

## The Need

More children are born every year in Guatemala than in any other Central American country. Almost half of these children are born to unwed mothers, many of whom are children themselves. Half the women in Guatemala will become a mother before age 19, and 20 percent will have two or more children by their 18th birthday. By their early 30s, many women have given birth to seven or eight children.



The reasons for Guatemala's high birth rate are complex, and deeply rooted. In 1996, the Government of Guatemala signed a peace agreement that ended a 36-year internal conflict, but left a legacy of crime, corruption and political violence. Little energy or resources have gone towards health care, social welfare or education, particularly in rural, indigenous communities. With little education or employment opportunities, many families live in poverty. Due to limited access to family planning information and services, women often give birth to more children than they can support. Malnutrition is rampant, and many infants don't live to their first birthday. Among children who do survive, exploitation, abuse and child labor are serious threats.

## Holt's History in Guatemala

In 1986, Holt began providing child support services through a partnership with a local child welfare agency, Asociación para

la Integración Familiar (APIF). At a small community center in Guatemala City, abandoned, abused and neglected children received emergency transitional care while APIF social welfare staff and Guatemalan Minors Court judges determined the best solution for each child. When possible, children were reunited with birth families. Others joined families through international adoption (ICA). Through 2010, Holt placed over 150 Guatemalan children with families in the U.S. and supported APIF's efforts to reunify another 500 children with their birth families.

## Current Projects

In January of 2008, the Guatemalan Government suspended international adoption due to unethical adoption practices among private attorneys, who directly facilitated the vast majority of adoptions from Guatemala between 2000 and 2007. The need for reform was evident. Holt quickly shifted focus, allying with the government to help meet this need.

In 2008, Guatemala ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, an international treaty that sets ethical standards of practice for adoption, and passed legislative reforms to meet the treaty's guidelines. To aid reform efforts, Holt completed the first comprehensive survey of institutionalized children in Guatemala. Funded by USAID, this survey documented the backgrounds and living conditions of over 7,000 children in orphanage care. A foundation for future reform, the Holt Orphanage Survey has already helped shape the country's child welfare policy.

Holt's work in Guatemala continues to be guided by the philosophy that all children belong in safe, secure families. With ICA suspended, Holt's primary focus is to keep children in families or family-like settings, not institutions. In 2009, Holt secured a three-year grant



to provide training and technical assistance needed to further these efforts. Project successes include strengthening the court management system that determines the fate of children in crisis; an improved research process to evaluate the best solution for each child; and the creation of a follow-up plan to ensure that children who have been reintegrated into families are receiving the services they need. Working alongside governmental and non-governmental social service and child care providers in three pilot sites, Holt Guatemala strives to preserve families by providing crisis intervention, family counseling, parent education and assessment services.

As Holt has evolved in the two years since Guatemala suspended ICA, so has our partner organization APIF. With the overarching goal of preventing children from entering institutions, Holt has helped APIF transition from child care and placement services to programs that support a small number of local families, such as therapeutic day care and parent education.

In May 2010, Guatemala experienced two natural disasters in one week – the eruption of Pacaya Volcano and Tropical Storm Agatha, causing flooded rivers and severe landslides that destroyed bridges, streets and homes. Through our child sponsorship program, Holt is able to provide support services to 100 children and families who lost their homes in this crisis.

## Strategic Directions

In the coming years, Holt Guatemala will continue to grow and strengthen model programs and services that demonstrate best practices in child welfare. Through sustained training and technical assistance, Holt will continue to build capacity and skill level of organizations that serve families. We will continue to promote domestic adoption – a limited placement option within Guatemala to date. Holt also hopes to create a life skills development program for older children who age out of institutional care.

Holt Guatemala has provided support services to thousands of children in crisis. To grow current programs and serve even more children and families, we aim to secure additional grant funding and more than double the number of children in sponsorship, reaching 250 by 2013.

