

Haitian “Orphans”: A US Social Worker’s Caution and Recommendations for Policy

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When considering a response to the thousands of children in Haiti who have been displaced from their families or even “orphaned” (1), it is essential that we be cautious in humanitarian steps forward. Right now, children are being flown into the USA on humanitarian visas for medical care. For example, the Shriners Hospital of Springfield, Massachusetts has a specialty in Orthopedics and they are receiving a small number of children for care. “Once these children enter into a phase of rehabilitation, they will need temporary care with families in the USA and we are already beginning to work on that issue” said social worker DeGuerre Blackburn, Executive Director of Voices for International Development and Adoption (VIDA). Blackburn, who has been consulting with the project emphasized that DNA tests will be essential because eventually reuniting these children with their families in Haiti, whenever possible, is the number one priority. Because some of these children have uncertain identities, as is the case with major disasters, creating a DNA databank is essential in Blackburn’s opinion. VIDA is currently taking the lead in investigating the options for DNA testing and developing a strategy for this small group of children.

From this author’s perspective, having extensively researched the problems of adoption fraud even with the use of DNA in Guatemala, a process that has insurances of test reliability and validity will be essential. While VIDA’s ethical approach will work for a small group of children, there is a need for such a response nation-wide and for all of the children who arrive in the USA from Haiti.

In the big picture, tasking a third party organization with a strong information management system which has no financial interest in intercountry adoption will be critical to a step towards developing a system which has the best interests of the child at heart. This may be a government organization or even better, a reputable non-governmental organization which can quickly and assuredly set forth the process, collaborating with the private sector which can donate the tests as a part of their humanitarian disaster assistance. Developing protocol for such a DNA testing and information management system could provide valuable lessons for disaster management and humanitarian aid on a global-basis.

Such a system would insure that the best interests of the child with the primary goal of child reunification with their family or kinship group. While we may argue how to do this efficiently, the fundamental value for a systematic and ethical child welfare response is non-negotiable.

As in the case of other disasters and war, there will inevitably be individuals and groups who attempt child rescues without appropriate paperwork or clearance to do so. Already, 18 days since the the 7.0 earthquake, news reports indicate that members of a USA-based faith organization have already been arrested in the Dominican Republic² for child trafficking. “This is no real surprise given history” states Dr. Kathleen Bergquist, Social Work Professor of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. The Haiti incident even smacks of a similar incident in Chad with “Zoe’s Ark,” a French group which attempted to airlift children out of the war zone related to Sudan. In an article entitled “Operation babylift or babyabduction?” Bergquist reminds us that the individuals arrested faced charges and ultimately there was a disappointing response from the French government in terms of law enforcement n(2). At the end of the day, because they really did not hold their citizens accountable for attempted child trafficking,(3) the illegal behaviors of these French citizens acting in Africa were ultimately

dismissed. This leaves us to wonder how the actions of “humanitarians” engaged in private and illegal airlifts of children will be treated by law enforcement in the future.

At this time, the number of children who will come into the USA legally under humanitarian visas for medical purposes is not being reported in the press on an official basis. Obviously, the citizens of the USA stand ready to help as neighbors of the island nation. Tracking these children will be best accomplished through coding the visas under which the children will travel, identifying them as specifically for Haitian children receiving humanitarian medical aid. This can offer a way of tracking children’s whereabouts over time for the necessary monitoring. Because these visas must be renewed, the US Department of State will be able to respond to the inevitable challenges of the aforementioned DNA match in the cases of children with uncertain identities. This would be a second data point for the management information system tracking the children.

Regardless of how our policy makers handle the early stages of child rescue, it will be imperative for social workers to continue to voice caution for anyone hoping to adopt a Haitian “orphan.” Already, there are indications of scams being perpetrated with USA families being approached with the opportunity to “adopt,” and unscrupulous individuals requiring upfront fees and payments for such an adoption. With the exception of the adoptions that were already in process when the earthquake hit Haiti, there are no new adoptions at this time. Inevitably, things will change in time, but in these early days social workers must caution hopeful families and, when called to assist with adoptions, only coordinate with reputable organizations. It is important to remember that not all of those whom that call themselves “adoption professionals” have the credentials or ethical practice experience of child welfare placement, especially in the context of disaster.

From a policy perspective, the USA government will again be tasked with developing sound short-and long-term child welfare policies to ensure the best interests of the child. Because Haiti is not a Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (HCIA) signatory nation, the USA’s commitment to that international standard does not apply. As Bergquist (2009) points out, even if the standard did apply, the HCIA has inadequate guidance for natural disaster and we learned this to be true for the children of the Tsunami of 2004 which killed over 200,000, orphaning or displacing countless children from their families. As we move forward, there is a call for the development of policy which truly responds to the practicalities of disasters and the needs of children, drawing upon the technology of DNA tests and skilled database management combined with ethical social work practice.

Finally, from a psychological perspective, Dr. Judith Gibbons of the Saint Louis University reminds us that “the research literature on helping children get through crises, including war and natural disasters, suggests that they need normalization...so, even the best intentioned shift in their environment – to a different language, culture, food, caretakers, carries with it additional stress, and a delay in psychological recovery.” Because many of these children are being air lifted in this crisis, it is essential that we consider how we treat these children in a culturally-competent manner, including involving Haitian social workers and psychologists in the process whenever possible. They can work in the child’s language and attend to the needs that Haitians understand best from their cultural lens.

Follow-up note, on February 4, 2010 a group of social work/human service practitioners and social work scholars wrote an open letter to USA Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in regards to these concerns, making recommendations for DNA-related policy and asking for clarification of the aforementioned “child trafficking” incident. For more about that, go to the author’s website www.HagueEvaluation.com.

1) It should be noted that the provocative term “orphan” is often mis-used. Often children

who are without family care are called “orphans” yet they do have living relatives who are just unable to care for them due to circumstances, such as natural disasters. With proper assistance, many of these children can be reunited with their families. Also, it should be noted that there are single orphans and double orphans and this denotes the loss of one parent or both parents, respectively.

2) The Dominican Republic, the other nation located on the small island in which Haiti is found, has long been concerned about issues of human trafficking of Haitians into their small neighboring nation. Haitians have historically been trafficked into the Dominican Republic for the purpose of servitude, underscoring issues of race and economic prosperity which divide these two poor nations. For a variety of reasons, there is no doubt that the Dominican Republic is actively engaged in monitoring human trafficking and migration along their border so as to avoid their own humanitarian crisis related to thousands of Haitians fleeing into their nation.

3) See Kathleen Bergquist’s (2009) analysis of the situation of Zoe’s Ark and humanitarian assistance and child rescues in times of war and disasters. Entitled: Operation Babylift or Babyabduction?: Implications of the Hague Convention on the humanitarian evacuation and ‘rescue’ of children. *International Social Work*, 52 (5), 621-633.

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