

International Adoptions Face Long Delays

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Dorothy and Douglas Hennessey decided to adopt a second child from China in 2004, when their first daughter, Maya, was 2 years old.

Based on their experience with Maya — whose adoption took 14 months — they expected she would be 3 or 4 when her sister arrived. Instead, it was three years before Georgia arrived — which she did on Dec. 19, when Maya was 5 1/2 .

"Ideally, I would have loved for them to be closer in age," said Dorothy Hennessey, who lives in Southington and worked through the West Hartford office of Wide Horizons for Children. "But it's terrific. Maya is an amazing big sister."

Lisa and Eric Bryant's adoption papers were filed in China in May 2006. "At the time, our agency said the current wait was six to eight months, but we expect there will be a delay," Lisa Bryant said. "They saw the handwriting on the wall."

Conservatively, the Bryants, who live in northern Connecticut, expected their child would arrive home sometime in 2007. Recently, they were told it probably won't happen until after the summer of 2009.

"There have been a lot of really dark months," said Bryant of watching the wait get longer and longer. "I've already accepted that there will be no Christmas with kids this year."

Hundreds of other families around the country are discovering that it's no longer so easy to take in the world's neediest children.

Just as international adoption has become a mainstream way to build a family — helped by celebrity adoptions such as those by Angelina Jolie, who has children from Cambodia and Ethiopia — the practice appears to be in crisis. Allegations of baby-selling haunt some countries, and some say the popularity of international adoption may be creating a worldwide backlash against it.

Adoptions have recently become difficult or impossible in China, Guatemala, Kazakhstan and Vietnam — four of the main countries that send orphans to the United States. Hundreds of adoptions nationwide are in limbo.

"There are few good options for people who want babies from international places," said Kathryn Beary, director of adoption services for Lutheran Social Services of New England, which has an office in Rocky Hill. "What has happened in the past year is that China has slowed down to a trickle."

While not long ago it took about a year to adopt a child from China, Beary said that now it takes 27 months or longer.

"It's really very, very difficult," said Beary, "but we feel that China is worth the wait. It's a wonderful program. It is consistent, reliable and the children are well cared-for."

Diane Kunz, a Durham, N.C., lawyer who founded the nonprofit Center for Adoption Policy, which promotes adoption, said some couples adopting from China — the largest sender of orphans — might wait more than five years. The country has also changed its criteria to exclude prospective parents who are single, recently divorced, over 50, on antidepressants or overweight — restrictions that Kunz says have knocked out about 60 percent of Americans looking for Chinese children.

"Everything is so volatile right now," said Gail Stern, founder of Mandala Adoption Services in Chapel Hill, N.C., which arranges inter-country adoptions. "If you called me today and wanted to adopt a child, I would tell you to sit on it. We cannot in good conscience tell people that if they start today, things will be smooth."

Scandal and uncertainty are not new to international adoption. Concerns about corruption have previously halted adoptions from Romania and Cambodia. But Stern and other adoption experts say they've rarely seen problems with so many countries at once. In mid-March, Kazakhstan unexpectedly shut down adoptions with little explanation.

Adoptions from Guatemala, another top sender, recently closed after allegations that babies were being sold or stolen. Similar concerns have also arisen in Vietnam.

Beary said that in her experience, Ethiopia is the only country where the number of adoptions to foreign families are growing.

She said adoptions from Latin America also have slowed to a trickle as more and more countries attempt to have their own citizens adopt the children. She said the same is true in China, Russia and India.

Why the adoption pace from China has slowed so considerably is not entirely certain, Beary said, but part of it is that adoptive parents from many more countries are now seeking babies in China. Also some feel that the coming Beijing Olympics may be slowing down the rest of the bureaucracy.

"The whole world is clamoring for Chinese children," said Beary, because they are so healthy "socially and emotionally."

While in past years her office has placed 50 to 60 children annually, last year it was down to 19.

"There are many, many people out there who are really distressed by the long waits," she said.

Barbara Anderson, vice president of Families With Children From China — Connecticut, said that in some cases families have waited so long that they have to redo various documents that cost hundreds of dollars. In other cases, she said, families have switched their application from wanting a child that does not have special needs to seeking one who does, because the wait is considerably shorter.

A Hartford-area family, who asked that their name not be used, did this partly because it appeared that the wait was lengthening in 2006. The mother said her youngest child was 4 years old and that she didn't want too many years between that child and the baby.

Once they switched the application to a special-needs child, the adoption took 10 months.

Her child has hepatitis B, she said, which physicians are watching, but which hasn't really been a problem yet. Often, foreign children with special needs have conditions that can be addressed very easily with medical care: a cleft palate or a clubfoot.

Dorothy Hennessey said she tried to stay busy with Maya and take lots of trips while they were waiting for Georgia. The last six months of the wait, she said, were "agonizing," because the number of babies available each month was so small.

Lisa Bryant said that after five years of trying to have a biological child, she had hoped the adoption would move smoothly. When the couple started the adoption process, "you finally feel like you are on track to have a family like everyone else and you can look forward to it like everyone else."

Having the process slow down so much has been difficult, she said. She and her husband have been filling the time partly by taking parenting classes and preparing for the adoption.

Mary Fournier, regional manager of Wide Horizons, said that over the years international adoption has waxed and waned. "Over a span of time, it really is cyclical in nature," she said, "like the tide coming in and out. ... This is sort of like a blip if you look at adoption history."

Beary, who has been arranging adoptions for 40 years, said she remembers her first supervisor telling her: "You may think you are busy now, but there will be times when there are no babies." "This is about as far as I've seen it swing," Beary said. "It's a tough time for families."

A McClatchy Newspapers report was included in this story.

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