

## The Need



After the abrupt fall and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990s, Mongolia lost all economic subsidies. Shortly afterward, a series of natural disasters severely affected Mongolia's lifeblood – livestock and herding – and worsened the country's difficult transition to a free market economy. As families strained to adapt to a new way of life, alcoholism increased, the number of single-parent

households grew and many children ended up abandoned or homeless.

Today, nearly one in four people live on less than 40 cents a day. Unable to provide adequate food and clothing, many impoverished parents seek outside care for their children. Often, institutions offer a temporary care solution while struggling parents work toward stability.

## Holt's History in Mongolia

In 1997, representatives from Mongolia approached Holt for assistance with child welfare services. Two years later, Holt began to serve homeless children in Ulaanbaatar through a partnership with the Mongolian NGO the Naidvar Center. Holt also established ties with the Infant Sanitorium (IS), Mongolia's primary government care center for abandoned children under three. Together, IS and Holt developed the Rainbow Special Baby Care Unit (SBCU), providing at-risk infants and toddlers with the proper nutrition, medical care and nurture they needed to recover and thrive. Restored health also enabled many of the children to reunite with their birth families or join adoptive families.

Through partnership with the Naidvar Center and the Infant Sanitorium, Holt introduced a pilot foster care program in 2005. Designed to give homeless children the loving, individual attention they need to grow and develop at a healthy rate, Holt's model of foster care provides a more nurturing alternative to institutional care.

Administrative issues within Mongolia, however, proved too challenging to sustain a functional foster care program here. Fluctuations within the Mongolian Government also caused difficulties and delays in processing adoptions. In 2008, Holt decided to invest our energy and resources elsewhere. Shortly afterward, however, changing conditions created opportunities for Holt to serve more children and provide more services in the region. In 2009, Holt re-established ties with our partners and the Mongolian Government. By the summer of 2010, ICA resumed.

## Current Projects

Holt strives to keep children within their birth families before pursuing ICA. With poverty the primary cause of child abandonment in Mongolia, Holt began working with struggling families to help stabilize their income in 2010. In Songin Khairan, one of the most impoverished districts of Ulaanbaatar, Holt began providing economic support to the most destitute families – primarily households headed by single mothers. This program enables parents to care for their children while they find the means to support their family independently. Every year, many more children are able to stay with their families in Mongolia than join families through adoption.

In Mongolian culture, the community traditionally assumes the burden of care for children whose families are unable to support them. Community care is considered temporary, and struggling families often relinquish children to orphanages with the intention to return for them later, once better equipped to care for them. Holt's Mongolia program staff frequently work with child care centers to help maintain contact with the birth families. Staff will notify the families of their children's progress and condition, and families often visit their children at the care center.

While children in care wait to rejoin their birth families or join adoptive families, Holt helps ensure the ongoing support for those living in two state orphanages. Holt supplements the nutrition of children at both the Infant Sanitorium and at No. 58 Kindergarten, a government-run institution caring for children ages 3 to 8. The Rainbow Special Baby



Care Unit also continues to provide loving care for 35-50 infants and toddlers, some of whom have moderate to more serious special needs. Today, Holt continues to fund special medical services, clothes, toys and equipment for the children and training for the staff at the Rainbow SBCU.

In addition to providing direct services to children, Holt partners with both the Nadvair Center and the Mongolian Government to strengthen and modernize the child welfare system here. Efforts include trainings for government officials engaged in child welfare work, including opportunities to visit Holt's model child and family services in Korea.

To improve services, local officials must first determine the need. Holt is supporting efforts by Mongolia's Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor to gauge both the breadth of child homelessness and the quality of care children currently receive in Ulaanbaatar's public and private institutions. This research informs Holt trainings for NGOs and officials on the effects of institutionalization and alternative care models – namely, foster care. After briefly implementing foster care in 2005, Holt continues to explore opportunities to resume this family-like care alternative for children living in Mongolia's orphanages.

## Strategic Directions

Mongolia has a significant number of children in care – more children than Holt currently serves. In the coming years, we hope to expand our outreach to these children, primarily by connecting them with funding sponsors. While Holt sponsors directly benefit the children they support, the sponsorship program also funds family preservation work here. Thus, increased sponsorship revenue will not only provide critically needed items to children in care, but also enable expansion of these services to more families in Songin Khairhan and neighboring districts of Ulaanbaatar.

Holt currently provides support services to at-risk families in partnership with the Nadvair Center and the Mongolian Government. Strong relationships with these and other local partners will not only further Holt's goal to serve more families and children, but also to provide services more in line with best practices. Domestic adoption, in particular, is often performed informally within a child's extended family or immediate community. Working with the Mongolian Government and the Infant Sanatorium, Holt plans to develop safeguards that ensure the welfare of children adopted in country.

While domestic adoptions continue, recent elections have stalled the ICA process in Mongolia, creating a backlog of dossiers at the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor. Holt will work with officials to expedite pending adoptions. Holt is also advocating for the relaxation of Mongolia's restriction on families who have previously adopted from other countries. Currently, these families are not allowed to adopt from Mongolia. As ICA becomes a more efficient and inclusive process, more children from Mongolia will be able to join families in the U.S.

When Holt began serving children in Mongolia, harsh winters limited access to regions beyond Ulaanbaatar. Thus, program development was also limited to the capitol city. In the coming years, we hope to expand services beyond Ulaanbaatar – first working with a child care center in Darkhan. As we strive to broaden our reach through family preservation, sponsorship and ICA, we will also provide necessary training for partners and key government officials in both the United States and Mongolia.

