



The Need



After the fall of communism in 1989, the former Eastern Bloc country of Romania opened its doors to outsiders – including those to its 650 state orphanages. Here, over 100,000 children were found living in horrifying conditions – the outcome of a workforce growth scheme instituted by former Dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Ceausescu's policies included denial of birth control and fines for childless women. As a result, many poor

Romanian families ended up with more children than they could support. For these children, Ceausescu offered a place in state institutions.

Romania has made great strides in the past 20 years, including the closure of nearly 100 orphanages between 2002 and 2003. In 2005, Romania passed a law prohibiting placement of children under 2 in institutions, unless they were severely disabled. And in 2007, the formerly communist country joined the European Union. However, over 2 million people continue to live in poverty and thousands of children remain in institutions. With few employment prospects at home, many parents leave their children in alternate care while they seek work elsewhere in the EU.

In the late 1980s, several thousand institutionalized children contracted HIV through unscreened blood transfusions. Today, Romania has the largest population of HIV-positive youth in Europe.

Holt's History in Romania

After the Ceausescu regime collapsed in 1990, Holt was among the first organizations to come to the aid of Romania's institutionalized children. But before pursuing adoption for these children, Holt trained local staff to investigate the children's backgrounds and possibly reunite them with their families. Many children were, in fact, able to rejoin their birth families. Others joined adoptive families in Romania – a permanency solution considered preferable to international adoption (ICA) because it enables children to stay within their birth culture. While placing

children locally, Holt also initiated an ICA program, placing the first nine children with families in the U.S. in 1992. The following year, Holt allied with local leaders in Bucharest and Constanta to develop partner organization Holt Romania.

With funds from a series of USAID grants, Holt developed a range of child and family welfare programs throughout the 1990s. The first organization to bring foster care to Romania, Holt introduced this family-like alternative to institutional care in 1993. In the years since, the Romanian Government and other child welfare organizations have widely replicated Holt's foster care model. Gradually, these organizations also adopted Holt's models of parent education, domestic adoption and programs to serve HIV-infected children.

In 2002, Holt Romania divided into two nonprofit agencies – the Holt Romania Foundation (HRF) and the Close to You Foundation. More sustainable over the long term, this separation enabled each organization to focus on a specific area of need. While the Close to You Foundation served HIV-positive children and families, HRF directed efforts toward preserving at-risk families. HRF's family preservation program provides counseling and support groups, parent education, access to community resources and the basic financial assistance parents need to adequately care for their children.



Close to You's services have gradually evolved to include everything from HIV counseling, vocational training and life skills development to social integration and recreational club activities. The foundation has also developed a nationally recognized, model foster care program for HIV-positive children. Through independent fundraising efforts, Close to You has in recent years become increasingly self-sufficient, causing Holt to end involvement in the program in 2008.

Upon entering Romania, Holt advocated for better regulation of

the adoption process. Poor oversight, however, enabled a host of unethical practitioners to traffic in Romania's children. In response, Romania declared a moratorium on ICA in 1999. With ICA briefly restored, Holt placed its last child in 2002 before an indefinite ban on ICA occurred in 2003. In ten years, Holt placed a total of 243 children to families in the U.S. Although the ongoing ban caused many agencies to leave, Holt stayed in Romania to sustain child and family support services.

Current Projects

Since the early 1990s, Holt's partner agencies have served over 20,000 of Romania's most vulnerable children and families. Today, HRF stands as the leading Romanian NGO for permanency planning.

HRF continually strives to strengthen and empower families, enabling them to provide stable homes for their children. Over the years, the NGO has adapted to the changing and emerging needs of children in Romania. To address one growing issue, HRF's social workers have become specialists in helping children of Roma and other "gypsy" communities acquire birth certificates. Without state registration, Romanian children struggle to access medical care, attend school and later acquire jobs.

Through the years, HRF leaders began developing alternate revenue sources to both supplement Holt's ongoing support and help ensure long-term sustainability. In 2001, HRF began to offer professional trainings in parent education skills – skills acquired, in part, through educational visits to Holt headquarters in Oregon. Here, HRF staff took in-depth courses from parenting organization Birth to Three, and successfully adapted what they learned upon return to Romania. By sharing this knowledge with other child welfare workers, HRF not only generated its own income, but could now indirectly serve many more children throughout the country.

With goals to expand programs and develop broader trainings, HRF also worked to secure land and funding for a permanent building. In 2007, Holt committed \$60,000 to build the HRF headquarters. With additional support from a Holt adoptive father, as well as materials and services donated in country, construction completed in 2008.

Today, the HRF headquarters provides a complex of services and resources for families in one accessible location, including

a parent resource center, educational and day care centers and professional trainings. HRF has in the years since opened two additional parent resource centers, offering pregnancy counseling as well as education and support for families.

Between 2004 and 2006, the state took over foster care and domestic adoption. Although no longer directly providing these services, Holt played a vital role in implementing and demonstrating the value of these programs. While many disabled children remain in state orphanages, the majority of Romania's orphaned and abandoned children now live in foster care and small-scale group homes. Holt also placed more than 700 children with Romanian families before the state assumed control. Through advocacy efforts, domestic adoption has become increasingly commonplace – with many more families hoping to adopt than there are available children.

Strategic Directions

Through the years, HRF has grown increasingly self-reliant. The EU recently awarded the foundation significant grant funding, which will enable the NGO to continue providing vital support to children and families in Romania.

Because of HRF's successful fundraising efforts, Holt has since 2002 limited funding to the organization's family preservation program, which is widely considered the most effective and comprehensive program of its kind in Romania. In the coming years, Holt will sustain both technical and financial support for family preservation, enabling an anticipated 400 children to remain in their birth families every year through 2013.

Holt relies on the sponsorship program to fund family preservation in Romania. Connecting sponsors to children enables Holt to meet the individual needs of each child, including food, school supplies, shelter and medical treatment as well as family support services that help stabilize homes. Through 2013, Holt will work to sustain the sponsorship program, and thereby the family preservation program. In total, Holt expects to reach a total of 700 children every year through all services.

