts).
- **Legal Statutes:** Key Pennsylvania statutes for this process are 23 Pa.C.S. §2711 (consents necessary) codes.findlaw.com, §2504 (alternative procedure for confirming consent), §2511 (grounds for involuntary termination), §2531-§2535 (reports and investigations, largely waived for relatives), and §2901-§2902 (adoption hearings and decrees). You can read these laws on the Pennsylvania General Assembly's website or FindLaw for precise language if needed.
- **Court Filing Fees:** For the latest Orphans' Court fee schedule (including adoption and termination fees), see the Allegheny County Court website or the “**Wills and Orphans – Fees**” page on the county's site. As of mid-2025, the adoption petition costs about \$280 alleghenycounty.us. If you have financial hardship, ask the Clerk about

possibly filing an *In Forma Pauperis* petition to waive fees (this may be difficult without an attorney, but it's an option if you cannot afford the filing fee).

By following these steps and utilizing the provided forms, a determined individual without legal training can navigate a stepparent or second-parent adoption in Allegheny County. Be thorough with paperwork and deadlines, and don't hesitate to double-check requirements with the Orphans' Court staff. With preparation and patience, you will be able to complete the adoption process and secure your child's legal future with both parents. Good luck!

Step-by-Step Court Parentage Order Process in Allegheny County

If you opt to seek a court order declaring parentage instead of an adoption, the process will run through the Family Division of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas (which handles custody, divorce, and related matters). This path is less standardized than adoption, but here are general steps to follow:

1. **Consult a Family Law Attorney:** Given the novelty of intent-based parentage in Pennsylvania and the lack of predefined forms, it is highly recommended to work with an attorney for a parentage petition. A lawyer experienced in LGBTQ+ family law can draft the necessary pleadings (there is no fill-in-the-blank form for "Petition to Confirm Parentage" in PA) and advise on strategy. They will also know how to navigate the Family Court system to get your case heard promptly. If you cannot afford private counsel, try contacting legal organizations (Lambda Legal, NCLR, ACLU-PA) or the Allegheny County Bar for referrals – they might connect you with attorneys who handle parentage cases or offer limited-scope assistance.
2. **Prepare Your Petition to Confirm Parentage:** The legal action can be framed as a "Petition for Declaratory Judgment of Parentage" or a similar filing. Essentially, you will be asking the court to formally recognize the non-biological spouse as a legal parent of the child. In your petition, include key facts:
 - Identify the parents (both you and your spouse) and the child (initials and birth date, to protect privacy in public filings).

- State that you are legally married (attach a copy of your marriage certificate) and that the child was born during the marriage. Note that under PA law, a child born to a married couple is presumed to be a child of the marriage. The PA Superior Court has held this “presumption of paternity” applies equally to same-sex spouses of birth mothers. Include that citation in your petition to support that you are already presumed a parent by marriage.
- Explain the circumstances of the child’s conception/birth: e.g., “Child was conceived via assisted reproduction using donor sperm. Spouses planned and consented to this method of conception together.” Mention any relevant evidence, such as signing fertility clinic or donor agreements jointly.
- State that the non-birth spouse is listed on the birth certificate as mother/father/parent. Attach a copy of the birth certificate if available.
- Cite the recent case law (e.g., *In re A.M.*, 223 A.3d 691 (Pa. Super. 2019) and *Glover v. Junior* (Pa. 2025)) that recognizes the parentage of a non-genetic spouse in a same-sex marriage based on the couple’s intent and the presumption of parentage. You may specifically quote the Supreme Court’s language that “the parties’ mutual intent to have and raise a child together” establishes parentage.
- Conclude by requesting an order declaring the non-birth spouse to be a legal parent of the child, with all rights and responsibilities, effective from the child’s birth.

Have both spouses sign sworn verification statements (an affidavit that the facts in the petition are true). Also prepare a proposed Order for the judge to sign.

3. File in the Family Division: In Allegheny County, file your petition at the Family Division (Civil) filing office. This is typically at the Family Law Center (440 Ross Street, Pittsburgh) or the main Courthouse – you can call the Family Division to confirm filing location for a declaratory judgment petition. Pay the required filing fee (call ahead to ask the fee for a custody/declaratory petition). The case may be docketed either as a custody matter or a miscellaneous civil action. If you are filing jointly with your spouse (since you both want the same outcome), you might caption it as *In re: Petition for Parentage of [Child’s Initials]* or as *Spouse1 and Spouse2, Petitioners*. Alternatively, one spouse could technically file against the other as a nominal respondent – but if

you're in agreement, make that clear in the petition (e.g., "Both the child's legal parents join in this petition and affirm the relief sought").

