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Haiti quake, tough standards complicate adoption process

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BY KAREN ROUSE

THE RECORD

Adoption agencies across North Jersey have been inundated with calls from families who want to care for the youngest victims of the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti.

But agency directors are responding cautiously — saying media images of suffering children may be triggering an emotional reaction from some who have not considered the complexities of adoption.

“That always happens after a huge national disaster and they show pictures of children and show horrors,” said Jared Rolsky, executive director of New Jersey-based Golden Cradle Adoption Services. The priority, he said, is to protect the children and verify they are actually orphans.

“This all has to be done legally and properly. ... You can’t just pluck kids up” and send them to families abroad, he said.

And even adoptions already under way from the Caribbean nation sit in limbo as international child advocates call for a halt on Haitian adoptions because the ability of the government there to process them is uncertain.

Midland Park couple Andy and Jennifer Tyler started the adoption process for a baby girl last summer, but now it is uncertain when it will be completed.

“Right now, there is no government,” said Andy Tyler, a salesman who has traveled to Haiti five times since 2003 as a missionary in Cap-Haitien. “Honestly, it’s in God’s hands.”

At the Fair Lawn branch of Bethany Christian Services, an agency that handles 1,800 domestic and international adoptions a year, e-mails and calls have been pouring in, said Nancy Dykstra-Powers, executive director.

“We are hearing from people who not only want to adopt a Haitian child, but would also

like to be a foster parent,” said Dykstra-Powers, who matches families with orphans from the God’s Littlest Angels orphanage in Haiti.

Dykstra-Powers directs callers to Bethany’s online application, but she expects many will not complete the process. “After all the emotion and the reality of raising a child sinks in, they may decide not to go through with it,” she said.

And many of those North Jersey families may discover they are not eligible to adopt a Haitian child.

Caroline Robles of Elmwood Park learned last week that at 27 she is too young to adopt a child from Haiti.

International adoptions mandate that prospective parents meet the requirements of both the U.S. and the country from where they are adopting. The U.S. rules include fingerprinting, background and medical checks, references and home inspections — to make sure the family can provide a safe environment to the child.

But Haiti’s rules are notoriously strict, said Dykstra-Powers. Among them, couples must have been married at least 10 years, and prospective parents must be at least 35 years old.

Thomas DiFilipo, president of Joint Council on International Children’s Services, an organization that advocates for the rights of orphans, said groups have been asking Haiti for years to ease its “overly strict requirements,” but there is no indication it will.

Last year, there were 330 U.S. adoptions of Haitian children, according to the U.S. State Department.

Amy Parodi, disaster communications manager at World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization, said a rush on the adoption process creates a potential danger for children to be exploited.

“There are children who are not with their families, but we can’t know if their parents are actually dead or [if they] actually have family members that can take care of them,” she said. “In the chaos, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands who have not been reunited.”

On Friday, Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., and other members of Congress asked Homeland Security to allow orphans without family in Haiti to be placed temporarily with relatives in the U.S.

According to the letter sent to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, more than 350,000 orphans lived in Haiti before the quake.

The Tylers, who have two biological sons — Quinn, 10, and Clayton, 5 — said that even before the earthquake, they were prepared to wait as long as three years for a daughter.

Jennifer Tyler said she always knew she wanted to get married, have biological children — and adopt.

“We believe children are a gift from God,” she said. Haiti was the logical choice because her husband had already developed a relationship with the Haitian people during missions with Open Door Haiti, a non-profit that supports a church and school in Haiti.

Last summer, the Tylers, both 39, contacted Bethany Christian Services. They have been through background checks, fingerprinting and provided references. They needed to complete a home visit from a social worker and were soon to be matched with a prospective child.

Then the earthquake hit.

“The hardest thing since the earthquake is seeing them pull out these children from all this rubble and for them to no longer be living,” said Jennifer Tyler.

As they wait, the Tylers continue to support the country they believe will someday provide them a daughter.

Quinn said his school is planning a fund-raiser. Clayton said he made a donation to Haiti in church today. “We have to pray for Haiti,” he adds.

The family is also helping to fund food containers that will provide more than 250,000 meals that Open Door Haiti will send to Cap-Haitien, Andy said.

Meanwhile, Jennifer continues to look at pictures of little Haitian babies online, Andy said.

“She’s fallen in love with them,” he said.

Taped to a wall in their kitchen are pictures of nephews and nieces and along with three Haitian children — Edmond, Wood-love and Roslin — whom they support through donations that provide hot meals or school uniforms and education.

Andy pulls out another picture of two boys, puts it on a kitchen counter, and points to Philippe, the child on the left.

“I would sit with him and his buddies just sitting and reading Creole books from school to him. He just wanted to hang out with me and read Creole,” said Andy.

When Andy returned to Haiti last November, Philippe told him in English, “‘I have Jesus now.’”

“All the stuff that you do to make life better there, that’s what it’s all about,” he said. “If you get to know them, they get to love you so much. That’s the passion in a nutshell.”

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NICK BRANDETH/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Andy and Jenny Tyler with their two boys, Clayton (5) and Quinn (10). The Tylers have been planning to adopt a child from Haiti but are now waiting to see what will happen because of the earthquake.

But agency directors are responding cautiously — saying media images of suffering children may be triggering an emotional reaction from some who have not considered the complexities of adoption.

“That always happens after a huge national disaster and they show pictures of children and show horrors,” said Jared Rolsky, executive director of New Jersey-based Golden Cradle Adoption Services. The priority, he said, is to protect the children and verify they are actually orphans.

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Fast Facts

Individuals or couples that want to adopt internationally must meet certain U. S. requirements, including background checks, fingerprinting and home inspections. But prospective parents must also comply with requirements set by the child’s home country.

Some people may discover they are not eligible to adopt from a particular country. To bring an adopted child to the U. S. from Haiti, the prospective adoptive parents:

- Must be 35 or older. For married couples, one parent may be under age 35 as long as the couple has been married 10 years, and has no biological children.
- Must be at least 19 years older than the child they intend to adopt. A waiver can be granted with permission from the President of Haiti.
- Must have been married at least 10 years at the time of application.
- Cannot have had more than one divorce.

SOURCE: Bethany Christian Services and the U. S. Department of State.

By the numbers

Adoptions from Haiti to the United States

2000: 130

2001: 192

2002: 187

2003: 248

2004: 355

2005: 234

2006: 310

2007: 191

2008: 301

2009: 330

SOURCE: U. S. Department of State

What’s next

The New Jersey chapter of Adoptive Parents Committee will hold a forum on domestic and international adoption tonight at Panera Bread in Ramsey.

Lorraine Kolankowski, executive director of Homestudies & Adoption Placement Services in Teaneck, will discuss the initial phases of adoption, including the pre-adoption home study process and deciding whether to do a domestic or an international adoption.

She will explore various issues, including the type of child (age, race and number of children) being considered, and travel requirements.

The forum will be held from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at 1300 Rt. 17 North, Ramsey, N.J.

Adoptive Parents Committee of New Jersey can be reached at 201-920-0502.