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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

THE PRACTICE OF CHILD WELFARE IN RUSSIA

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When entering a situation, community, or nation, social workers are equipped to ask questions about *systems*—in this case pertaining to Russian orphans: how children enter the child protection system, their care in orphanages, and what happens when they age out. And, what happens to the parents whose children are in the child protection system. This workshop addresses these systems issues.

The presenter of this workshop utilized a Power Point presentation and flow chart handout for participants to describe the child protection system in the Vladimir Oblast—a region located near Moscow. The presenter has been traveling to Russia, in particular the Vladimir area, to conduct orphan camps, hold workshops, and meet with Russian professionals since 1998. The information presented in this workshop is a compilation of evidence collected on the child protection system of this region through interviews with orphanage staff, social workers, and staff members with Children’s Hope Chest. The latest update for this information was January 2006. It must be stated that this information must be updated regularly as the system is in constant flux.

Entering the Child Protection System

There are three primary avenues for entry into the Child Protection System: 1) Ministry of Health—children transferred from baby orphanages, who were abandoned at birth, born in prison, or left without care as a baby; 2) Ministry of Social Welfare—street children and runaways placed in shelters, where they can stay up to six months. Social workers determine whether to send these children to the orphanage or return them to their parents. Also, single mothers can apply for a one year temporary placement of their children in the orphanage as part of their social benefit program provided by the state. 3) Ministry of Education—Inspectors, employed by the Ministry of Education, investigate cases of neglect and abuse and compile evidence for the court on whether to deprive

parental rights. These workers oversee children in their charge throughout their duration in the system. Inspectors generally cover a geographic area of 5,000 in population. Referrals may come from teachers, neighbors, or are discovered in the course of supervising socially deprived families. Children are temporarily held in a hospital or shelter pending the judge's ruling for the state to take custody. Here the child is provided a medical, psychological, and educational assessment by a multidisciplinary commission to determine placement (i.e., regular orphanage or boarding home for special needs children). A form of kinship foster care is available for relatives to care for these children and is supervised by the state, but no funds are provided in exchange for care.

Parents in the Child Protection System

No treatment plan is developed for parents to address issues resulting in the loss of their child to the state and placement in the orphanage. This is due largely to the state's pursuing termination of parental rights upon the child's entrance into the system (see discussion below). It is estimated that 90% of the children in the orphanage system are there due to alcohol related problems of their parents. Since there is no plan for parents to secure treatment for their alcoholism, services are not seen as needed. Occasionally a parent will appear before the court to seek the child's return; and, a child may be returned home providing the court determines that significant changes have occurred with the parent(s). There are times when the orphanage serves as a temporary placement for children—particularly when parent(s) are serving jail or prison time. Upon completion of their prison time these parents have their children returned to them. Additionally, single mothers can temporary leave their children in the orphanage for one year as part of their social benefit from the state.

Note above that no treatment plan is developed for the parents to complete to have their children returned. In the United States, most parents are actively involved in fulfilling a treatment plan and many have their children returned subsequently. In Oklahoma, where the presenter is from, some 65% of children are reunited with their parents following the parents' completion of a court ordered plan. With no real plan to help parents, including the absence of resources to help them as well, children tend to be left for the state to parent; their natural parents are no longer involved.

Children in the Child Protection System

Children are placed in orphanages in the Vladimir region, with those from birth to 3 years being placed in facilities operated by the Ministry of Health. Children ages 4 and above are placed in facilities managed by the Ministry of Education. All children are provided a physical and mental assessment before entrance into the orphanage or boarding home for special needs children. The mental assessment can be repeated if the orphanage director (who now has custody of the child) believes the child has been misdiagnosed or has made significant progress to merit reevaluation. All children placed in the care of the orphanage receive physical assessments two times a year.

Orphanages in the Vladimir Region are funded through the Ministry of Education. This is a new policy, as of 1-1-03, differing from the previous one, where orphanages were funded by cities or districts where they were located. In the Vladimir Region, the Ministry of Education operates 18 orphanages totaling some 1000 children.

Once a child enters the orphanage, there is the requirement to pursue termination of parental rights (as discussed above). This process occurs more readily with younger children than with those who are older, since the younger are more adoptable. The termination process can be delayed as long as parents visit the child once per month while the child is in the orphanage. When termination does take place, the child is placed in the Federal Data Bank for three months to find Russian adoptive parents. If no adoptive parents are found, another three months must lapse before the child is made available for international adoption. Thus, six months must go by before the child is eligible for adoption internationally. In this system, young children make it to the Data Bank quickly, whereas registering older children is a much slower process. Adoption, then is another way that children exit the child protection system—both Russian adoption and internationally.

