

## The Need



In the last decade, economic growth has lifted over 2 million people out of poverty in Thailand. However, as the country's burgeoning manufacturing sector is primarily concentrated in cities, poverty remains widespread in many rural areas. Also excluded from the country's growing prosperity are migrants, minorities and refugees.

For these and other struggling families, relinquishing or abandoning a child often seems the only recourse. An enduring stigma against unwed mothers also compels many Thai women to relinquish their children to institutional care.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has greatly affected children and families in this Southeast Asian country. Although Thailand developed one of the most aggressive programs to treat and prevent the spread of the disease, the rate remains high. An estimated 380,000 children have been orphaned by AIDS, placing the burden of care on grandparents and other caregivers. Another 200-300 children are born HIV-positive every year.

## Holt's History in Thailand

After establishing successful programs in Korea and Vietnam, Holt sent a survey team to both Thailand and the Philippines in 1975. Recognizing the value of partnership with local child welfare staff, Holt developed a new mode of operation in both countries, with Holt providing the funding and technical assistance and Thailand and the Philippines providing the human capital. In Thailand, Holt allied with a group of Thai educators and social workers to establish a child welfare organization that soon evolved into an independent agency, led and staffed by Thai nationals. Founded on the belief that every child deserves to grow up in a permanent, loving family, the Holt Sahathai Foundation (HSF) – or United Hearts Foundation – quickly became a prominent provider of child welfare services in Thailand.

During this period, Holt also cultivated a new approach to “permanency planning” for children in care. Although the ultimate goal of uniting every orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable child with a loving family remained, Holt began exploring the possibility of keeping children within their birth families before pursuing adoption. Often, a child's best interest is to remain within their family. In 1976, HSF began providing support services to struggling families, thus enabling them to care for their children.

That same year, HSF also became the first organization to implement foster care in Thailand. A more nurturing alternative to institutional care, HSF foster care provides a loving home for children while they await adoption or to rejoin their families, once stable.

In the early 1990s, Holt established an international adoption (ICA) program for hard-to-place children – often older children or children with special medical needs. The number of children joining families through ICA subsequently increased. In 2005, Holt formed a partnership with the Thai Department of Social Development and Welfare to place even more children with special needs through ICA.

As HIV/AIDS grew to epidemic proportions in the late 1990s, Holt began providing assistance to HIV-positive single and expectant mothers in the south – a particularly vulnerable region. HSF also piloted a system of caring for HIV-positive children in foster care. To accommodate the evolving needs of children entering care, HSF trained foster parents to care for children with other special needs as well. In the years since, Holt's foster care program in Thailand has become the model for both governmental and non-governmental child institutions as they transition to this family-like care alternative.



## Current Projects

Holt serves children and families in Thailand exclusively through our partnership with HSF, which continues to be a recognized leader in child welfare services. One of the first agencies on the scene after the December 2004 tsunami devastated the coast of Thailand, HSF quickly expanded services to meet the immediate needs of disaster victims. With long-term stability a concern, HSF created a five-year tsunami assistance project, serving 350 families – including 800 children – through nutritional, financial and educational support. Brought to a successful conclusion at the end of 2009, this project underscores HSF's capacity to identify and effectively respond to emerging social problems in Thailand.

Though one of four NGOs licensed by Thai authorities to facilitate domestic and international adoption, HSF first strives to keep children in their families. By providing support in the form of guidance counseling, financial assistance, vocational training, educational sponsorship and income-generating projects, HSF strengthens vulnerable families and prevents child abandonment. Training in proper health and nutrition also reinforces a family's ability to care for their children. Annually, HSF support programs enable thousands of children to stay with their birth families.

The stigma of unwed motherhood remains a major cause of child abandonment in Thailand. To assist unwed mothers, HSF provides shelter as well as health and postnatal care. HSF also provides counseling to help the women cope with discrimination, and ultimately make an informed decision about whether to relinquish their child. To date, about 80% of the women who received HSF support eventually decided to keep their baby.

HSF does not operate child care facilities, but instead promotes community-based alternatives to institutional care. As other child welfare organizations have begun to embrace foster care, HSF social workers are drafting a manual that defines the standards of practice for emerging programs throughout the country.

## Strategic Directions

At present, Holt is the only U.S.-based agency working with HSF to place children with permanent families through ICA. Together, Holt and HSF place approximately half the total children joining families in the U.S. from Thailand every year.

Although the number of adoptions from Thailand has progressively decreased, adoptions to the U.S. have remained fairly stable. In 2010, HSF initiated a project to stimulate adoption of children with special needs in government-run child institutions. By the end of 2010, the first children will be released to Holt for home finding. In the coming years, Holt's Thailand program will strive to increase adoption for children with special needs, maintaining placements at 25 annually.

In the coming years, Holt will also continue supporting children and families in Thailand through community-based programs. With injection drug use largely responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS, HSF recently received a grant to work with the Thai Office of National Narcotic Prevention. In 2010, HSF began educating parents on the prevention of drug and substance abuse.

As more children enter Holt's sponsorship program, increased revenue will also enable growth in activities, with particular focus on permanency services for children near HSF's branch in the south. Holt's three-year goals include more than doubling the number of children in sponsorship – from 200 in 2010 to 500 by 2013 – and expanding outreach to serve more than 5,000 children in Thailand.

