

# International adoptions a long-term project, specialist says

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As far as local adoption practitioner Sandra Webb is concerned, news that the province may be eliminating its international-adoption fees as part of its response to the tsunami disaster is great to hear.

Ms. Webb, who conducts home studies for international adoptions through her Cobourg agency Focus On Family, noted that the fee elimination will not apply to domestic adoptions — but in an international adoption, one is glad to save money wherever possible.

Though the costs of adopting a child from another country have been cited as \$10,000 to \$30,000, Ms. Webb said that the higher figure is far more common. To be able to save that \$985 means a lot.

"Adoptive families want so badly to be a family or to add a child, so they don't want to rock the boat," Ms. Webb commented. "While in the midst of their adoptions, most of them don't want to be writing to the ministry to say that \$985 fee is unfair, because they don't want to risk their adoption.

"These people should be delighted."

She has a home study in the works right now in which the adoptive family may be able to avoid the fee, and one being lined up in which they probably will.



PHOTO BY TED AVSOEN

Adoption practitioner Sandra Webb uses a stuffed orangutan to put children at ease.

International adoptions have mushroomed in recent years, with fewer babies available domestically and through dissatisfaction with the open-adoption model that has become prevalent.

Now that Ontario has passed the International Adoption Act, international adoptions must go through an agency licensed to arrange adoptions in the country from which the adoption originates. This holds true even in cases of families adopting a child related to them.

In order to obtain a licence, an agency would have to understand the legislation and regulations surrounding adoption in that country.

Ms. Webb's role is to provide the home studies for these adoptions, and she has worked with Chinese, Korean, Russian, Ukrainian, South African and Sri Lankan adoptions.

Ms. Webb recalls handling a couple's adoption of a Sri Lankan child some time ago.

She did the home study, but they made their own contacts and arrangements on the Sri Lankan end because the husband was originally from that country.

Later, after the International Adoption Act had been passed, they were interested in adopting a second child. Obligated to go through an agency, they learned how much the costs would be and were forced to abandon these plans.

It's possible humanitarian considerations might be made on behalf of people wishing to adopt family members from the affected areas, as some of these agencies (such as Mission of Tears, with which she has worked) are also charitable organizations. But in the end, these agencies also have costs to cover and are limited in what they can do.

There is a lot of discussion around adopting these children, but Ms. Webb

predicts nothing is going to happen for a long time.

"They have to find relatives for these children, they have to get organized and set up orphanages. And there's going to be a tremendous amount of trauma for the kids," she said.

A similar situation happened more than a decade ago, when fighting in Romania left many orphans and people flocked to open their hearts and homes to these little ones.

"There's a reason why you need organization and planning," Ms. Webb said. "Every country starts out allowing adoptions, has problems and then has to reorganize."

The case of the Romanian children brought out an awareness of how living in institutions might have affected these children. A report on the issue that is now required reading for adoptive parents.

Romania has now put a moratorium on adoptions, as has Vietnam. Russia put one on in response to stories of abuse to Russian children who had been adopted — they are now formulating legislation to deal with this situation.

In the case of adoptions from countries devastated by the tsunami, Ms. Webb said, "I think we all know now that it's wonderful to be wanting to help. But things need to settle, and we have to get a better handle on the children.

"First, they must look for their parents. Second, they have to find ways to help them deal with the grief and the loss. Then, we have to realize that they might not have a clue about their heritages — no history, no contacts. Their history begins with this great loss.

"It's such a good, loving response to want to help, but there's a lot more to it than pity — love doesn't always cure everything."

Premier Dalton McGuinty has made

comments urging that everything be done to expedite these adoptions, but you can't shortcut through the requirements of the International Adoption Act. At best, once adoptions begin to be allowed from these affected countries, Ms. Webb would estimate the process will take six months to a year from that time. "I don't see how they can be a lot faster," she said.

As she heard at a conference in Russia this fall — and she believes it would apply to those countries affected by the tsunami — they are truly sad to lose one of their children to adoption outside their home country. Imagine, she posited, that many Canadian children are left homeless because of some disaster and numerous families from another country express interest in adopting them.

She expects that tsunami-ravaged countries would first want to see a child go to members of its own family (immediate or extended). Then they might prefer that the children at least go to families with a similar cultural background.

There might be other delays, she suggested, from the fact that government offices in affected countries may not be doing their fastest work and most meticulous record-keeping right now, as they concentrate more on emergency response.

While Queen's Park has suggested funding might be made available to help encourage international adoptions. But the suggestion raises as many questions as it solves — does that apply only to adoptions from these specific countries, for instance, and how would it be determined which families qualify for financial assistance in adopting?

"I have contacted the ministry saying I would be delighted to be part of a committee to organize a means of working with tsunami orphans," Ms. Webb said.