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Friday, 15 April, 2005

The Secretary of the Committee
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to the Committee as an adoptive parent who has experienced the process of Intercountry Adoption on a personal level. While I will briefly address the terms of reference of this Inquiry I want to firstly explain how my family and I have found the process.

To be blunt we have found the process difficult, frustrating, unnecessarily drawn-out, extremely expensive and unfriendly to both the adoptive children and the prospective families. Our first adoption took 2 ½ years – one and a half of which was the actual assessment process carried out by the NSW Department of Community Services. Each step of the way included unexplained waiting times, such as the six month wait we had from sending in our Expression of Interest to being invited to the First Timers' Seminar which is the first official step in the process.

Once we were approved and allocated a child it became obvious (during the 11 ½ month wait we had to endure to bring our son home) that our case worker at DoCS and all other staff members there had little knowledge of how the adoption process worked in the country where we were to adopt from (in this case Guatemala). After many months of frustration I joined an email group of families all around the world who had adopted from Guatemala and through this forum I was able to provide DoCS with a breakdown of the process. Overall there were many instances of unprofessional behaviour from the Department and even though we believe our case worker had all best intentions she was only employed two days per week and thus her level of service was severely curtailed. It seemed to us that the entire ICA Department was drastically under-resourced and forced to function in an unprofessional and apathetic manner.

This was our personal experience. I would like to now address the particular terms of reference:

1) Any inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions.

There are a variety of inconsistencies between approval processes:

- Fees charged to adoptive families by individual state departments providing Intercountry Adoption services. Fees vary greatly from state to state, with NSW leading the field with a processing fee of $9,700.00 for first adoptions and with Tasmania at the other extreme with a fee of $2,052.00. It is important to remember that these fees are only a relatively small part of the total costs faced by families formed through Intercountry Adoption, who must also pay for Immigration fees, travel costs, fees charged within the donor country on top of the normal expenses of setting up a room for a child and other associated costs.

- The age of prospective parents. Each state appears to have its own arbitrary rules regarding age. In most cases these rules do not match those set by the donor countries.

- Time off work. Each state has different requirements as to how much time one parent must commit to not working after an adoptive child comes home. While there is merit in not placing newly adopted children into care soon after arriving home the states seem to have set up arbitrary amounts of time – ranging from 6 to 12 months. This also does not take into account the financial necessity for families to work (especially having spent up to $40,000.00 on their adoption) and the creative way in which families are able to achieve this without placing children into care.

- The actual process varies from state to state in terms of the assessment of applicants. In fact, families who move from one state to another (because of family or work commitments or simply because the status of Intercountry Adoption in their state – e.g. Queensland – is at a standstill) sometimes have to be re-assessed and re-approved.

- Very importantly the programs (i.e. the donor countries each state works with) vary from state to state. In theory some states are meant to be "in charge" of certain programs (i.e. countries) and offer that particular program to the other states. In practice this does not happen or happens so poorly that the average family would find it difficult to find out what programs are offered by states other than their home state and how they may be able to access those programs. In my experience information dissemination from the departments to their clients is almost non-existent. Most families find out what is going on "on the grapevine" or by conducting intensive personal research on the internet.

2) *Any inconsistencies between the benefits and entitlements provided to families with their own birth children and those provided to families who have adopted children from overseas.*

- The $3,000.00 Federal Government Baby Bonus. While in theory this is available to adoptive families, in practice it isn't. Because there is an arbitrary cut-off of 26 weeks regarding the age of the child when it is placed in the care of the adoptive family this effectively prevents the vast majority of ICA families from receiving this payment. The nature of Intercountry Adoption is that children are often older than six months when they are available for adoption. Many countries have extensive screening processes to ensure that there are no other options for that child (as is deemed necessary by the Hague Convention). This means that children are older babies or toddlers by the time they join their adoptive families.

  This is extremely discriminatory as adoptive families not only face the same child-rearing costs as biological families they have paid up to $40,000.00 simply to form their family and are therefore starting much further behind, financially, than the average biological family.

- Families are charged an Immigration Fee of $1,245.00 by the Federal Department of Immigration in order to bring their child into Australia.

In conclusion

Overall Australian families formed through Intercountry Adoption are treated as second-class citizens. We have to fight every step of the way and pay State and Federal fees not faced by any other type of family – all to achieve our dream of creating a family and at the same time providing a better future for an orphaned or abandoned child. I can not see that adoptive families are doing anything wrong yet we treated very poorly by all levels of government.

In fact, it could be argued that the Australian government has a very poor attitude towards Intercountry Adoption in general. Compared to other countries socio-economically comparable to Australia our statistics on ICA are abysmal. In 2003 Canadians adopted 2,181 children from overseas, over 20,000 children each year are adopted via ICA by citizens of the United States, yet in the 2003-04 financial year only 370 children found an adoptive family in Australia. A country as wealthy and as open-hearted as Australia should be able to put into place processes which allow as many qualified and properly assessed families as are willing to adopt from overseas to do so.

Some prospective adoptive families are told that there are more families than available children but this simply isn't true. This is simply a ruse to divert from the fact that the state departments charged with providing ICA services are under-resourced and not really interested. There are many thousands, if not millions, of children around the world who are living tragic lives in pathetically under-resourced orphanages in third world countries. While some of these countries do not have intercountry adoption programs many do. *The Australian Federal government should be doing everything in its power to research and establish programs with any and all potential donor countries. Furthermore, the Federal government should be encouraging and assisting families who want to adopt from overseas and not placing hurdles in their way.*

I wish your inquiry the best of luck and look forward to hearing of some positive outcomes for the future of adoptive families in Australia.

Yours faithfully,

Kathy Blanter