

Submission

Inquiry into adoption of children from overseas

15 July 2005

Email: fhs.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam:

I would like to contribute my comments to the inquiry.

My husband and I decided to adopt from overseas following volunteer work we have undertaken in orphanages in Thailand, Cambodia and Nepal in recent years.

We are different from your average applicant in that we have decided to adopt a child as a **first** option (i.e. we chose not to have biological children).

This has been a stumbling block for DoCS since the start of the process. It was considered an "abnormal" or "unnatural" thing to do. Who would adopt over having their own child? As such, our home study took up to eight months to complete (as opposed to the six months that DoCS states as a guideline). At each step in the process, I have found DoCS to be particularly slow to respond. So much so, that it took 18 months for our application to be approved, despite doing our best to turn around paperwork in the shortest possible time.

We have now been in the process for three years and approved by the Philippines for 12-months.

My frustrations about adoption in NSW/Australia are as follows:

1. Delays in the approval process.

Despite having to pay a decent amount of money to DoCS, it seems that all that applicant families can expect to receive is a poor service – with long lead times and little communication. We wouldn't stand for this if we were dealing with a private enterprise. However, DoCS continue to get away with poor service because of the fear of applicant families to "challenge the system". No family wants their file to disappear to the bottom of the pile.

I believe that all adoption authorities need to be more transparent about the process, provide honest advice regarding options/decisions (rather than opt out with the line "we can't offer advice"), and regularly communicate with families. It is an extremely difficult process for families to go through and a helpful person at the end of the phone/email would be appreciated.

Can you imagine if all would-be parents were to go through a process such as approval for adoption before having biological children? The birth rate of this nation would be seriously in decline as many would opt out because it was just "all too hard".

2. Increase the number of country programs.

Currently, there are only a handful of countries available to adoptive parents in NSW. Looking at the statistics, less than 50 children are placed in NSW each year.

When questioned regarding adoption from other countries, applicants often receive an outright "no". This is the answer we received after expressing interest in Nepal – where we had worked for a period of time and maintain strong contacts with several families/NGOs.

In New Zealand (of which I was born), there has been a NGO accredited to place Russian orphans for a very long time. I understand that Australia could establish a similar arrangement with Russia – but only have to ask. South Africa, Nepal and many other countries may also be open to sending children to Australia.

Considering the amount of applicants each year within NSW, I believe that adoption authorities need to take steps to progress the opening of new programs so that many more children may also find their "forever families".

3. Reduce government fees associated with adoption and offer the same benefits as families with biological children.

As a taxpayer, I believe I have already paid for all Government services via my taxes – that includes adoption. It is frustrating that the Government chooses to subsidise IVF treatments and is not prepared to offer assistance for adoptive families.

Further, I am bemused by the Government's decision to cap the baby bonus at two years. How the Government arrived at two years is beyond my understanding. Most people with any knowledge of adoption know that most children adopted from overseas are older than two years by the time they reach Australia. And we know they are more likely to be older because of the time it takes for the adoptions to be approved by Australia and the countries of birth, and delays in the immigration process. I urge the Government to amend the legislation and make the maternity payment available to all adoptive parents, irrespective of the child's age. Given the relatively small numbers of parents who adopt, inclusion of this group into the maternity payment legislation would be quite inexpensive for the government but it would provide financial support and recognition for a very worthy group of parents who face similar experiences to those of parents starting a new biological family.

4. Make available lists of waiting children.

I believe that approved families who might be interested in adopting those children with special needs should be able to access a list of waiting children (if available) from their chosen country. Children included on the list are: a) over 5 years, b) part of sibling groups, and c) have mild to moderate medical conditions.

I have requested the Philippines list from DoCS and been told it does not exist. This is not true. I have also been advised by DoCS that a) it is unlikely that a family would be approved to adopt a child over 8 years of age and b) the Department of Immigration would not allow most children into the country.

I believe this sort of attitude forces applicants to pursue an ideal - i.e. young baby, healthy, etc. But we all know that these children are not readily available and many of the children that are, in fact, fit within the criteria of "special needs".

I find it outrageous that authorities (both in Australia and overseas) don't make more of an effort to place children from the special needs list. The ones who miss out are the children. Isn't this process supposed to be about finding families for children and not vice versa?

Thank you for opportunity to raise these thoughts.

Yours sincerely,


Sydney