4. **Court Proceedings and Hearing:** Once filed, your petition will be assigned to a Family Court judge. Unlike adoptions (which go to Orphans' Court), a parentage action could be treated like a custody case. You may get a scheduling order for a brief hearing or conference. Because you are essentially asking for a non-adversarial declaration, the court may simply set a short hearing where you present your evidence. At the hearing, be prepared to testify or affirm:
 - That you are married and your child was born during the marriage.
 - That you consented to the child's conception and have been raising the child together.
 - Show the birth certificate with both names (if the judge hasn't seen it).
 - If applicable, present any signed donor agreement or an affidavit from the donor waiving rights (to show no one else is a claimant for parentage).
 - The goal is to convince the judge that there is no dispute to resolve – you are jointly petitioning the court to confirm what is already true in fact: that you both consider yourselves parents and it serves the child's best interest to have two legal parents.
5. **Obtain the Court Order and Amend the Birth Record:** After the hearing, ensure you get a certified copy of the court's Order/Judgment of Parentage from the Clerk of Courts. This order should explicitly state that the non-biological spouse "is hereby declared to be a legal parent of [Child], with all the rights and obligations of parenthood", or words to that effect. It may direct the Pennsylvania Department of Health to list both parents on the child's birth certificate (if not already done). If your name was not on the initial birth certificate for some reason, you would send a certified copy of this order to the Division of Vital Records to have a new birth certificate issued. In your case, since the non-bio parent is already listed on the birth certificate, you might not need a new one. However, having the order on file will bolster the validity of that birth record. No other state should remove your name from the certificate now, because a court has adjudicated you as a legal parent.

Special Considerations and Potential Complications

Every family's situation is a bit different. Here are some special scenarios and issues to keep in mind as you pursue adoption or a parentage order:

- **Children Conceived via Assisted Reproduction:** Pennsylvania, as of 2025, does not have a comprehensive assisted reproduction parentage statute. Unlike some states, **PA law does not explicitly strip sperm or egg donors of parental status by statute**. Instead, it relies on case law and contracts. This means if you used a known donor (especially without a written contract), that donor could potentially claim parental rights. The **safest course in donor cases is to have a written donor agreement upfront and to terminate the donor's rights through confirmatory adoption**. Pennsylvania courts have upheld donor contracts as legally enforceable, which is good news. But a contract alone won't put your second parent's name on a birth certificate or guarantee recognition everywhere. Thus, couples using any form of assisted reproduction should plan for a court order after birth. A partner who isn't genetically linked due to gamete donation should do a second-parent adoption for full protection. Bottom line: donor or IVF conception = get an adoption decree or parentage judgment to ensure no donor can interfere and both parents are secure.
- **Known Sperm Donors and Lack of Donor Agreements:** **If your child was conceived with the help of a friend or known donor and you did not have a formal agreement, you are at the greatest risk for legal complications.** As noted, Pennsylvania courts default to genetic parentage absent evidence of a contrary intent. A known donor might later have a change of heart and file for paternity or visitation. If you find yourself in this situation, act quickly. Pursue a second-parent adoption as soon as possible – once the donor's rights are terminated in the adoption, he cannot revive them. If the donor indicates willingness to cooperate, have him sign a consent to adoption or a termination affidavit. If he resists, you may need to litigate the termination on grounds of being a donor. The court will look at factors like: was the child conceived via clinical procedure or at-home insemination; was there an agreement (even oral) that the donor would not be a parent; has the donor had any involvement or provided support, etc. It can become a fact-intensive case. Getting legal counsel is crucial in a contested donor scenario. Do not delay –

Pennsylvania law could deem an involved donor a “legal father” if you don’t solidify the non-bio spouse’s status. Remember that a birth certificate alone will not prevent a determined donor from asserting rights if no adoption has occurred.

