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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reference: Adoption of children from overseas

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Wednesday, 14 September 2005

Members: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop (*Chair*), Mrs Irwin (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cadman, Ms Kate Ellis, Mrs Elson, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus, Mr Quick and Mr Ticehurst

Members in attendance: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Irwin, Mrs Markus and Mr Quick

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

How the Australian Government can better assist Australians who are adopting or have adopted children from overseas countries (intercountry placement adoptions) with particular reference to:

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

WITNESSES

VOIGTMANN, Ms Paula, Executive Director, Christian Salvation Service (Taiwan) 1

Committee met at 10.27 am**VOIGTMANN, Ms Paula, Executive Director, Christian Salvation Service (Taiwan)**

CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—Welcome. Thank you for agreeing to talk with the committee in this private meeting. We have not yet received evidence from an overseas adoption agency for our inquiry, so you will provide a valuable insight as our first such witness.

The committee's terms of reference ask the committee to examine how the Australian government can better assist Australians who are seeking intercountry adoptions. In particular, we are looking at inconsistencies between different Australian states and territories. We have already explained to you that we cannot extend usual parliamentary privilege outside the borders of Australia in this case, so we are all being very cautious and none of us will make defamatory statements!

Ms Voigtmann—I understand. Would it be reasonable for me to begin with a short statement of who I am and what the Christian Salvation Service is?

CHAIR—Yes. You begin with that, and then I will introduce you to the other members of the committee.

Evidence was taken from Ms Voigtmann via teleconference—

Ms Voigtmann—I am the founder and executive director of Christian Salvation Service. Christian Salvation Service is a not-for-profit 501c3 organisation registered in the United States, with its headquarters in St Louis, Missouri. It is this organisation which initially donated funds enabling the establishment and registration of the CSS foundation in Taiwan.

CSS in Taiwan is a private, non-profit, social welfare organisation registered under the Taipei social affairs bureau. The Taiwan foundation is a non-government organisation. We are known for crisis intervention concerning women and children. Our services include but are not limited to counselling, long- and short-term care, shelter and the facilitation of adoption. I understand that your committee is interested in knowing more about adoption process as it relates to children from Taiwan and I hope that I will be able to provide you with some information. I do not, however, presume to be an expert on Taiwan law or to speak on behalf of any government agencies. Thank you.

CHAIR—We seem to take relatively few children from Taiwan—I think something like 229 last year. Do you think there is a greater capacity for Australia to take more children?

Ms Voigtmann—I would say from my experience and the development over the years in Taiwan that there is certainly a limited number of children here available for adoption. My organisation, which is one of the top three organisations, only expects to do 50 adoptions a year worldwide. I do not believe that overall there are a great many children from Taiwan going abroad for international adoption. It is difficult to say. The numbers to Australia could increase but not by a great deal.

CHAIR—Is that because children are being adopted in Taiwan or because there are fewer children being surrendered?

Ms Voigtmann—I think both situations are true. There is increased local adoption but also there is a huge increase in abortion. Within the last five years, the medical insurance that most people carry covers an on-demand abortion. We are not seeing the same number of children being born to parents who are not prepared to care for them.

Mrs IRWIN—Could you expand a little bit more on the active child rescue program and the children's shelter? How are those working?

Ms Voigtmann—As I said, we are known primarily as an agency for crisis intervention. As such, we receive referral phone calls from hospital social workers all over the island. When they have, through their social work department, identified a child or family that seems to be at risk then they look for solutions. Referring them to CSS is one of their possible choices. We evaluate those cases that are referred to us and see whether or not, within our scope of services, we can provide any help. Generally the children referred to child rescue have both a physical and social background problem.

Mrs IRWIN—When you start counselling the young women, is it usually in the early stages of pregnancy?

Ms Voigtmann—No, it is not. I would say that 15 or even 20 years ago it was, when we were dealing with young, unwed mothers. In society today we generally do not have an opportunity to counsel before the 7th or 8th month of pregnancy.

Mrs IRWIN—In your eligibility criteria you state that only practising Christian couples can adopt children. If there is, say, a couple here in Australia that might not be Christian but they can offer a loving environment, would they be considered?

Ms Voigtmann—No, they would not. The criteria as we have set them down are quite strict. One of the reasons for this is, again, the very small number of children that we have available for adoption. These are the criteria that we believe in and we do not have trouble finding enough couples to adopt who meet all our criteria.

