



ADOPTIONS FROM THE HEART Vietnam program coordinator Heidi Gonzalez spends time with toddlers at Tam Bihn Orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Top right, the Thi Nghe kitchen was recently remodeled. Staff, including from left, Ms. Chi the Vietnam in-country facilitator, Ms. Phung the orphanage director and a staff member discuss the changes.



In early 2003 Vietnam closed its doors to adoption leaving families and agencies in the United States to play a long waiting game. When the doors finally reopened in 2006, Vietnam's intentions of creating a streamlined and stable program emerged. Looking to improve the adoption process and end system-wide breakdowns, including immoral actions as severe as child trafficking, the Vietnamese government initiated new mandates that should, in essence, change the face of adoption.

While it is still too early to detect the overall effects of the changes made by Vietnam, the constant evolution of the adoption process continues to affect both families and agencies in the United States.

The reopening of the program came with stringent mandates. Agencies placing Vietnamese children now need licenses to work in the country. The licenses, which now restrict agencies to work regionally, give the Vietnamese government a firmer grasp on where and with whom children are placed. The new licensing, while cumbersome, is a positive change. Now all agencies must follow the same guidelines and adhere to certain criterion which helps to standardize the process.

Vietnamese orphanages face many financial challenges. Refurbishing dilapidated buildings and improving inadequate facilities only begins the ever growing "to do" list. All licensed agencies are now required to make a humanitarian aid commitment, which in turn improves the quality of life for children living in the orphanages. Prior to the shutdown, many agencies working with Vietnam did not provide humanitarian aid. Although humanitarian aid is an inherent process for our agency, the government's required commit-

Adoption in Vietnam

Then and Now

By Heidi Gonzalez



THE ENTIRE GO VAP ORPHANAGE was recently remodeled including the bathrooms, left, and the emergency room, right.

ment from all participating agencies should only help to improve orphanage conditions, which should be, and now is, a top priority. For example, one of our agency's humanitarian aid projects successfully built bathrooms with running water and functional toilets, replacing a room lined with buckets and a small basin filled with stagnant water.

Vietnam has also changed its procedures for post-placement reporting, which previously required families to supply annual updates, including photos, about the child's health, development, adjustment and daily routine. Now, however, families must provide updates every six months for the first three years of the placement, then yearly after that. While having to complete reports more frequently may be a burden, it is vital for adoptive parents to willingly comply with these new agreements to ensure the continuation of the program for other families.

Other new regulations require international adoption agencies working with Vietnam to have an office in the country, which will be periodically inspected. Additionally, as of March, the Department of International Adoption will require all referrals to pass through its staff's hands. Prior to this regulation, referrals were done regionally through orphanages leaving various avenues open for corruption. Each of these mandates helps centralize the process, making it more uniform. With referrals passing directly through the Department of International Adoption and no longer through orphanages, the government is able to more closely monitor placements regionally.

Since the "centralization" process has been put in place, families adopting from Vietnam have had to deal with the new mandates, which, in

some cases have been both time consuming and costly. One of the first American families adopting after Vietnam's reopening, the Dalton family, faced numerous hurdles as Vietnam implemented various form changes and adjustments to the ever stabling process. Joyce Dalton, an adoptive parent of two Vietnamese boys — Jeffrey Vu Dalton, 5, and Andrew Minh Dalton, 8 months — adopted one son before Vietnam's closing and the other after the program reopened through Adoptions From The Heart.

Dalton adopted Jeffrey in April 2002, and Andrew in November 2006. "Within a year of our first adoption, Vietnam was closed," Dalton said. "Since Jeffrey was Vietnamese, Vietnam was the country we wanted to pursue for our second child so we 'sat it out' and waited for Vietnam to sign a memorandum of understanding with the United States and then iron out the details."

Once Vietnam did reopen, Dalton entered the adoption process for her second time, facing challenges ahead. "The time frame from paperwork to referral for our second adoption took much longer than it did for our first one. Along with a longer wait, the entire process was much more stressful due to procedures changing two, three and sometimes four times since the country reopened," Dalton said.

Along with an increased wait period, costs for documentation rose as well. "The second adoption was incredibly costly. It probably escalated to nearly two to three times the cost of the first adoption in terms of documentation. In about three or four situations we had a document in our dossier notarized, state certified and the Vietnamese Embassy stamped that it was revised three times." In several instances, she found herself shipping materials

between her and Trenton, N.J., or Washington, D.C., and often paying for expedited service. "It's almost comical that last May or June we thought a referral was imminent, and it didn't occur until early fall," Dalton said.

Travel requirements have also changed with Vietnam's reopening. In the past, adoptive parents were required to take two separate trips to the country. During the first trip, adoptive parents applied their paperwork, returned home and waited up to 45 days, and then returned to Vietnam for their giving and receiving ceremony. Now agencies themselves apply for the paperwork and adoptive parents wait up to 120 days for it to be processed, and then travel for their giving and receiving ceremony.

While the centralization added a layer to the process, which lengthened the trip and made it more expensive, Dalton has no regrets. "As torturous as this most recent experience has been, I always come back to the two wonderful children who would not be with us had we not made the journey when and how we did."

Wait times for paperwork and added costs have continued to decrease since the reopening as agencies have become more familiar with the new processes and procedures, and fewer form changes have been issued by Vietnam. As the adoption process with Vietnam continues to steady itself, agencies and adoptive parents are hopeful that the United States will once again be able to provide "forever families" to the children of Vietnam.

Heidi Gonzalez is Vietnam program coordinator for Adoptions From The Heart, a licensed non-profit agency based in suburban Philadelphia, Pa. With 12 offices in seven states, Adoptions From The Heart offers both international and domestic adoption.