

International Adoption and Post-Placement Services

By Susan Myers

Introduction

During the last six years, media attention to international adoption has unfortunately tended to focus on negative and tragic situations. At least 10 children adopted from Russia have been abused and killed by their new parents. And one child, a 6-year-old girl, was adopted by a single man who abused and exploited her through pornographic photos displayed on the Internet for years before he was arrested and she was removed from his custody.

What happened in the period immediately following the adoptions of these children? Was anyone from the agencies watching, monitoring or supervising these families? What can be done to prevent such tragedies from continuing to unfold? Some people argue that if an adoption is finalized abroad, there should be little need for further follow up by an adoption provider in the United States. Reputable adoption agencies are alarmed by this attitude, and seek to find ways to engage families in post-adoption services that are meaningful and hopefully, meet the needs of both the parents and their newly arrived children.

Why Bother?

Families sometimes question the value and need for agency or social worker monitoring and involvement after international adoption, especially when it is already finalized. Many times, compliance and cooperation become an issue and adoption workers are surprised to hear from families that they no longer wish to follow through with agreed-upon visits.

Why does post-adoption reporting matter? Why bother sending in all these photos and scheduling meetings with the adoption worker who interferes with us getting on with life as a family? From the Lutheran Adoption Network's perspective, there are several valid reasons.

1. The country's law requires post-adoption follow up visits and reports as a condition of international adoption and parents committed legally to do it.

2. Some states still require a specific amount of post-adoption follow up, regardless of the type of immigration visa that was issued.
3. Post-adoption reports may help to combat persistent negative myths about international adoption such as, the children's organs are harvested and sold, or they become slaves or servants to rich American families.
4. Hearing and seeing how well the children are faring in their new homes demonstrates to foreign officials that international adoption is a good solution and keeps adoptions an option for other children in the future.
5. Having the support of a trusted and knowledgeable adoption worker can help families adjust to the big change in their lives, and normalize their experience.

The Challenges

Our experience shows that there are more compliance problems with post-adoption services in "interagency" cases, including those common situations where two agencies are involved, a local/direct service agency and a placing agency. Interagency work requires the placing and local agencies to communicate more in order to keep the local agency involved in the process, but this communication is time consuming and often breaks down.

Many times, once the homestudy is submitted to the placing agency, the family and their local worker drift out of touch and if the placing agency does not keep the local worker in the loop of what is going on with "her" family, it's hard for her to suddenly step back in after more than a year and reconnect. However, the placing agency requires her to meet with the family and submit reports for the post-adoption process that may last for more than three years. Families often report wanting "closure" once they return home with their child, and experience the ongoing post-adoption visits as an intrusion or an obligation they have to meet.

A few countries, including Vietnam, Ukraine and Kazakhstan require parents to self-report for 18 years and



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this leads to the question of whether either the placing or the local agency needs to track and remind the family when these reports are due. This is an incredible burden on the agency but many will undertake it because they believe they are ultimately accountable to the foreign country.

Country requirements frequently include multiple photos of the child in his or her new home and getting these can be a hassle for the agency as well as the family to produce the “right ones.” Some adoptive families give only “bad” or poor quality photos to the social worker for post-adoption reports and this has always been a mystery. Creative adoption workers often bring a camera when they make a home visit to ensure good and timely photographs to accompany the report. Pictures truly are worth a thousand words and speak volumes to government officials, as well as the loving orphanage staff and birth families, who may be lucky enough to see them.

Prevention is in the Preparation

Adoption agencies want to find ways to address the problem of cooperation with post-adoption requirements, and at the same time meet the needs and respect the integrity of the new adoptive family. When we think about how to solve the problem of post-placement noncompliance, the saying “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” comes to mind. In this case, the prevention is in the preparation that families receive before they ever travel for adoption, and is the responsibility of both agencies.

Post-placement requirements and issues should be discussed from the first contact with the social worker during the home-

Hague Convention and Post Placement

According to the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 and Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, a distinction is made between “post-placement” services and “post-adoption” services. Post-placement services are defined as services provided during the period of time between a grant of custody or legal guardianship and a final decree of adoption. Typically, these cases have been known as “IR-4” visa cases and they occur less frequently. They require the adoptive family to finalize their adoption in the United States after a specific number of months and require visits and reports by an agency or social worker recommending that the adoption be finalized. IR-4s are also issued under other conditions, such as when only one parent travels for the adoption. Under the Hague regulations, any agency providing post-placement services must be accredited or act as a supervised provider through an accredited agency.

By contrast, post-adoption services are defined as those performed after a final decree of adoption is granted in the foreign country. In many countries, a final adoption decree is part of the adoption process and these cases, known as IR-3 visas, constitute the majority of international adoptions into the United States. Children who immigrate on IR-3 visas also receive automatic citizenship.

Agencies or social workers providing post-adoption services, including reports, visits and counseling do not need to be Hague accredited or supervised, as post-adoption is not defined as an adoption service in the Intercountry Adoption Act. This distinction may lead some families and agencies to question the important practice of post-adoption visits and reports, as well as the fees charged to provide these services. Regardless of the legal definitions, post-adoption services are vital to the ongoing success of intercountry adoption.

simple way to do that. Placing agencies, local social workers and parents are all partners in the adoption process, and honoring our commitments should be the guiding principle as we work to find homes for all children who wait.

study. There should be ongoing and direct conversations about why it is important, what it involves, and how much it will cost. The agency’s policy about paying these fees in advance or at the time of service should also be shared with the family. Because of the long standing problems some agencies have experienced, many now require the post-placement service fees to be paid before the family travels. Some placing agencies now also require a deposit that is held in escrow and returned to the family after the post-adoption reports have all been received. They have been forced to develop this policy after being repeatedly “burned” by families who refused to schedule visits, write letters or send in photographs as they contracted to do.

It may be helpful if social workers can discuss noncompliance openly with families, even sharing some examples and how the agency is unable to “force” compliance when adoptions have been finalized abroad. However, the potential impact of this action on the future of international adoption from the country involved is serious. Countries can and do decide to suspend international adoptions when they are unable to track the status of the children — their own citizens — who have been adopted abroad.

In 2006, this exact scenario occurred in Ukraine, and more than 500 reports are still missing. Families who have adopted internationally have an obligation to honor their child’s heritage and homeland, and completing the post-adoption requirements are a