Does an AI tool help boost adoptions? Key takeaways from an AP Investigation
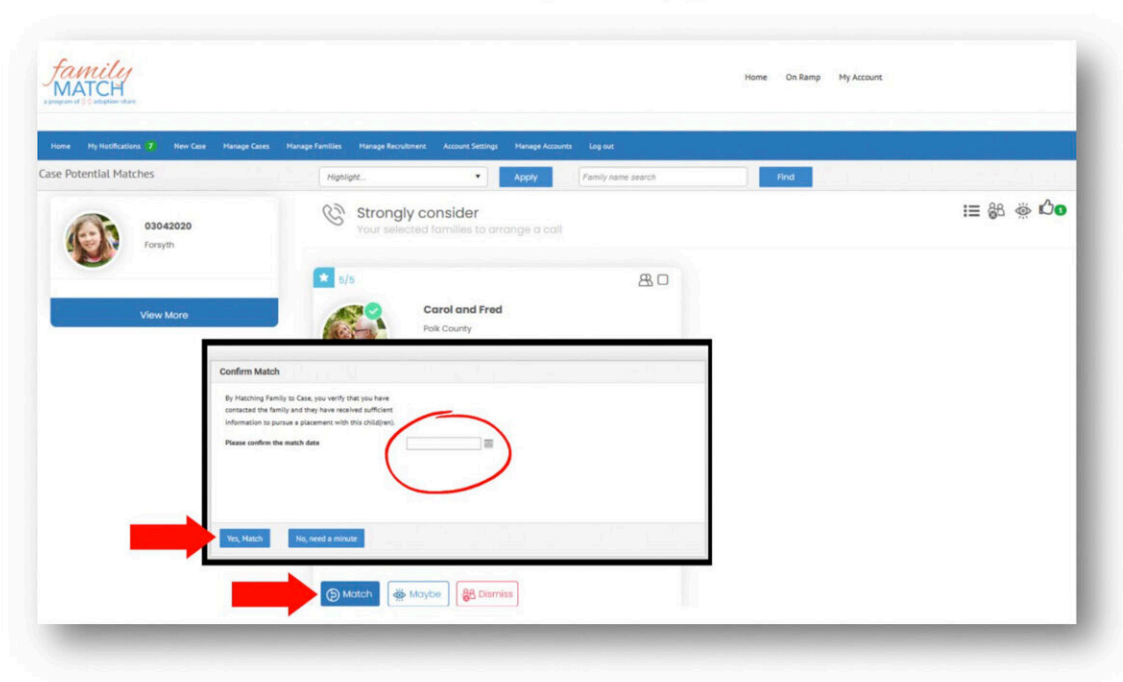
November 6 2023, by SALLY HO and GARANCE BURKE

This image shows part of the user guide for Adoption-Share's Family-Match software in Florida, Georgia and Virginia dated April 2023. An Associated Press investigation found that Adoption-Share's tool – among the few adoption algorithms on the market in 2023 – has produced limited results in the states where it has been used, according to the organization's self-reported data that AP obtained through public records requests from state and local agencies. Credit: AP Photo

Former social worker Thea Ramirez has developed an artificial intelligence -powered tool that she says helps social service agencies find the best adoptive parents for some of the nation's most vulnerable kids.

But an Associated Press investigation has found that the Family-Match algorithm has produced limited results in the states where it has been used, raising questions about the ability of artificial intelligence to solve such enduring human problems.

Two states dropped the tool with only a few adoptions at the end of their initial pilots. Social workers in Florida, Georgia and Virginia told AP that Family-Match wasn't useful and often led them to unwilling families. Florida agencies, on the other hand, reported a more positive experience with the algorithm, saying that it assisted them in tapping into a broader pool of prospective parents.

Ramirez declined interview requests but said in an email that "Family-Match is a valuable tool and helpful to users actively using it to support their recruitment + matching efforts."

Here are some takeaways from the investigation:

ROOTED IN FAITH

Ramirez, of Brunswick, Georgia, where her nonprofit is also based, got her start building a website meant to bring prospective adoptive parents together with mothers giving up their babies for adoption.

Ramirez marketed her website to anti-abortion counseling centers, which seek to persuade women to bring their pregnancies to term.