Mr QUICK—Can you explain how you liaise with the territories or states in Australia, how you have developed that link, whether it is successful and what we could do to make it even smoother?

Ms Voigtmann—I will try to explain that. Right now, with the relatively small total number of adoptions a year that we do, we work with four countries: the United States, Australia, the Netherlands and Sweden. At the current time, Australia is receiving one-third to one-half of all of our allocations. I think the improvement in the relationship between our organisation and the different waiting families in Australia has developed over the last five or six years. I think it is due to the submissions from Australia of really good families that meet all of our criteria and are well prepared. The Australian families have been ones that we have been very happy to accept. How we work with the different states depends on what those states require and what is already

in place in that state. We cannot dictate what types of services exist but, if we are approached by them, then we would evaluate that and see how we could fit our program to their requirements.

Mr QUICK—The criteria for quite a few intercountry adoptions is that there must be a high emphasis on the adoptive parents understanding the culture of where the children have come from, yet in your basic criteria there is no real mention of that. What do you put in place to ensure that once the child is adopted in the Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, Canada or the United States there is that strong link back to Taiwan?

Ms Voigtmann—One of the things we have seen and experienced is that each of the countries we are working with has addressed that question and they already present solutions and possible programs—they ask the parents to go through specific orientation. A lot of this work is done on the other side and not done by us but we can see the work that has been done when we review their home studies and their applications. The other important part is the parent groups or later affiliations that the couples make with other couples in their areas or nationwide that have adopted children. I think the adopting parents' country is doing most of that work for us and they have already established that concern.

Mrs MARKUS—I noticed that you focus more on a family adopting one child, or an additional child if that child has special needs. What is your reasoning for that?

Ms Voigtmann—Let me clarify that. We usually prefer to adopt a child to a childless couple. We also willingly and routinely accept a second placement in that family as long as the first child placed is over two years old. So we routinely place two children—not only one—with a childless couple, and the second child would not necessarily have special needs. If we were looking to place a special needs child we would widen our criteria specifically on the number of children in the family. We would not widen the criteria on, say, time of marriage or their Christian faith. We understand that, many times, people who want to take a special needs child are people with biological children or larger families, so we widen the criteria for special needs. For the healthier babies, we prefer not to place more than two of them in a family and for that family to have no other children.

Mrs MARKUS—Do you have many sibling groups that require adoption?

Ms Voigtmann—It has been quite amazing that in the last two to three years we have received several. Of course, we get one or two sets of twins every few years—that is not impossible—but, for older sibling groups, we get maybe four or five cases a year where both siblings are under six.

Mrs MARKUS—Normally that sibling group would not be more than two children?

Ms Voigtmann—That is right. We have had greatest success in placing sibling group children in South Australia.

Mrs MARKUS—What is the reason for that?

Ms Voigtmann—I think it is in the establishment of relationships. In both Queensland and South Australia we previously had very active individuals who really searched for adoptive

families for children. The agency in South Australia is no longer in existence; it was run by Sue Priest. Sue came to Taiwan. She understood our program and told us that she felt there were older families in South Australia who had possibly reached the age where they could not adopt infants anymore and were still interested in adopting. Couples who were 45, 46 or 47 were identified and older children have been placed with them.

Mrs MARKUS—One of the things you are highlighting—and please clarify this if you think I have understood it incorrectly—is that having somebody in an Australian state who has an interest in, and a strong understanding of, how you operate actually facilitates adoptions between you and that state.

Ms Voigtmann—Yes, that is correct. That has been our experience. The areas where the most children go are places where there are the most active individuals trying to find parents for our children.

Mr QUICK—Do you have many visits from our state agencies?

Ms Voigtmann—No, we do not. We have had visits from Sue Priest. Most of the parent group leaders were originally adoptive parents who, when they came here to get their own child and then went back, decided to do something to help other people in their state. Jean Frost is a former adoptive parent in New South Wales and Pippa Evans is a former adoptive parent in Queensland. They seem to take on this mission and want to help. That makes it a little bit easier.

Mr QUICK—What is the situation with other countries? Do they liaise better with you than Australia does?

Ms Voigtmann—It is very funny situation and I would like to clarify it. The United States is by far the worst and we have placed very few children there. They are the most difficult to work with and the least cooperative, and their immigration regulations are difficult to comply with.