US organizations, Children's Hope Chest (Colorado Springs, CO) and Buckner Orphan Care International (Dallas, TX), work together to provide services to area orphanages and technical schools. Hope Chest services area orphanages through: church adoption of various institutions in the region (conducting construction projects, special camps, and providing financial and material support for children), summer and winter camps for children and youth of various ages, coffee house in the city of Vladimir, and family centers (group homes) for older youth, both male and female, at various locations. Buckner and CHC split the cost of providing over 50 foster home placements for older youth for living skills development and training in family living and provide the salaries of caseworkers who provide services to the orphanages, group homes, and foster homes.

The Nadezhda Fund is a Russian non profit charity organization sponsored by Children's HopeChest. It has long term obligations with the Ministry of Education (Vladimir) to provide services for orphan children.

Children are required to remain in the orphanage until completion of the 9th grade, when they are eligible for training in one or more technical schools in the region through the 11th grade. They may study a variety of subjects including auto mechanics, baking, sewing, locksmith, etc. Children may attend the university, but must pass comprehensive and competitive entry exams in order to be eligible. Orphan children who opt for technical school training usually try to get jobs upon graduation and not further their education. For the most part, orphans struggle with being prepared for the world outside their institutional experience.

Youth may continue the final two years of high school and graduate after the 11th grade. (It must be noted that Russia is moving to requiring 12 years of school.) Youth may attend college (3 to 4 years) where study is offered in a variety of professions, including teachers' training, computer technology, etc. Following completion of college (which

takes 4 years), youth may transfer to the university but must study the major begun in college.

Finally, it must be noted how children are supported both within the orphanage system and when they leave. Youth are provided payments of around 3,900 rubles/month for clothing and food (15,000 rubles/year for clothing—with allowance greater during the winter months and 2000 rubles/month for food). However, a portion of these funds go to the orphanage for care of the child. Approximately 27 rubles make up one US Dollar. All payments cease once the child leaves the system—finishes tech school or college. Students graduating from tech school receive 21,000 rubles and from college: 19,500 rubles). Aid to children in the system usually goes to age 23. The state provides youth in its charge an apartment following graduation from technical school or college. If the parents are living, youth are provided their parents' apartments; on the other hand, youth are provided housing by the state if this arrangement is not possible. Problems may exist for youth from families where siblings (also in the system) have rights to the same apartment. Also, it may be difficult for an orphan to claim his/her parents' apartment if they are still living there. Thus, housing arrangements can become complex. If housing is possible through these family arrangements, then youth don't have the option for housing provided by the state. Regarding transportation, youth are now required to pay for their own transportation between cities and villages (as of January 2005).

It must be noted that changes continue to occur in the Child Protective System. Recently the government approved a plan to begin foster care in 27 of the 82 regions. Vladimir is one of those regions. As yet, services for parents of children in the orphanage system haven't been developed. This is due largely to the state's pursuing termination of parental rights for those parents who have children in the system. Hence, social services to these parents are not deemed to be necessary.

Some general information about orphans throughout Russia indicates the following:

- The estimate is that there are some 770, 000 orphans
- 100,000 new orphans are added to the system annually
- 93% of orphans today are known as “social orphans”—abandoned or removed from their parents
- Within one year following leaving the orphanage or tech school, 40% are involved in drugs, 10% have committed suicide, and 10% are considered “normal”
- “Street Kids” are estimated at 1 to 3 million
- Orphan graduates between the age of 16-23 from the 82 regions total 90-130 graduates each
- Russia's unemployment rate stands at 13% --with youth it is 26% --the majority being orphans
- Regarding domestic adoptions, they are free for Russians; 92% of children adopted are under one year; up to 80% of these adoptions fail with the child returned to the state
- 27 to 82 regions in Russia have foster care that is state supported; however, no national foster care plan has been approved

- Finally, there is the lack of Russian government ownership of the orphan problem; a lack of organizations to provide services to orphans; and a lack of coordination between agencies that serve orphan children
- The ministries of education, health, social work, labor, and international affairs all work with orphans, yet, don't coordinate together

The above general information was gathered through a Child Protection Workshop held at the Russian American Christian University (RACU) in Moscow, January 2006.