

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
House of Representatives
Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the process of intercountry adoption. Having read many of the current submissions it is obvious that most points regarding inconsistencies between states and financial inconsistencies between birth and adoptive parents have been covered.

However I do wish to comment more generally about the adoption process. My husband and I have been in the process of adopting from overseas for almost 2 years. This is not as long as some, but a long time for anyone who has been wanting to start a family for many years previous to adoption application. This is the case for many people in the adoption process. We are encouraged politically to procreate and increase the birth rate but if this is unattainable biologically then that encouragement seems to quickly disappear.

The cost of intercountry adoption is high and is not facilitated at all in any sector. The Department of Community Services (DOCS) continually justifies all of their requirements with "It is in the best interests of the child". As a hopeful parent in the process, I care deeply about all children who have been orphaned and have no arguments with this motivation. But we are spoken to like we have no rights and often feel as if we have become a bunch of papers on the desk of an administrator. The quest to create a family when obstacles are experienced can not possibly be matched with a process that becomes about ticking boxes and completing forms. We are given as little information and feedback as possible. That which we are given is vague and non committal.

Those of us who wish to be parents and have travelled a long path in pursuit of this dream are aware that it is important to ensure that adopted children are placed in caring families. There should be *some* assessment process. I simply believe that the process should be more humane. We are not treated like human beings longing for a child. Moments of childhood or teenage abandon that everyone has in their past are dredged up and scrutinised. Family relationships are expected to look perfect. In contrast, those who are blessed with the ability to conceive and give birth are not subject to any tests regarding their character or past.

Inconsistencies between states are obvious but there are even inconsistencies between cases in the one state. Social workers give differing information to different applicants and appear to work as independent contractors rather than as assistants in a consultative assessment process.

There should be a standard process for all applicants in the adoption process operating across the country. The desire to create a family and have children is a natural human urge and process. Certain members of the community should not be discriminated against because of where they live, or because a member of staff involved in their case is new to the job, changes jobs or has a lot on their plate. Nor should they be judged solely on their financial capacity. They of course should have the financial ability to provide for a child, but should not be asked to pay \$20 000 more than someone giving birth, especially when the adoption service is provided by a government department and Australians are being encouraged by the government to push up the birth rate.

I feel that the situation could be enhanced by the employment in the adoption department of people who have been through the experience. Young university graduates have worked hard to attain their social work degree but do not have the life experience necessary to deal with couples or singles who are working on creating a family, and the emotional difficulties faced in this situation.

We have been told that the ultimate decision regarding our acceptability in the country of origin lies with that country. DOCS continually reminds us that the final decision is not theirs. Yet we have had to go through a very strict assessment procedure to be accepted by DOCS. There is no need for such an expensive and excessive assessment by DOCS when the final decision lies with the adoption country.

The process administratively is quite ridiculous. There are many forms to be completed, documentation moving back and forth unnecessarily, and odd questions asked at inopportune times. My husband phoned to advise he had faxed in a required medical test result and was asked, again, further questions about his personal life. If there are further questions, an appropriate arrangement to discuss them should be made. Standard forms are posted rather than emailed, and some photocopying for DOCS files is done by applicants.

The staff are helpful when we email or telephone when we have gotten desperate about not hearing anything, although it can take some persistence to get through. However information is not voluntarily offered. Although every applicant is supposed to go through the same process, very little standard information is provided. We discover bits and pieces as time goes on, during the endless months of waiting without hearing a word. When deadlines are given, they are often extended many times. *If* a reason is provided for the extension, it is the lack of funding the department receives, or the amount of work the staff has to deal with, or simply "the nature of this work" which is a vague, unquantifiable and arrogant excuse. These types of responses are not professional and are tolerated only by clients in such a desperate position as to want to create a family.

I feel that DOCS is not the appropriate organisation to process inter-country adoption applications. The process has become much less about providing a home and loving family for an orphaned child and much more about dispensation of paperwork, paranoia about difference (anything opposed to 'normal' – whatever that is) and fee processing. Prospective parents who endure this long, exhausting, and expensive process because they want to create a family are not people who need to be excessively scrutinised for tendencies towards child abuse. But DOCS operates from the viewpoint of regularly dealing with parents who do behave in this way. I continually read or see on the news children and babies who have been mistreated by their biological parents when DOCS have failed to intervene. From the outside it appears that double standards operate within the department. Perhaps DOCS in some way tries to redress the balance when unable to protect children already born by being excessively picky, when they have the opportunity, during assessment of adopting parents. It is difficult to reconcile the two standpoints. Private agencies dealing specifically with adoption and accredited by the federal government for consistency would be a more efficient and viable system.

I trust that all submissions will be of assistance in developing a new system of inter-country adoption that will bring parents wanting to have children and children orphaned in other, often disadvantaged countries, together.

Name Withheld
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