CHAIR—What about Holland?

Ms Voigtmann—Holland is one of the easiest, along with Sweden, because the country is small and it does not have very many people in between in the process. The Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands has given a licence, as it were, to a particular group to handle international adoption. In Sweden, it is the same: there is a licensed agency that is the go-between for the government and there are not so many people to go through.

Mrs IRWIN—Following on from those answers, have you any suggestions for ways to improve the adoption processes used by Australian agencies?

Ms Voigtmann—Not really. From our point of view, everything in Australia works well systematically. The cases that we receive are properly put together. Their home studies are good and the documentation is good. From our standpoint, it is fine. The only area I would comment on from a Christian Salvation Service standpoint is that we have too many entities to deal with, and the changeover of personnel—which will always happen in government offices or within a department or subdepartment—causes us a lot of trouble because then everyone wants to say:

'Hi, I'm new in this job. Would you tell me all about yourself?' This happens an awful lot in Australia.

CHAIR—Do you have any problems dealing with Queensland as the managing state? Do you find it unusual to be dealing with a state as distinct from Australia the country?

Ms Voigtmann—Not exactly. We understand that the immigration rules are nationwide. Donna Justice is our international director of programs and she works primarily at answering the correspondence and putting the cases together, but I do not think it is a real problem for us to deal with states. I think that the only issues that ever come up are, again, the changeover in personnel and the lack of corporate memory when changes are made. That causes us some extra work but, really, we understand the process—that is, that the states are somewhat different.

CHAIR—In the case of Queensland, you have had visits from the Queensland support parent group, haven't you?

Ms Voigtmann—In so much as Pippa Evans was here doing her adoption. We have not had specific visits that did not relate. I cannot remember if she has been back; sometimes people do come back once for a vacation. But I would not say we have had any official visits from any areas to try to determine our programs, with the exception of when Sue Priest came from South Australia several years ago to see whether she could establish a relationship. Otherwise, we have not had any officially designated visits to build a working relationship.

CHAIR—Has that been a problem or is that just fine?

Ms Voigtmann—From our standpoint, it is fine. It is just when situations like this come up that we become more aware of how much variation there is from state to state. But it is not something that concerns our agency particularly.

Mrs IRWIN—I understand that the Christian Salvation Service depends solely on donations. Do the majority of those donations come from Australia? Who would they be coming from—church groups, individuals or organisations?

Ms Voigtmann—Let me explain a little further. There are two sources. As I said, there are two organisations of the Christian Salvation Service: the Taiwan foundation, which is the entity that deals with the adoptions and the crisis intervention, and the US foundation, which is the mother foundation of the Taiwan unit.

We send out about 15,000 to 20,000 newsletters within Taiwan every year. The Taiwan people are generous with their donations to support our crisis intervention and social work. We do many things other than adoption and we publicise our work here. We give tax donations within Taiwan for the people of Taiwan who donate. From overseas, the amount of donation we receive is small. It usually comes at Christmas time or once or twice a year from adoptive parents. We do have adoption fees for adoption, which is the second part of our income. Those adoption fees are paid to the US agency in the United States, which then donates money back to the Taiwan agency.

Mr QUICK—Can you explain about the special needs children? How large is the group and how effective are you in placing those children overseas?

Ms Voigtmann—The definition of ‘special needs’ changes all the time. At this point, it is maybe 60 per cent of our children, but some months I look at the case list and I say, ‘In one way or another all of these children are special needs.’ We have a very high degree of success in placing physically handicapped children or children whose mothers have taken amphetamines during their pregnancy. We place a number of children, four or five a year, whose mothers are diagnosed as schizophrenic or manic depressive. One of our biggest concerns in the society today is the use of synthetic drugs and what, if any, effect this is going to have on children in the future. We are highly successful in placing these special circumstance children.

If I could have a wish about the Australian program, it would be that the medical clearances be a little broader. This is one of those things that helps us to choose the Netherlands sometimes, or even the United States with its difficulties, because a child with, say, a missing hand or foot or something like that will not get a visa to Australia. We sometimes have mentally capable children with physical needs but we cannot choose Australian families for those children.

CHAIR—It is a very small number, only three in 2002-03. How many overseas adoptions would you place every year around the world?

