



Aid Groups Seek to Reduce Orphanages, Expand Family-Based Care Globally

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“The family is the first essential cell of human society.” — Pope John XXIII

Board any flight to Uganda this summer and you will find a plane full of enthusiastic, well-meaning tourists eager to volunteer at one of the many “orphanages” scattered throughout the country. They are eager to help a nation full of orphans who have nowhere else to go. Or so they believe.

The truth is, Uganda has few true orphans. The AIDS crisis in Uganda never produced the “orphan crisis” the media reported, and even those children who lost both parents to the disease were raised mostly by extended family.

Today we know more than 80% of children growing up in so-called “orphanages” around the world have at least one living parent, including in Uganda.¹ And like most parents, they want to bring their child home where they can love and protect them, if they can get the support they need.

It is estimated there are between 600-800 orphanages in Uganda alone, and most of them are foreign owned. But it is likely there are many more since less than half of them are legally registered. This is an increase from 1999, when there were only 39 orphanages. We know this rapid rise in orphanages is not in response to a need, but rather part of a burgeoning industry that sees profit over care for children.²

Not all orphanage owners are unscrupulous, but most are able to raise money and attract volunteers by posting images of the children on the internet. They also form partnerships with par-

ishes and other well-meaning groups throughout the United States that donate money, publicity and other kinds of support, including volunteer trips and missions.³ A steady stream of well-meaning volunteers who “pay to play” are funding these orphanages and unwittingly supporting the terrible harm that institutions inflict on these children, despite their best intentions.⁴

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Volunteers usually stay for short visits. They show affection and then return home, which disrupts the attachment process and leaves children with many problems in their emotional and psychological development.⁵ The resulting desperation for affection and love leaves them much more vulnerable to others who seek to exploit and abuse them.⁶ Even the best orphanages with the



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“Children form friendships so easily and they get attached to people so easily, especially if you’ve been separated from your real family, so it is very easy to get attached to someone. So, after a short period of time these people would leave. We would cry, I remember; these are lost dreams, shattered dreams, because when they came in they were a sign of hope, but now they’ve left,” says Ruth Wacuka, who spent part of her childhood in a Kenyan orphanage, and is now an advocate with the Kenya Society of Careleavers and a public speaker on the harms of orphanage care.⁷

Children are placed in orphanages primarily because of poverty and a lack of basic services, such as education or specialized care for children with disabilities. More than 80 years of research shows that children living in orphanages are at greater risk of impaired development in their cognitive, physical, emotional, social and life skills. Studies illustrate that children who remain in orphanage care have cognitive development that is lower when compared to those placed in foster care, and significantly lower than those that were never in an orphanage. Long-term consequences include significantly higher rates of unemployment, drug abuse, sexual exploitation and suicide.⁸

In addition, orphanages are not cost effective. Studies show that money spent on orphanages can support six to 10 times as many children living in families, with better results.⁹ For donors, this means every dollar they donate can ultimately support six to 10 more kids if it is spent on services that support families instead of orphanages. Despite this evidence, orphanages continue to exist, and in some parts of the world the phenomenon is growing.

To respond to this problem, three organizations — Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Lumos, and Maestral International — joined forces for the MacArthur Foundation’s *100&Change* competition in 2017. Catholic Relief Services carries out the commitment of the U.S. bishops to assist the poor and vulnerable overseas. Lumos, founded by author J.K. Rowling and named for a light-giving spell from the Harry Potter books, seeks to end the institutionalization of children. Minneapolis-based Maestral International includes global experts in its work to support the development

and coordination of child protection and social welfare systems. It strengthens community and national systems for preventing harm to children and to support children at risk.

The MacArthur Foundation’s competition offered a single \$100 million grant to solve one of the world’s most critical social problems. CRS,

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Lumos, and Maestral leveraged the opportunity to create an initiative that would mobilize other like-minded organizations, raise awareness, promote new policies and encourage well-meaning donors to shift their support away from orphanages and toward families. From among the 1,904 proposals submitted, the MacArthur Foundation endorsed the solution by naming it one of four finalists for the grant.

Although the proposal, called Changing the Way We Care, was not selected as the winner of the competition, the MacArthur Foundation committed \$15 million to the program over five years. Additional resources from the U.S. Agency for International Development, known as USAID, and the GHR Foundation, a private design-build philanthropy, allowed the project to launch last fall with a total budget of \$24 million.

With this critical funding commitment, teams began catalyzing and building on existing momentum to form a more cohesive global movement that will work with others globally to prevent children from entering institutions, while working to reintegrate them into safe, nurturing families. The ultimate goal is a safe and loving family for every child.

In October 2018, Changing the Way We Care launched in three countries: Guatemala, Kenya and Moldova. Working hand in hand with children, families, communities and governments, the initiative is building upon the expertise of the three organizations and the body of evidence and best practices built thus far, using programmatic successes and evidence collected to influence political bodies, funders and other countries.

Through this work, Changing the Way We Care



is building foundations and models for how to transition from orphanages to family care for children, as well as broader care reform to systems at national government levels that need to accompany these processes. As additional resources become available, more demonstration countries will be added to show solutions across diverse settings. Changing the Way We Care also will work with Catholic and other faith-based partners in the United States to shift the way the faith community supports vulnerable children abroad.

Part of the work includes educating anyone who hopes to volunteer in an orphanage and asking volunteers to keep in mind that most developed countries did away with orphanages decades ago because of the harm caused to children. We must remember our own history. There are far better ways to help the world's most vulnerable families and ensure that children in Uganda, Haiti, Guatemala and many other countries across the globe have the love and nurturing that only a family can provide.

"Number one, volunteering is a good thing, but there is a better way to do it," said Wacuka, who suggests the use of more people trained in ways to strengthen families. "If you want to go to an orphanage, how about you engage in an activity that is less [in contact] with the children ... Number two, so many people who come to volunteer are not qualified, they have less skills, they do not know how to handle vulnerable children. Remember, these are very vulnerable children."

More information about Changing the Way We Care is at <https://www.changingthewaywecare.org/>

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NOTES

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