



Service goes to great lengths to 'find families for children'

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Staff Writer

KEARNY—Adopting a child is a process rife with emotion, seemingly endless paperwork and months, sometimes years, of anxiety. For families looking to adopt internationally, the necessary steps can seem even more overwhelming.

In recent years, domestic infant adoptions have been on the decline while international adoption programs are rising. For over 100 years, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark has provided adoption services for countless families in the area.

In 1998, international adoption services were established. Licensed by the State of New Jersey to provide international adoption home studies and post placement services, Catholic Charities is partnered with Children's Home Society and Family Services of Minnesota.

Patricia Chiarello is program director of Family and Adoption Services for Catholic Charities. With 30 years experience in the adoption agency, she witnessed the development of the international program.

Chiarello believes society's acceptance of single mothers raising their own children has contributed to the decline in domestic adoptions. "There have not been orphanages in America since the 1970s, with most children going directly into foster care. Today, single women can parent their own children and there is more family support. There is not such a stigma anymore."

Through Catholic Charities' partnership with Children's Home Society and Family Services, it can connect with foster homes and orphanages from countries around the world including: Russia, China, India, Thailand, Vietnam, Nepal, Ethiopia and several Latin American countries. The individual countries have specifications about who can adopt, the duration of the process and how many times the adoptive parents have to visit the country.

According to Chiarello, Russia and Ethiopia are the more popular countries for those looking to adopt. "Because Russia is such a large country and there are many orphanages, the wait is shorter when adopting a child. Children's Home Society and Family Services of

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Minnesota recently built a center in Ethiopia and due to the AIDS epidemic and war, there are younger children available for adoption."

Catholic Charities encourages those interested in international adoptions to contact them by phone at (201) 246-7378 or to visit the group's Web site www.ccannj.com/adoption_services. If an individual or couple is looking to adopt, Catholic Charities provides home studies and are able to work collaboratively with other licensed U.S. international adoption placing agencies and not just their partner.

"When we complete a home study, we basically represent and are an advocate for the adoptive family. We explore how the family wants to raise a child, what their dreams and goals are, and their life experiences. Basically, it is a biography of who they are

and how they got there," Chiarello explained.

Lesley A. Moore, division director of Children and Family Services for Catholic Charities, believes experience and individual attention are cornerstones of her operation. "Patricia is an adoption expert and has been with the agency for 30 years. Sometimes, as our clients are very eager to build their family, the process can appear long and overwhelming. We work to help and support families to help them make sense of and navigate the many steps involved in the adoption process. We go above and beyond what is required by the state, providing support and attention responsive to the needs of each individual family."

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Charities also provides education, counseling and support service for families during the adoption process. Helping a child transition and adjust to life in a new country as well as maintaining the child's cultural identity is discussed with those looking to adopt. Chiarello and the staff stay involved with the families after they have com-

pleted the process. Most families come back to the agency and keep in touch.

"We like what we do and it shows," Chiarello said. "It is not just a job, it is a commitment. We don't find children for families; we find families for children. I love this work and feel it is important. This agency has a mission: to serve families and children in need."

Moore's passion for children fuels her work with families. "Adoption is a small part of what we do (at Catholic Charities) but it is our oldest and most enduring program. Our commitment to families spans generations. Our work goes beyond placements."

With only three on staff in the adoption program, all clients receive individual care and attention. "You can't help but form a personal attachment to

the families that work with us. We care about families and invest a lot in the work we do. The agency goes through the whole process with the families—the heartaches, frustration the joy and happiness. We may be a small group, but we do big things," Chiarello said.

A case involving a single teacher adopting a brother and sister from Ethiopia is particularly memorable for Chiarello. The adoptive parent went to meet the grandmother of the siblings in their home country and participated in a ceremony.

"The grandmother had to approve of the adoption," Chiarello recalled. "The children's parents had died and they were receiving exceptional care at home, but there were economic troubles. The children still keep in touch with their grandmother and they exchange photos. Today, they are around 10 years old and are exceptional, talented children who give back to the community."



Advocate photo - Melissa McNally

During the last 10 years Patricia Chiarello (left), program director of Family and Adoption Services for Catholic Charities, and Lesley A. Moore, division director of Children and Family Services, have placed 72 children from 20 countries with local families.