- **Previous Court Orders or Agreements:** If there have been any prior court proceedings involving the child, these can affect your path. For example, if the family previously lived in another state and obtained a parentage or custody order there, you should disclose that to the Pennsylvania court. A valid parentage or adoption judgment from another state is generally honored in PA (and vice versa). You may not need to redo the process in PA; you might simply register the foreign order with the Allegheny County Family Court (there’s a procedure to register out-of-state custody determinations, which could include parentage judgments, under the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act). If you have a prior adoption decree from another state or country, you can file it with Pennsylvania’s Department of Health to get a state birth certificate. If the child was born in another state that refused to put both moms or both dads on the birth certificate, a second-parent adoption in PA can often fix that by allowing you to get a PA birth certificate with both parents listed. Always inform your attorney and the court of existing legal documents to avoid conflicting orders.
- **Unmarried Couples:** Pennsylvania does allow second-parent adoptions by unmarried couples as well, thanks to a 2003 PA Supreme Court decision. So if a couple wasn’t married when the child was born, they can still petition for a co-parent adoption in Allegheny County. The steps are similar, though the court will treat it as a “second-parent adoption” rather than a stepparent adoption. Marriage is not a requirement – but being married can simplify some presumptions. Likewise, an unmarried non-bio parent would have an even stronger need for an adoption or parentage order, since they don’t benefit from the marital presumption of parentage at all.
- **If the Birth Parent is Deceased or Incapacitated:** If, tragically, the biological parent were to die or become unable to consent before an adoption is completed, the non-bio parent should immediately seek legal help to secure their status. A parentage order might be necessary to establish the surviving partner as the child’s legal parent, especially if

extended family or a sperm donor could raise challenges. Pennsylvania courts would likely apply the intent-based parentage doctrine in a posthumous situation (looking at the couple's intent and conduct) to avoid the child being left with only one legal parent or placed with someone else. The surviving partner might also consider filing for guardianship or custody as an interim measure while pursuing a formal parentage adjudication. These scenarios are complex, and legal advice is a must, but the core principle still applies: document everything (marriage, co-parenting evidence, donor agreements) and get a court order as soon as possible.

- **Safety and Travel Considerations:** With a confirmed adoption or parentage judgment, you have full parental rights everywhere. However, in the current climate, some LGBTQ+ families take extra precautions. For instance, when traveling out of state (particularly to states that have shown hostility to LGBTQ+ rights), carry a copy of your adoption decree or court order.

When to Get a Lawyer: Even if you start on your own, remain open to seeking a lawyer's help if complications arise. For example, if the other biological parent is contesting or cannot be located to give consent, you will need to navigate notice by publication and possibly a contested hearing – this is beyond basic DIY territory. Or, if at any point you feel overwhelmed by the process (understandable – courts can be intimidating), investing in a lawyer's services might save time and stress. Some attorneys will offer limited-scope services – say, you prepare the documents and just pay them to review or to attend the hearing with you. This can cut costs versus full representation.

In summary, starting without a lawyer is possible for straightforward adoption cases (especially step-parent adoptions with cooperative parties). Pennsylvania provides forms and the law is on your side as an LGBTQIA+ petitioner. But be diligent, use the available self-help resources, and don't hesitate to ask for help from legal aid or hire an attorney if things get complicated. The end goal – the security of your family – is too important to risk by going it completely alone if you're unsure. Many have done it successfully, and with preparation, you can too!

Community and Legal Resources for LGBTQIA+ Families

Building your family and safeguarding your rights is easier when you have a strong support network. Below is a curated list of national and local organizations, agencies, and services that can assist Pittsburgh-area LGBTQIA+ families with adoption, legal matters, and community support.

National Organizations & Resources:

- **Queer Family Planning Project (QFFP)** – QFFP is a community-driven nonprofit based in Pittsburgh dedicated to supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals and families in their journey to parenthood. They provide mini grants, affirming resources, peer support, and advocacy to help queer and trans folks build and protect their families with confidence and care. Website: queerfamilyplanningproject.org
- **Human Rights Campaign (HRC)** – HRC's All Children–All Families program works with adoption agencies to improve LGBTQIA+ inclusion; HRC maintains a list of participating agencies. HRC also offers general adoption how-to guides and publishes updates on relevant policies (for example, their 2024 press release on foster care protections). Website: hrc.org/adoption.
- **Lambda Legal & National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR)** – These legal advocacy groups often step in if LGBTQIA+ parents face discrimination. Both organizations have resource libraries and may provide legal help or referrals for family law issues. NCLR in particular has an excellent FAQ for LGBTQIA+ families in the post-Dobbs era with practical steps for legal protections. Websites: lambdalegal.org and nclrights.org.
- **PFLAG** – While not adoption-specific, PFLAG is a nationwide network of LGBTQIA+ people, parents, and families. PFLAG Pittsburgh has local meetings and could be a source of camaraderie for LGBTQIA+ parents (and grandparents!). Sometimes hearing from those who've navigated adoption or foster care can be invaluable. Website: pflagpgh.org.
- **COLAGE** – A national organization specifically for children and youth with LGBTQIA+ parents. As your family grows, COLAGE can be a great resource for your kids to connect with peers in similar families. They have chapters, events, and online communities. Website: colage.org.



