

Adoption process is more involved than many realize

Legal declarations, parental rights are part of a long wait
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By Karamagi Rujumba, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The touching images of Haitian children arriving on U.S. soil pulls at the heartstrings of many Americans, especially those who want to adopt children.

But adoption experts say that compassion for the displaced children and the reality of child adoption--both in and outside of the United States-- are two different things.

Even under usual circumstances there are enormous misconceptions about the intricacies of child adoption, experts say. And those misconceptions could explain the flood of offers to adopt children who have suffered immeasurable loss.

"People have to realize that there is often nothing fast-moving about the process of adoption, much less adoption of the children coming out of Haiti right now," said **Brian Cabrey**, a child advocate and a former senior attorney with the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Like Pittsburgh, which received a group of 53 children from earthquake-torn Haiti on Tuesday, the state of Florida, because of its proximity to the island nation has seen an influx of children unaccompanied by parents in recent days, Mr. Cabrey said.

But that alone doesn't mean that the children are orphans or that they are ready for adoption, said Mr. Cabrey, vice-president of Florida's Children First, a statewide child advocacy program.

"Part of the problem is that we don't know what the status of these children is. A child must have no parental rights attached to them before they can be adopted. But how can we know that, especially considering the situation in Haiti at the moment," said Mr. Cabrey.

In the case of the children who arrived in Pittsburgh from the BRESMA orphanage in Port-au-Prince, their adoption status has been enhanced by the fact that most of them already had parental rights severed. That is a legal process that must occur before a child can be placed for adoption.

If some didn't have those parental rights severed, that may explain why adoptions have not yet been completed for them, said Sandra McLaughlin-Butzine, director of Bethany Christian Services of Western Pennsylvania in Wexford.

"In international adoptions, the child has to be legally declared an orphan before they can even come. In fact, they travel on an orphan visa," said Ms. McLaughlin-Butzine, whose agency handles adoptions from five continents and 12 countries, including Haiti.

"It's a complicated process with a number of legal hurdles. There are state and federal laws and then there are laws of the country where the children are being adopted from," she said. Haiti, for example, is one of a few countries that allow a single woman to adopt a child.

On average, an international adoption could take up two years in the processing of paperwork and cost anywhere between \$22,000 and \$25,000, said Ms. McLaughlin-Butzine.

Even within the United States, a private adoption could cost that much, in both time and money, especially depending on the race of the child a family wants to adopt, experts say.

"We are always in need of families to adopt African-American and mixed-race babies," said Connie Bach, director of adoption for Children's Home of Pittsburgh and Lemieux Family Center, a full service agency in Friendship.

Full service means that her agency helps walk prospective adoptive parents through the process, which includes a security background check, a family analysis profile, matching and placement of the child before a court can put its stamp of approval on an adoption.

"Something people should know about adoption is that it often takes time, but if a family is truly committed to the process, it can be the most rewarding thing," said Ms. Bach, whose agency mostly focusses on adoption of babies within the United States.

Outside of private adoptions, there are some 125,000 children across the United States who are ready for adoption, said Jacqueline Wilson, director of the Three Rivers Adoptive Council.

Her agency contracts with the state and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services to facilitate adoptions for children who are in the foster care system and who, for one reason or another, a court has decided should not be reunited with their biological parents or with relatives.

"Because of Haiti, we have been getting a lot of calls in the last few days from people who are interested in adoption," Ms. Wilson said. "They are saying, 'If I can't adopt a kid from Haiti, maybe I can adopt one from Allegheny County.'"

Unlike private adoptions, which can start from upwards of \$10,000, Ms. Wilson said, the state facilitates adoptions at a minimal cost. She declined to give a ballpark number but she said the state and agencies like hers charge only a processing fee for different levels of paperwork.

The first step for prospective adoptive parents, she said, is a daylong seminar on the ramifications of adoption. That is followed by a state-required comprehensive background check specifically looking for incidences of child abuse or neglect.

State law also requires a court records check and a check into family finances. A bankruptcy, for example, would be noteworthy, experts said.

A full FBI check, medical screening, income verification and at least six personal references also are required before the process can move on to matching of children and families, said Ms. Wilson.

The one to two years that it can take to adopt a child -- including a six-month period in which a child is placed in a home before an adoption is approved -- is essential, Mr. Cabrey, the Florida child advocate said, because "one of the worst things that can happen is an adoption done too quickly."

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