



**Holt**International

FINDING FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN

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March 8, 2010

Senator John Kerry  
Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Washington, D.C.

RE: S.1458 – The Families for Orphans Act

Dear Senator Kerry:

On behalf of Holt International Children's Services, I am writing to express our grave concern about S. 1458, the Families for Orphans Act (FFOA).

Holt International Children's Services pioneered the modern era of intercountry adoption in 1956 with adoptions from Korea. We currently have programs in 17 countries and in the past five decades we have placed more than 50,000 children with adoptive families in the U. S. Although we are primarily known in this country for intercountry adoption, our priority is finding families for children, and Holt's international programs perform multiple services. We work to keep children and families together, to reunite families and to facilitate domestic adoption in their birth country. Holt International has a long history of child advocacy and our agency was an early advocate of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.

Holt appreciates and acknowledges the good intentions of the Families for Orphans Act to elevate the needs of homeless children around the world and to eliminate barriers that stand between children's fundamental rights to a permanent, loving family. That is our intent as well.

However, we believe strongly that S. 1478 is not the answer. We are especially concerned that this legislation will establish an additional bureaucracy that will not streamline, but instead complicate and duplicate existing systems within the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State (DOS), the U.S. Immigration Service (USCIS) and Health and Human Services (HHS). This concern is based on Holt's years of experience with USAID through the Office of Orphans and Vulnerable Children, as well as other foreign aid programs carried out by numerous child welfare organizations large and small, that consistently provide the services outlined in S. 1478. Holt was also one of three Principals for AdoptUSKids, a 20 million, 5-yr initiative of Health and Human Services to place children from U.S. foster care with adoptive families.

These varied experiences over more than five decades of working with children and families, informs our conclusions of S. 1458.

The recent evacuation of hundreds of children from Haiti who were already in the adoption process prior to the earthquake demonstrates that effective systems are already in place. The DOS, USCIS, USAID and HHS effectively coordinated efforts under incredibly difficult circumstances. As an organization that was the beneficiary of successful evacuation of 23 children by the U.S. government agencies, it is difficult to understand how the FFOA could have improved this process.

Contrary to the statement by the Families for Orphans Coalition, “the growing waiting lists of people with new awareness of the plight of these children who are interested in adopting them” would not be positively affected by FFOA. Furthermore, the priority of adoption is not families for children—but children for families.

For years USAID, DOS and HHS have responded to international crises that affect children without creating additional bureaucracies. Following the fall of Romania in the early 1990’s numerous organizations and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) descended on Romania to provide assistance to institutionalized children. A task force between USAID, HHS and DOS was established to organize NGO efforts to avoid duplication, provide networking, support and oversight. Holt worked in Romania helping to establish foster care systems and social work training for more than ten years and the Romanian NGO Task Force was viable in coordinating efforts of both U.S. and foreign NGO’s throughout that time.

After the Tsunami in Thailand similar inter-agency coordination was implemented to maximize efforts and avoid duplication of resources unnecessarily. This has been our consistent experience with U.S. Government agencies responsible for work with children’s issues domestically and internationally. Can there be improvement in the process? Of course, each of us has room for improvement and Holt appreciates the efforts of members dedicated to that priority.

As an alternative to the FFOA, we suggest the following to elevate the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children:

- Fully fund the Office of Orphans and Vulnerable Children(OVC) within USAID to adequately provide funding for programs that:
  - Prevent institutionalization
  - Keep birth families together
  - Reunite birth families
  - Provide permanent families in their birth country

- Designate a minimum of two million dollars annually in the OVC budget to work with the Central Authority to fund technical assistance and infrastructure initiatives to countries who have ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, or are working toward ratification of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.
- Establish an Ombudsman position within the Central Authority (similar to Ombudsman position within USAID) to serve as liaison between Central Authority, Congress, adoptive families, adult adoptees, media and others concerned about issues of international child welfare and adoption.
- Establish an Intercountry Adoption Commission to review pressing issues that are barriers to children finding families and to advocate elimination of those barriers when possible and reasonable to do so.

This letter is written with profound appreciation to Senator Landrieu and others who are unwavering in their commitment to children without families--it is not easy to oppose those efforts and it is not done lightly. However in consultation with numerous respected child welfare and adoption organizations, and professionals who agree with our conclusion, we believe it is critical to be on record with our concerns.

The Families for Orphans Coalition supporting the Families for Orphans Act does not fully represent the adoption community, and the Families for Orphans Act does not have the full support of the adoption community. As an example, Holt is one of the largest members and a founding member of the Joint Council for International Children's Services, and while the Joint Council is part of the Coalition supporting the FFO Act, it does not represent our views on this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns and for considering our suggestions. Please let us know if you have any questions or if we can be of further assistance. Holt stands ready to help in any way we can to help children and families. We look forward to working together with you on behalf of children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Susan Soonkeum Cox  
Vice President Policy & External Affairs  
Holt International Children's Services

CC: Senator Richard Lugar, Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Senator Mary Landrieu  
Senator James Inhofe