



Families for Orphans Coalition

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Joint Council on International
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Kidsave International

National Council for Adoption

The Institute for Human
Services/North American
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The Institute for Orphan
Advocacy

Weaving Families

Worldwide Orphan Foundation

February 3, 2010

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Chairman
U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 439
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Kerry,

We are writing today to request that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee immediately take up and pass the Families for Orphans Act, S. 1458. Had this bill been enacted, the Department of State could have been better prepared to address the needs of Haiti's newest orphans. What's more, had the policies and practices envisioned by this bill been put in place in Haiti, its children could have been less vulnerable to the isolation and abuse we are witnessing today. While disasters cannot be averted, passage of the Families for Orphans Act can begin to avoid similar catastrophes of untold numbers of orphan children being left to fight trauma, stress, fear and loss without the support of a caring adult.

Before the earthquake Haiti had an estimated 380,000 children who had lost at least one parent. Of them, 50,000 were estimated to be true orphans – 20,000 of whom were growing up in orphanages, the rest on the streets. Now, while no one really knows, the earthquake has left an estimated 10,000 more children all alone. World attention is riveted on them and their futures remain uncertain.

The Families for Orphans Act proposes the creation of an office within the Department of State for the purpose of developing and implementing comprehensive strategies to encourage the preservation of families as well as the provision of other legal, permanent relationships through kinship care, legal guardianship, domestic or intercountry adoption. The bill includes a clear directive whereby intercountry adoption would be an alternative only after a determination that a child cannot be placed in a family domestically but it also acknowledges that adoption is always preferable to long-

term foster care or institutionalization. To that end, the Families for Orphans Act addresses the need to expand upon current opportunities to connect orphans to caring adults in their own countries. Finally, the proposed office would be responsible for conducting the research needed to better ascertain the number of children living without parental care worldwide and the global efforts needed to support these children.

Our experience has been that promoting families for children has not been a visible priority for the United States Government. For the most part, this is the result of a development driven focus which focuses on the protection and physical well being of orphan children rather than on the elimination of the social and economic causes of their vulnerability. What's more, current U.S. funded orphan programs are disorganized, disconnected and promote a wide variety of policies and priorities, some of which are mutually exclusive. Modeled after the successful Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, the Office of Orphan Policy, Diplomacy and Development would address this by providing our diplomats the authority to put solutions for investing in children having families on the table and the tools needed to promote programs that support children and families, not institutions.

If the office proposed in the Families for Orphans Act had been in existence prior to Haiti's earthquake, much of the current chaos surrounding the protection of Haiti's orphans could have been averted. Had the thousands of children who were known to have no parents or family able to care for them prior to the earthquake been documented, plans could have already been underway to find families for them through domestic or international adoption, instead of being relegated to what may be years in a refugee camp and a lifetime without parents. This tragedy is compounded because of the growing waiting lists of people with new awareness of the plight of these children who are interested in adopting them.

Families are essential to the healthy development of children. Research in child development has shown that the quality of caregiver-infant relationships in the first years of life may be more important than the quantity of nourishment in facilitating healthy human development. And children who grow up without a family of their own are far more likely to experience homelessness, incomplete education, violence, teen pregnancy, unemployment, emotional disorders, depression, and suicide. The Bucharest Early Intervention Study conducted by researchers from Harvard Medical School, the University of Maryland, Tulane, the University of Virginia, and the University of Minnesota reported that children living in orphanages suffered decreased brain activity (including lower IQs), poor growth, and a variety of developmental and emotional delays.

History has shown that when the United States makes the conscious decision to be a leader in area of great social need, the difference is immeasurable. U.S. led efforts to combat trafficking, provide relief from HIV/AIDS, eliminate hunger and promote democracy are but a few examples of the type of

leadership the U.S. is capable of providing. The passage of the Families for Orphans Act is the first step toward truly addressing the global orphan crisis. We are thankful for the bipartisan leadership shown by Senator Mary Landrieu, Senator James Inhofe, Congresswoman Diane Watson, and Congressman John Boozman in introducing this bill and hope that you will add your support to their efforts to provide a family for every orphan.

Sincerely,

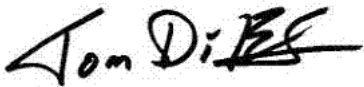
The Executive Committee of the Families for Orphans Coalition



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Kidsave International



Chuck Johnson
National Council for Adoption



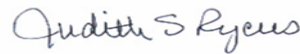
Tom DiFilipo
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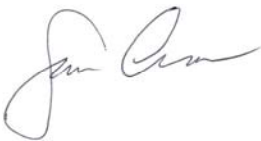
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Equality for Adopted Children (EACH)



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cc: Senator Mary Landrieu, Senator Christopher Dodd, Senator Russ Feingold, Senator Barbara Boxer, Senator Robert Menendez, Senator Benjamin Cardin, Senator Robert Casey, Senator Jim Webb, Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Senator Ted Kaufman, Senator Kristen Gillibrand