- **North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)** – NACAC isn't LGBTQIA+-specific, but they support adoptive parents (especially those adopting from foster care) with parent networks and advocacy for post-adoption support. They can help you find parent support groups and also inform you about adoption subsidies and tax credits. They have an LGBTQIA+ section on their site as well. Website: nacac.org.

Pennsylvania & Pittsburgh-Area Resources:

- **Persad Center** – Pittsburgh's LGBTQIA+ counseling and community center, which also has programming for families. Persad has historically partnered with Adoption Connection PA to recruit and support LGBTQIA+ foster/adoptive families. They may offer parent support groups or referrals to LGBTQIA+-friendly services (legal, therapeutic, etc.). Website: persadcenter.org.
- **Adoption Connection, PA** – A full-service, non-profit foster care and adoption agency in Western PA (based in Beaver Co.). LGBTQIA+-affirming (as noted, they explicitly welcome all sexual orientations, gender identities, and relationship statuses). They handle foster-to-adopt placements (including a treatment foster care program) and private infant adoption services. They have staff "LGBTQIA+ Champions" trained by Hugh Lane to ensure inclusive practice. This could be a great agency to contact if you're interested in foster care in the Pittsburgh area. Website: adoptionconnectionpa.org.
- **TRAC Services for Families (Three Rivers Adoption Council)** – A long-standing Pittsburgh adoption agency focusing on finding homes for children in foster care (especially older youth and children of color). TRAC has been a resource for LGBTQIA+ families for decades; they completed HRC's All Children–All Families self-assessment and have worked to attain cultural competency benchmarks. They provide foster care certification, matching, and extensive post-adoption support (including outpatient therapy). TRAC is the largest SWAN affiliate in the region, which means if you want to adopt a waiting child from foster care anywhere in PA, TRAC can facilitate those matches. Website: tracpgh.com.
- **Every Child, Inc.** – A Pittsburgh-based agency (located in downtown) that provides foster care and adoption services and is known for its commitment to LGBTQIA+ youth and families. Every Child is the agency mentioned as having HRC's highest equality recognition locally. They often speak out about the need for affirming homes for queer youth. If you are especially interested in fostering/adopting LGBTQIA+ teenagers or children with special medical needs, Every Child may be a valuable partner. Website: everychildinc.org.

- **Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS)** – The county's child welfare agency. They have information on how to become a foster parent on their site (or via a phone info session). Even if you go through a private agency, you might attend an Allegheny County orientation. The DHS Office of Children, Youth and Families also can connect you to all the contracted agencies. Notably, Allegheny County has an LGBTQIA+IA+ Advisory Council within DHS, and Hugh Lane Foundation is a key training partner, showing the county's inclusive approach. Website: alleghenycounty.us/Children.
- **Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation** – Hugh Lane (formerly the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force, reinvented to honor Hugh Lane) provides health and wellness programs to LGBTQIA+ youth and allies. Legal services through Hugh Lane offer free help on issues like name/gender changes, discrimination, and some family law matters. They also run the AFFIRM training for foster parents and could be a support if you end up fostering an LGBTQIA+ youth (they have mentorship and resource programs for queer and trans kids in care). Website: hughlane.org.
- **ACLU of Pennsylvania** – The state's ACLU has been active in fighting discrimination (they were involved in the Fulton case on the side of Philadelphia enforcing nondiscrimination). While the ACLU generally takes impact litigation rather than individual family cases, they are a good contact if you face any discriminatory treatment by a public entity in the adoption process. They also lobby for LGBTQIA+ rights legislation in PA. Website: aclupa.org.
- **Equality Pennsylvania (Equality PA)** – The statewide LGBTQIA+ advocacy organization. They provide updates on any legislation affecting LGBTQIA+ families and sometimes have local workshops or town halls. Keeping an eye on Equality PA news can alert you to issues like efforts to ban gender-affirming care (which could indirectly impact foster youth, etc.) or progress on adding LGBTQIA+ protections to state law. Website: equalitypa.org.

Legal Resources and Support

- **Local Lawyers and Contacts:** Hugh Lane has compiled a list of vetted local resources and contacts for folks who would like legal support through the confirmatory adoption process. Please see below.

