

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

**RE: Inquiry into the Adoption of Children from Overseas –
submission**

Background

We adopted our 15 month old son from Ethiopia on June 19 2004 through the Intercountry Adoption Service (ICAS), Department of Human Services (DHS), Victoria.

We were both 42 yrs of age at the time of the adoption and also have three biological children who were 14, 16 and 18 years old.

The process took 3 years 3 months and cost \$30,084 (this breakdown includes administration; here and in Ethiopia, travel and accommodation and equipment (see attached spreadsheet) but does not include any costs after we arrived home e.g. medicals, blood tests, paediatric assessments, medication etc.

Issues

Time lines

Whilst we were reasonably happy with the content of the assessment process (information evening, education classes and home study/assessment), we think it needs to be completed within a shorter time frame. This largely beauracratc process could and should be completed within 12 months. After all, Australia only has approximately 400 overseas adoptions per year; of those Victoria has about 111 allocations per year. It is a user pays system where the customer receives inadequate service enduring lengthy delays between each step of the process with very little recourse. Adoption is an emotional issue and often prospective parents don't want to be seen to 'rock the boat' as they are often desperate to experience parenthood.

Costs

The cost is prohibitive to many families. The fees we were charged by ICAS and the Ethiopian Power of Attorney were \$14,138. Then the travel expenses were \$13,000 and the equipment; car seat, cot, pram, high chair, formula, nappies, clothing etc. cost \$2,856.00.

Unlike birth parents we were not entitled to the maternity payment as our son was 12 months old when he was allocated to us. Payments are only made for a child up to 26 weeks of age from the time he/she comes into your care. There are very few babies allocated from Ethiopia under three months of age and then there is normally a three month wait until you can travel to collect your child so it is rare to have an infant under 26 weeks old. However, you still need to buy the same equipment as you would when having a biological child and have the added expense of medical bills as the infants are often malnourished and weak when they come into your care.

Added to this is the policy that one parent has to remain at home for twelve months after placement. In Victoria the policy states:

one or other (or both) parents are required to stay at home for 12 months after the child is placed with the family. For school children they are required to be available for out of school hours care.

This comes at a time when, because of the high cost of adoption fees, most parents are feeling the financial strain.

I took a combination of adoption leave, annual leave and long service leave all at ½ pay. This meant that the family income was reduced by a further \$33,000 per year. I think by incurring such high costs and unrealistic expectations the government not only dissuades prospective families from adopting but also sends a message to the larger community that only high-income earners can adopt so therefore they are the only parents "good" enough to adopt, which of course is blatantly untrue.

Adoption Leave

The Workplace Relations Act 1996 states that in order for a parent to take adoption leave the child being adopted has to be less than 5 years old, presumably based on an assumption that all children above five will be at school. This discriminates against older children adopted from overseas as often they have little or no English, have experienced a traumatic event (the death of one or both parents) and then face the trauma of leaving their country and culture.

Research indicates that the older the child is the more time they need to adjust to their new family and culture. They often require some time at home with their family to adjust to their new circumstance. If parents are forced to take leave without pay this puts considerable strain on the family at a time when it is experiencing a time of emotional change. We believe this clause should be amended to take in to account the needs of older adopted children.

Government assistance

We were not entitled to any assistance from the government. Our son was allocated to us at twelve months old and so we needed to purchase all the equipment that any parent having a biological baby would need to purchase but because he was over 26 weeks we were unable to get any assistance.

Also, I was not told about the immunisation payment or that you had to claim for it by your child's second birthday. I paid over \$200.00 (not reclaimable through Medicare) for my son to have the new "all-in-one" shots so he would complete his 'catch up' course more quickly, minimizing the risk to him and other children of contracting a disease. I was waiting in the queue at Medicare when I saw a brochure which included information about this payment and thought "at last something I can claim" but when I went to the counter I was told I was too late as my son had turned two five days before!

Conclusion

It is our belief that Intercountry adoptive parents and children should be given the same assistance and supports as other families within the community. The government needs to abolish or substantially reduce these high adoption fees; not only would this decrease the financial burden on adoptive parents but would reduce the community's perception of Australians "buying children." Although we know this is not the case many people have said or inferred this to us since we adopted.

