

## The Need



With almost one-third of its population living below the poverty line, Nepal is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Although only 16 percent of Nepal's land is arable, the vast majority of laborers work in agriculture – Nepal's economic mainstay. In 1996, Maoist extremists led an insurgency that both toppled the country's democratic government and incited a ten-year civil war. The conflict further exacerbated economic strife in Nepal, deterring foreign investors and creating security concerns that hampered tourism – a major source of foreign exchange.

Nepal's economic struggles have placed significant stress on families, causing many to abandon or relinquish their children to outside care. However, with the vast majority of Nepal's child care centers at full capacity, many homeless children have nowhere to go. Nepal has the highest child mortality rate in Asia and nearly half of all children are chronically malnourished.

## Holt's History in Nepal

In 2006, Holt began to explore the possibility of providing adoption and child welfare services in Nepal. The following year, Holt joined with the Nepal Child Conservation Home to help provide food, medical support, safe shelter and nurturing care for a small number of children. Holt brought in a physician, improved the children's nutrition and increased the number of caregivers.

Holt began an international adoption (ICA) program in the spring of 2009, placing four children with families within the first year. Soon after, however, questions began to arise regarding the

legitimacy of Nepal's ICA process. Although the exposure of unethical practices led Holt to suspend all new adoption activity at the end of 2009, Holt remained in Nepal to both help the government improve their system of ICA and to sustain support for children in care.

## Current Projects

In August of 2010, strong evidence of ethics violations moved the U.S. Department of State to close adoptions from Nepal. Today, adoption remains suspended while the Nepalese Government works to make their system more open and ethical. With strong support and encouragement by the U.S. Embassy, Holt is actively participating in these reform efforts.

One action should create a significantly improved system. Before pursuing ICA for a child, Holt makes every effort to ensure that adoption is the best option for that child. Whenever possible, Holt strives to reunite children with their birth families. To determine whether ICA is the final and best way for a child to have a permanent family, Holt representatives must first have direct access to that child while in care. Holt is advocating for Nepal to be less restrictive toward agencies as well as to provide child information vital for adoptive families to make an informed decision – including facts about the child's origins, health history and how they entered care. These steps are critical to developing a process that safeguards the rights of every child, their birth parents and their potential adoptive parents.

The way most children enter care in Nepal, however, poses a considerable challenge to reunification efforts. Most of the children at Holt's sponsored care centers have been abandoned, not relinquished. Consequently, the facilities often have little information about the children's backgrounds. Without a family to contact, Holt can't



initiate the reunification process. Also rare are relinquishments by single parents, as out-of-wedlock birth is greatly shunned – even punishable by death in some regions.

Nevertheless, Holt continually strives to reunite children with their families, whenever possible. Holt supports the care of children at two care centers in Nepal – the Children’s Conservation Home and a facility called HOPAD, which cares for children newborn to 6 years of age. Holt’s sponsorship program provides funding for their overall care, meeting their nutritional, medical and educational needs.



## Strategic Directions

The Government of Nepal needs time to develop a reformed system. Consequently, international adoption will not likely resume until at least 2012. Although the current government has stated their commitment to reform, limited resources and a coming shift in political power may impair Nepal’s progress toward an ethical ICA process. The incoming Maoist/Communist coalition government has historically opposed ICA, which creates considerable uncertainty. Holt will continue working with the current government to bring practices up to standard. Holt is also working to develop a separate and accelerated ICA process for children with special needs.

In 2011, Holt will initiate a 6-month pilot family preservation program for 30 families in the countryside. Most of these families are headed by women and belong to the numerous caste groups that comprise “Dalits” – often the most impoverished families in Nepal and the children most at risk of abandonment. The lowest, most shunned members of South Asia’s caste system, Dalits often experience discrimination that obstructs access to education, health and employment. The program will enable single mothers to learn income-generating trades such as sewing or embroidery, providing a means of support for their family.

To sustain vital child welfare services in Nepal, Holt must grow our sponsorship program here. Sponsorship enables Holt to serve children in care and will also provide the funds needed to develop family preservation. While cautious to avoid care centers with a history of unethical practices, we are currently exploring opportunities to partner with facilities in the Western region of Nepal. New partnerships would enable Holt to serve many more children and families through sponsorship while also sustaining support of current programs.

As Holt strives to grow and improve programming in Nepal, continuous engagement with the Government and child welfare community will be essential. To this end, Holt will create training opportunities for key officials and staff.