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JCICS cautions against rash legislation limiting the options for Russian orphans but encourages strengthening and improving the intercountry adoption system

Joint Council on International Children's Services (JCICS) is saddened by the recent reports of the January 2005 death of Dennis Merryman, an adoptive Russian child residing in Baltimore, Maryland. However, we strongly caution the Russian Duma against passing legislation eliminating intercountry adoptions or calling for a bilateral agreement, as proposed by Duma member Yekaterina Lakhova and Federation Council committee member Valentina Petrenko.

This case has not yet been tried in the US court of law and we discourage a premature response that would impact thousands more children in need of permanent families. According to news reports the child is alleged to have suffered from cystic fibrosis and digestive problems. The parents have been charged and the autopsy report listed starvation as the cause of death. Until all the facts are made public and the US legal system has reached a verdict the defendants, as in all cases, should be innocent until proven guilty. JCICS does not know the specifics of the case or the health care issues confronted, but we recommend withholding judgment until the outcome has been determined. Although the death occurred in January 2005 the autopsy report was not released until late July which addresses some of the questions of why this case is only now being discussed by the US media and adoption community.

JCICS supports the United States Judicial System in swiftly investigating this case but to further proactively address this tragedy and ensure that children are protected, JCICS proposes the following:

1. Permanency for Children to Remain a Priority

While this tragic case should not be dismissed, it is also important to recognize that it does not represent the international adoption community. As a whole, the majority of adoptive children are thriving in permanent, loving and safe homes and their heritage and country of birth are celebrated throughout the year. Many studies have shown that children growing up in institutional settings in any country face a higher occurrence of poverty, prostitution, drugs and crime. The high majority of intercountry adoptions provide orphaned children with stability, love and safety in a permanent family.

2. Standards for Pre-Adoption Screening and Post-Adoption Reporting Be Strengthened

JCICS recommends that all agencies examine their pre-placement training and education for prospective adoptive parents to ensure that parents are sufficiently prepared for adoption. Some agencies or parents may wish to voluntarily undergo psychological testing as part of their home study. There are numerous screening tools already used in the U.S. home study process, however, JCICS recommends a strengthening of the pre-adoption process.

STATISTICS

- Approximately 44,166 children have been adopted from Russia since 1992 by U.S. Citizens
- While a singular death is unacceptable, the estimated number of Russian adopted children who have died as a result of physical abuse in the U.S. represents .03% of the Russian adopted population
- In 2003 UNICEF estimated that there were over 700,000 orphans in Russia
- On June 1, 2005 the Russian Minister of the Interior stated that "Family abuse is another problem [in Russia]. Analysis of the relevant administrative and criminal cases is indicative of a considerable incidence of psychological and physical abuse in families... Last year more than 154,000 offences were recorded [in Russia]."

Furthermore, we recommend that all agencies examine their post-placement reporting schedule and if necessary, reinforce contact with adoptive families especially within the first three months of arrival into the United States. Adoptive families should be encouraged to join support groups with other adoptive families and contact their agencies at the first sign of difficulty. Adoption agencies employ trained social workers to assist families in the transition process and families need to be encouraged to utilize this expertise.

3. Creation of Research Study to Identify Solutions & Safeguards

JCICS will be collaborating with other NGOs to create a task force to examine cases of abuse and determine what additional safe guards can be put into effect to maximize the protection of children. We invite the input of the Russian government and encourage continued open dialog to discuss concerns and implement solution strategies to better serve children.

JCICS shares the commitment of the Russian government to strive for best practices in child welfare and offer our assistance to the Ministry of Education. It is our hope that international adoption will continue to be a positive option for children in need of permanent families.

Joint Council on International Children's Services (JCICS) is one of the oldest and largest membership associations of licensed, non-profit international adoption agencies, child advocacy groups, parent support groups and medical clinics in the world. JCICS does not place children for adoption or provide adoption services, but rather advocates on behalf of children in need of permanent families and promotes ethical practices in intercountry adoption. JCICS believes that all children – regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, medical limitations or other conditions – deserve permanent, loving homes. When children cannot be cared for in their birth families, or in permanent adoptive homes within their country of birth, we believe that intercountry adoption provides the most positive option for children.

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