"Could we make Roe v. Wade obsolete by raising adoption awareness? I think so," Ramirez wrote in a 2012 blog post about her website. Ramirez

said in an email that Family-Match is not associated with the program for mothers with unwanted pregnancies.

In this photo provided by the New York Stock Exchange, Adoption-Share founder and CEO Thea Ramirez, center, Miss Utah USA 2013 Marissa Powell, center right, and fellow adoption supporters ring the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange in New York on Aug. 20, 2013. An Associated Press investigation found that Adoption-Share's tool – among the few adoption algorithms on the market in 2023 – has produced limited results in the states where it has been used, according to the organization's self-reported data that AP obtained through public records requests from state and local agencies. Credit: NYSE via AP

INSPIRED BY ONLINE DATING

Ramirez recruited research scientist Gian Gonzaga, asking if he would team up with her to create an adoption matchmaking tool based on compatibility, to help child welfare agencies find adoptive parents for foster children. Gonzaga had previously managed algorithms that powered the online dating site eharmony.

"I was more excited about the project than anything I've heard for all of my career," Gonzaga said in a promotional Family-Match video posted to YouTube.

Gonzaga ultimately joined the board of directors of Ramirez's nonprofit, Adoption-Share.

Gonzaga, who worked with his wife Heather Setrakian at eharmony and then on the Family-Match algorithm, referred questions to Ramirez. Setrakian said she was very proud of her years of work developing the Family-Match model.

An eharmony spokesperson said the company had no involvement with Family-Match and called the pair "simply former employees."

DEFT LOBBYING

From former first lady Melania Trump to governors' offices in Georgia and Virginia, Ramirez has worked connections to land contracts.

Virginia and Georgia officials dropped Family-Match after their trial runs only produced one or two adoptions a year. Tennessee said they killed a pilot before rolling it out because of technical issues.

Months after Georgia quit Family-Match, Ramirez met with a staffer at

Governor Brian Kemp's office and appeared at a statehouse hearing to request $250,000 to fund a statewide expansion.

The state reversed course and in July signed a new agreement to resume using the technology. Adoption-Share is allowing Georgia to use Family-Match for free, a state official said.

Longtime Florida social worker Connie Going looks at a computer screen with an image of her adopted son Davion in her adoptions office June 12, 2023, in St. Petersburg, Fla. Going said the Family-Match tool gives false hope to waiting parents by failing to deliver successful matches, and ultimately makes her job harder. Credit: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara

BRUSHES WITH FAME

Ramirez also has won support from public figures.

In New York, she rang the opening bell of the New York Stock Exchange with the then-Miss Utah U.S. beauty queen. In Florida, Ramirez initially distributed her tool for free thanks to a grant from the Jupiter, Florida-based Selfless Love Foundation, founded by Ed Brown, the former CEO of the company that makes Patrón tequila, and his wife, Ashley Brown, an ex-model and advocate for foster children.

The Browns fundraise for the foundation's causes at an annual Palm Beach-area gala that has spotlighted Adoption-Share's work. Selfless Love Foundation marketing director Shelli Lockhart said Adoption-Share's grant ended in October 2022, and that the foundation was "so proud of the work we did together" to increase the number of adoptions but declined to clarify why the grant ended.

Once the philanthropic dollars dried up, the state government picked up the tab, awarding Adoption-Share a $350,000 contract last month.

In May, Family-Match was selected to benefit from a fundraiser promoted by then-St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Adam Wainwright aimed at helping the organization grow "to address the pressing need for foster and adoptive families in Missouri," according to a press release from Adoption-Share. Ramirez posed for photos on the baseball field next to Darrell Missey, director of the Missouri Children's Division, which was considering Adoption-Share's proposal.

TEST CASE: FLORIDA

Ramirez has highlighted the tool's penetration in Florida's privatized child welfare system as she has tried to court philanthropic support and

new business in New York City and Delaware.

This year, Adoption-Share won a contract with the Florida Department of Health to build an algorithm for public health officials focused on children with the most severe medical needs and disabilities, who may never be able to live independently. The contract represents a significant expansion beyond Adoption Share's work with child welfare agencies because medically fragile children can require lifelong caregivers.

"The power dynamics are different because the child can't just leave," said Bonni Goodwin, a University of Oklahoma child welfare expert. "The vulnerability piece increases."