Low-Income:

Neighborhood Legal Services: <https://nlsa.us/request-legal-help/>

Allegheny County Bar Foundation Pro Bono

Center: <https://www.acbf.org/pro-bono-center/get-legal-help/>

Family Empowerment and Legal Access Clinic - University of Pittsburgh School of Law: <https://www.law.pitt.edu/experiential-learning/hickton-center-community-legal-services-clinical-legal-education/family>

Private Attorneys:

Morgan

Bonekovic: <https://www.pollockbegg.com/attorneys/morgan-m-bonekovic/>

Benjamin Lehman: <https://www.bermanvoss.com/our-firm/benjamin-m-lehman/>

Wakefield Law Group: <https://wakefieldlawgroup.com/>

Kathleen Schneider: <https://www.kdschneiderlawoffice.com/>

Lois M. Vitti: <https://www.vittilaw.com/>

Other Resources:

Allegheny County Bar Association Lawyer Referral

Service: <https://getapittsburghlawyer.com/>

North Penn Legal Services Family Law

Handbook: https://www.nplspa.org/file_download/inline/6d6f6562-aa69-4a62-ab58-bf4088869f61

- **Allegheny County Orphans' Court (Adoptions Department):** 1700 Frick Building, 437 Grant Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15219. Phone: 412-350-5550 alleghenycourts.us. (Call during business hours for questions about filing procedures or to confirm filing fees and requirements. The Clerk's office cannot give legal advice but can answer process questions like "what time are you open" or "where do I file.")
- **Allegheny County Bar Association** – Legal Help: The ACBA Pro Bono Center can connect low-income individuals with volunteer attorneys or clinics. Phone: 412-402-6677 for assistance acbf.org. They may refer you to a free legal clinic or to Neighborhood Legal Services. If you do not qualify for free help, the ACBA Lawyer Referral Service can refer you to a family lawyer (call 412-261-5555 palawhelp.org). Explain that you are seeking a step-parent or second-parent adoption; some attorneys have experience with LGBTQ family adoptions.
- **PA Law Help:** PALawHelp.org is an online resource with information on Pennsylvania law and a directory of legal aid programs. It contains articles and forms on family law topics, including adoption. Visit PALawHelp.org for self-help materials and referrals to programs in

Pennsylvania paprobono.net. (For instance, you can find statewide adoption forms, instructions, and possibly a guide on step-parent adoptions on this site.) PALawHelp can also direct you to the Allegheny County Law Library or other free resources if you need to do research or find sample petitions acllib.org.

- **Unified Judicial System of PA** – Orphans' Court Forms: The state court system provides certain official Orphans' Court forms online (like final decrees, notices, etc.) pacourts.us. For example, you can download a blank Final Decree of Adoption or Notice of Hearing form from the UJS website. These can be useful for ensuring you have all needed paperwork. [(QR codes for these forms can be placed in print materials.)]
- **Allegheny County Bar Foundation** – Pro Se Assistance: In addition to the Pro Bono Center, note that the Allegheny County Law Library (921 City-County Building) has form packets and research guides for pro se filers acllib.org. The law librarians cannot give legal advice, but they can help you find the right forms or rules. Consider visiting them if you need help locating a sample Petition for Adoption format or understanding local court rules.

Community Support Groups: Apart from professional services, consider joining social groups for LGBTQIA+ parents. In Pittsburgh, there have been "Rainbow Families" meetups in the past – check Facebook or Meetup.com for any current LGBTQIA+ parenting groups or family playgroups. The Pittsburgh Equality Center (formerly GLCC) sometimes organizes family-friendly events where you can connect with other parents. Building these peer networks can give your family a sense of community and your kids playmates who also have two moms or two dads, etc.

Conclusion

Adopting and raising children as an LGBTQIA+ family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a journey filled with joy, bureaucratic hurdles, occasional challenges, and abundant rewards. Legally and socially, things have never been better – marriage equality and progressive court decisions have opened doors, and local agencies are eager to welcome diverse families. But recent events also remind us not to take rights for granted. By staying informed on the legal landscape, carefully completing processes like second-parent adoption, and organizing essential documents, you can shield your family from future uncertainty.

Remember that you are not alone in this process. Reach out to the community: other LGBTQIA+ parents, affirming agencies, and support organizations are ready to help you navigate everything from the first orientation session to finalization day and beyond. One day you'll be holding your child's adoption decree, marveling at how a pile of paperwork and a leap of faith created a forever family. And when you do, you'll join a proud cohort of Pittsburgh LGBTQIA+ parents. Your family – defined by love, protected by law, and supported by community – will be part of the beautiful tapestry of what family means in Pennsylvania.

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(All website citations were accessed and verified in 2024–2025 to ensure the latest information.)



Appendix 1