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To: Committee, FHS (REPS)
Subject: Adoption

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

**Submission re Inter-country Adoption Service and Allowances Paid
To Adoptive Parents**

21.4.05

Dear Secretary,

We thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into "how the Australian Government can better assist Australians who are adopting or who have adopted children from overseas". As a thirty year old adoptive families' support organisation with around one hundred and fifty members we hear many first hand accounts of families' adoption experiences.

Comparison with birth experience

Parents with both adopted and birth children describe very contrasting experiences. In fact one parent described it as a "completely different ball game".

Lack of Support and Information

In the case of a baby born in a hospital parents are helped to fill in all necessary forms including those to claim any relevant allowances. Adoptive families do not receive this kind of service and have to do their own research to find out their entitlements often with the help of other members of adoption support groups. Similarly birth parents are routinely given information about services they can access. Adoptive parents for the main part must pick up this information from here and there, usually from

friends, acquaintances and support groups. Birth parents (in SA at least) are given a booklet in which the child's immunisation status is recorded. Adoptive parents often have difficulty obtaining one, despite this book being considered a standard and commonly referred record of early childhood health records for Australian children. This is because there is a system in place which assumes that all new children in a family are there by birth. The relevant service providers for the main part have not factored in that some children are not biological children of the parents and may not have arrived with them at age zero.

Entitlements

When it comes to accessing information about entitlements adoptive parents report that the workers in the very organisations who are responsible for administering these entitlements often do not give the information needed or give misinformation. This seems to be because adoptive families do not always fit the norm and workers are not familiar with their needs and entitlements.

With regard to entitlements adoptive parents are particularly discriminated against because they cannot claim the \$3000 "baby bonus" unless the child was placed with them before the age of 26 weeks. Quite apart from the fact that there is no early history known for many of these children and so no accurate birth date very few adopted children are placed with their adoptive parents by the age of 26 weeks. The cost of providing for a child are no less because they are older. If the baby bonus is intended, as we are told, to help with the expenses of a new child in the family, surely this should be available to all families with a new child at whatever age and in whatever way the child joins the family.

Comparison with other states

Administration

The main difference between SA approval processes and that of other states is the involvement until April 2005 of a licensed adoption agency. The AAC Adoption Agency played a large part in most SA adoptions although the Government's Adoption and Family Information Service had the responsibility for the approval of adoptive parents and of the placement of the child. A large proportion of all adoptions in SA over the last 30 years have been handled at least in part by this agency. Families from different states travelling overseas together to pick up their new children have often expressed their admiration to SA residents of the SA system. Whilst this was not perfect (as clearly expressed in the Review of Inter-country Adoption and Post Adoption of Services (i), commissioned by SA government, which did

not however suggest the closing of the agency) this system had considerable strengths, as applicants could draw on the experience and expertise of both the Government's and the Agency's staff. Parents post placement are more willing to consult a non government agency than the Government department that has been responsible for approving them as adoptive parents and which will assess the suitability of recommending the final legalisation of the adoption.

Under this dual system SA has had the highest number of adoption placements per head of population of any state (not including ACT) and one of the fastest assessment and placement times.

Cost.

Charges by State authorities for the processing of an adoption assessment vary greatly from state to state i.e. between \$2053 and \$10,799 on 2004 figures (i). Adoption is seen as a service to the child. Whilst the legislation is all purportedly made "in the interests of the child", (who is regarded as the client) it is the adoptive parent who pays and goes on paying for all the child's needs even whilst the child, in most cases, is in the guardianship of the (relevant) Minister until the adoption is legally finalised (usually about 18 months after placement). We have never heard any one argue that the child's interests should not be paramount, but whilst this is the case why should adoptive parents be footing a bill that can now amount to an excess of \$30,000 and even before the child is legally theirs?

After that the dissimilarity in costs for adoptive and birth parents are less pronounced. Adoptive parents have all the same expenses that birth parents have and, as with birth children, there is no predicting how much these will amount to. Think how much that \$30,000 could buy in food, school uniforms, music lessons, school fees, nursery furniture, family holidays, soap and tooth-paste.

By contrast birth parents are not asked to pay anything to the authorities for the privilege of having a child. The cost of the birth is subsidised by Medicare and parents are able to claim the \$3000 "baby bonus" so long as they do so before the baby is 26 weeks old.

In fact the charges laid on adoptive families are discriminatory, excluding those who cannot afford these costs: not a very equitable or precise way of assessing who will make the best parents.

Australia's aid to undeveloped countries has been reduced as a percentage of GST in recent years. Australia could afford to

subsidise overseas adoptions as a form of aid to countries who cannot provide for all their children needing families. (Given that stringent procedures are in place to ensure that children are not being trafficked and that all avenues for family care have been explored in the child's country of origin.) A subsidy would reduce the discrimination against potentially good parents who cannot afford the current costs of an inter-country adoption and also assist those many families currently have to borrow money to be able to afford to adopt a child.

WORLD FAMILIES AUSTRALIA WOULD LIKE TO SEE:

1. Age limit for which parents can claim the "baby bonus" abolished, (not just raised as some have suggested).
A child at any age deserves the help that this gives to his/her new parent(s).
2. All new legislation either state or federal drafted and worded in such a way as to be inclusive of the needs and rights of adoptees and adoptive families.
3. All regulations governing the administration of such legislation equally appropriately drafted and worded.
4. The Federal Government as the signatory on our behalf to the Hague convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledge the positive contribution that support groups make to the pre- and especially post adoption service to adoptive families.
5. The Federal Government, if it is to continue to delegate its responsibilities under the Hague convention to the States, require the State Governments to provide or fund adequate post adoptive support services for all adoptive families. Where it is not able, or it is inappropriate for it to do so, for the States or the Federal Government to adequately fund voluntary groups who are able to offer these service. Services should include pre and post adoption counselling and access to information on specialist and non-specialist services that can assist the adopted person or, in the case of a younger child, his/her family (ii).

Yours sincerely,

(Ms) MA Sanders
President

(i) Review of Inter-country Adoptions and Post Adoption Services Commissioned by the SA Minister for Social Justice, Hon Stephanie Keys, Final Report August 2004

(ii) The SA Dept of Families and Communities is currently giving ARMS (relinquishing mothers' support group) \$42,000pa. Currently the Department is assisting East Meets West (support group for young adult and teen age adoptees) to retain the accommodation it previously shared with the AAC Adoption Agency. No funding is being given to the adoption support groups which assist families with younger children. Since the closure of the AAC Agency these support groups report increased numbers of requests for information and support.