

The Need



The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 left this small nation in Southeast Asia both politically isolated and economically ravaged. More than 25 years of war had also overwhelmed Vietnam's orphanages with orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable children, including thousands of mixed-race children – or as the Vietnamese called them, *buidoi*, the dust of life. Under social pressures and growing threats from the North, many Vietnamese mothers sought outside care for their children.

In the years since, political reforms, modernization and movement toward a market economy have dramatically changed life in Vietnam. But while reform has led to greater prosperity in many parts of the country, it has also caused a greater disparity of living standards between rural and urban dwellers. In 2010, 28% of Vietnam's population, including 2.6 million children, were considered vulnerable. This figure includes victims of trafficking, migrant workers and people living below the poverty line. As rural families seek a better quality of life by migrating to urban areas, many resort to abandoning children they can't support. Rising rates of HIV/AIDs and the recurring stigma of unwed motherhood have also caused an increase in child abandonment in recent years.

Holt's History in Vietnam

Building on the child welfare model established in Korea over a decade earlier, Holt expanded to Vietnam in 1973. Holt first served families and children here through a USAID-funded

nutrition program, later developing an international adoption (ICA) program to help find permanent homes for the twenty-five thousand children living in Vietnam's orphanages.

In Korea, Holt developed a model of care that matured in Vietnam – a model of loving, individual attention to nurture children's development while they await permanent placement. Orphanages often lack the capacity to lavish attention on every child, causing delayed development and deteriorating the children's already weak conditions. To ensure children received the attention they need to thrive, Holt introduced foster care in Korea in 1965, replicating the model in Saigon in 1973.

The following year, Holt began serving children in 26 orphanages in Da Nang – a battle-ravaged area largely composed of refugees. As it became apparent that Saigon would soon fall to the North, however, Holt leaders decided to evacuate the children in care. Through one of several agency-arranged "Baby Lifts" at the end of the war, Holt's flight evacuated children legally free for adoption. A total of 409 children left Vietnam to join adoptive families in the U.S. Despite steady growth in services, political instability forced Holt to cease work in Vietnam in 1975.

In the early 1980s, Holt briefly helped bring more children into adoptive families. However, Holt couldn't fully serve children in Vietnam again until 1989, when the Government of Vietnam invited Holt to help support and operate orphanages. In the ensuing years, Holt developed programs throughout the country that enabled children to stay within their birth families, despite hardships.

Vietnam only allowed ICA on a case-by-case basis until new adoption legislation passed in 1992. Holt's international adoption program expanded significantly and remained mostly stable until 2002, when Vietnam issued a decree requiring new country agreements. After the U.S. and Vietnam reached an agreement, ICA resumed again in 2006, before expiring in 2008.

Current Projects

ICA from Vietnam remains suspended while the Vietnamese Government works to ratify the Hague Convention. Holt nevertheless continues to keep or place children in families in Vietnam through family preservation, reunification and domestic adoption.

Working in partnership with the Government of Vietnam, Holt provides emergency assistance, counseling and the basic financial, health, nutritional and educational support needed to stabilize struggling households. Holt also works to prevent child abandonment by providing pregnancy counseling, temporary shelter, medical care and nutritional support to single mothers coping with the stigma of unwed motherhood. Often, however, hardships force families to seek outside care for their children. When this occurs, Holt allies with government social workers to keep or reunite children with their families, providing the support and resources needed to create a stable, nurturing home environment.

Sometimes family reunification is not possible – or the best solution – for every child in Vietnam. For these children, Holt helps sustain three government-run child welfare centers (CWCs), providing technical assistance and financial support to ensure adequate nutrition, medical care and enough childcare workers per child. An integral component of permanency planning, CWCs provide temporary shelter while Holt finds families for children through domestic or international adoption.

Although unable to rejoin their birth families, many children who enter care are able to experience family life in foster care. Holt continues to be the only NGO providing foster care services in Vietnam. In 2003, Holt-Vietnam's thriving programs moved Vietnam's Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs to promote this family-like alternative to institutional care. Holt also trains and supports foster families to care, often long-term, for children with special needs – a growing population of children in care in Vietnam.

Strategic Directions

Holt continues to serve children and families in Vietnam since the suspension of ICA. With the changing environment, however, Holt has shifted away from our traditional model of services.

Through the years, Holt's support of institutional child welfare centers has hinged on our ability to place children in care with permanent, loving families in the U.S. CWCs provided temporary transitional care – for children processing for adoption, or before transferring to Holt foster care. With ICA suspended, we are now exploring cost-effective ways to better serve children in Vietnam through community-based services, rather than institutions.

While we work to improve local services, Holt will continue advocating for international adoption to resume within a reformed process. To help the Government of Vietnam develop more ethical practices, Holt has already provided support and guidance in the drafting of the new adoption law, which passed in June 2010. Once implemented, this law will limit the agencies working in Vietnam – as well as the fierce competition that leads to corruption.

A recognized leader in child welfare services in Vietnam, Holt is well positioned to resume ICA placements in the next three years. Holt is also working closely with the U.S. Department of State to develop a pilot ICA program for children with special needs. The Government of Vietnam plans to license agencies at the beginning of 2011. Whether ICA resumes, however, will depend on the U.S. assessment of the child welfare system and implementation of the new adoption law. Holt will continue advocating for the Department of State as Vietnam's newly reformed system of ICA unfolds.

Over the coming years, Holt plans to expand community-based services to children and families. By expanding family preservation in all provinces, Holt will also bring many more children into sponsorship – providing essential funding for program growth in Vietnam.