Ms Voigtmann—Around 50.

Mrs IRWIN—What countries would the majority of those children be going to?

Ms Voigtmann—The majority are still going to the Netherlands, with Australia probably second and then Sweden and the United States.

Mr QUICK—Is the fact that Taiwan is not a signatory to the Hague convention a hassle with your agency?

Ms Voigtmann—It is hard to say. Again, it is not a problem here. I think that our judges and governmental social affairs people comply with it and are very well aware of it. The only reason we did not sign is that we are not allowed to, due to the political problems with China. I think that most people in the world realise that our standard is probably in compliance with the convention; it is a political issue that we cannot sign or be members.

Mrs IRWIN—I was very interested to read that the Christian Salvation Service allows the biological mother to see a couple’s file and have input into the matching process. A number of overseas countries do not do this. I feel you should be congratulated for that because it also assists in the grieving process. Do they pick out the family that they want their child to go to in Australia?

Ms Voigtmann—I am really happy that you asked that question because it allows me to explain two points. Before I can answer that question clearly I would like to say that Taiwan has a totally different policy on or understanding of adoption than most of the other countries that would be sending children to Australia—for example, Korea or China. It is basic to the understanding about Taiwan adoption to understand that adoption is a contract between the legal

guardian and the potential adoptive parent. There is no point in the process where the government or our agency takes legal custody of the child. Parental rights are not terminated here until the time that they are terminated in the family court. So the judge literally terminates the parental rights and immediately assigns them to the adoptive parents. This is quite different from an unconditional surrender to an agency where the agency takes custody and the agency then chooses what to do with that child. That is what you see in almost every other country. Am I making myself clear on that?

Mrs IRWIN—You are. Thank you very much for that, Paula.

Ms Voigtmann—To take that another step, then, if it is this relinquishing mother who is going to be directly in court passing her child's custody to an adoptive parent, she must be fully informed about who that parent is and she must be comfortable with it. She is not giving her child to Christian Salvation Service and saying, 'You guys decide what will happen to him. Goodbye.' She is involved in the process from the beginning.

CHAIR—The emphasis of course here is the mother, so is it exclusively for the mother to do? Is the father not involved?

Ms Voigtmann—Again, this would depend. We do have some married couples who relinquish due to illnesses in the family, poverty, mental illness or jail terms. There are occasionally married couples. But we would work with whoever the legal guardians are, which is established by law here. If an unwed mother is under the age of 20, she is not legal to contract and must have her legal guardian present. So adoptions done by teenagers must be signed by their father or their mother. Whoever is their legal guardian must cosign.

Mrs IRWIN—I understand that couples need to be infertile or have secondary infertility. What evidence do you require from the adopting parent here in Australia? Does it mean that IVF has not worked? Could you explain secondary infertility?

Ms Voigtmann—Usually secondary infertility would be just something where the ob-gyn doctor has not been able to identify an absolute specific but that the couple had been trying to get pregnant for a number of years. We consider their age, the length of their marriage and the amount of time to say if it is possible that they are still going to conceive. We might not accept the file of a woman who is 27 or 28 with secondary infertility but if the woman is 38, 39 or 40 then we would say that she is probably not going to conceive even though the doctor cannot give a specific reason. It is not necessary that they have tried IVF but we need either a medical reason or a long time of trying.

Mrs IRWIN—I note that the couple should be under the age of 45 to be accepted. How long would the process be? Say that I decided that I wanted to adopt a child from Taiwan and I started the paperwork today. How many years would I be looking at before I could adopt or get that child from Taiwan?

Ms Voigtmann—I cannot speak from the Australian side; I do not know. But from the time I get a file which we approve we usually tell people eight to 12 months. It just depends on how long it takes on your side.

CHAIR—Paula, thank you very much on behalf of our committee for agreeing to speak with us this morning. It gives us a clearer insight and we are very grateful for that. Would you be happy if we published the transcript of today's discussion?

Ms Voigtmann—I do not have any problem with that if you think it would be helpful.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. In that case the committee can agree to have the transcript published, including on the parliamentary database.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Irwin**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

CHAIR—We are most grateful for your agreeing to speak with us today. May we wish you every success with your continuing work in the interests of children.

Ms Voigtmann—Thank you very much. Good luck with all of your work.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Committee adjourned at 11.00 am