The time factor also needs to be addressed. It is unacceptable for families to wait (some as long as five years) to receive an allocation. Particularly, as there are over a million orphans in Ethiopia alone. Believe me, the process is an emotional roller-coaster, many prospective parents do not have biological children and have already been through the emotionally draining and costly IVF process before starting the adoption journey.

Even more damaging is that the high costs and lengthy timelines can be interpreted as the government's way of stemming the number of overseas children coming into Australia. Particularly, when comparing the number of children adopted by families in the USA to those adopted by families in Australia; there were over 20,000 children adopted by Americans in the 2003-04 financial year compared to 400 in Australia. With the ever decreasing birthrate I would have thought that the Australian government would welcome overseas children and make the transition to their new families and country as smooth as possible.

Finally, I wish your committee could have joined us on our trip to Ethiopia. The people had very little but were so generous and the country was beautiful. The orphanage where our son had spent most of his life did their best but with over 200 children and very little resources it was difficult and many of the children were sick. There was a corridor where row upon row of babies laid on the floor and outside the fifty or so older children had one worn out soccer ball to play with.

You may wonder what this has to do with an inquiry into Intercountry adoption but when we walked through the gate laden with clothes, baby formula, footy balls, toys and lollies the only questions those children asked were "Will you be my mummy & daddy?" or "Do you like me? Please take me." You see, the one thing they wanted above anything else was a family.

So when you make your recommendations please try and remember that every obstacle our government puts in the way of Australian families adopting children from overseas leaves a child in an orphanage where even with the best will in the world they often receive little nutrition, affection or love.

Thank you for taking the time to read this submission.

Regards Claire, Toby and Ermias Bottrell

Adoption Expenditure 2000 - 2003

Amount	Item	Date Paid	Stage
100	Registration of Interest	11/11/2000	Application
1000	Application Fee	16/03/2001	Application
200	Education classes	31/10/2002	Assessment
2685	Assessment fee	11/03/2003	Assessment
\$36.00	Lonely Planet Guide	16/03/2002	Assessment
55	AACASA Membership	11/03/2003	Assessment
480	AACASA Package	10/06/2003	Approval
1300	ICAS File Preparation Fee	31/07/2003	Approval
165	David L Bailey (Notary)	15/08/2003	Approval
80	Department of Foreign Affairs	15/08/2003	Approval
250	Ethiopian Consulate	15/08/2003	Approval
756.54	Power of Attorney (Lakew)	19/09/2003	Approval
100	Courier	15/09/2003	Approval
1000	ICAS Allocation Fee	14/03/2004	Allocation
1210	DIMIA (pay by Visa card)	15/03/2004	Allocation
	Foster Care Fees (US\$120 per child fo 2 months = US\$240) + special		
497.68	baby fee US\$100 - paid at allocation	15/03/2004	Allocation
2751.03	US\$2000,00 - paid at allocation	15/03/2004	Allocation
790	Vaccinations/medical kit	24/04/2004	Allocation
100	Travel Deposit	22/04/2004	Allocation
	Foster Care Fees (US\$120 per child x 2 months - balance paid when		
382	picking up children)		Allocation
200	visas		Allocation
\$14,138.25			
Travel Expenses			
5600	2 x adult airfares		Travel
320	1 x child		Travel
300	Insurance		Travel
\$170.00	Ruck sack		Travel
700	Hotel @US\$100.00 x 5 nights		Travel
1000	Aid		Travel
	phone calls and courier to Kenya to		
1000	locate missing visas		Travel
4000	Misc (food, spending money etc.)		Travel
\$13,090.00			

Equipment

\$269.00 Stroller	Equipment
\$399.00 car seat	Equipment
\$70.00 high chair	Equipment
\$70.00 baby carrier	Equipment
\$200.00 blankets/sheets etc	Equipment
\$1,000.00 clothes	Equipment
\$58.00 nappies	Equipment
\$400.00 formula	Equipment
\$200.00 bottles	Equipment
\$40.00 food	Equipment
\$150.00 travel cot	Equipment
\$2,856.00	

Total: \$30,084.25