

An end to orphanages

By **Sean Callahan, Georgette Mulheir, Philip Goldman**

MAY 7, 2017

There has been horrendous news coverage of orphanages recently: children starving in an orphanage in Belarus, a fire killing 40 girls in an orphanage in Guatemala, children being made to clean septic tanks and scavenge for food at an orphanage in India. This all gives rise to a hugely important question: Why are millions of children around the world living in orphanages when they could — and should — be growing up in families?

It was when J.K. Rowling heard similar stories of children kept in cages over a decade ago that she started Lumos Foundation, named after a spell in her Harry Potter books that brings light to darkness. Since then, Lumos has successfully worked with governments to change policy and practice, helping to move thousands of children out of orphanages and back into family care.

Lumos is now partnering with Baltimore-based **Catholic Relief Services** (CRS) and Maestral International in Minneapolis to bring this movement to the wider world. Together, this group will work to prevent children from entering orphanages and help the estimated 8 million children currently in orphanages realize their right to a family.

The partners plan to support the transformation of child care systems in a number of countries, so that children receive the support they need to stay with families in their communities, instead of living in anonymity in too-often uncaring institutions. This proposal has been named a semi-finalist in a competition run by the John D. and **Catherine T. MacArthur** Foundation for a \$100 million grant. The MacArthur 100 & Change grant seeks to solve a critical problem of our time, and by recognizing with semi-finalist status the need to reform systems of institutional care, it shows that a global response is both necessary and achievable.

While orphanages differ in size, care and quality — certainly not all are as horrendous as those that have made recent news — we know that children can only reach their full development potential in family environments. Research shows that for every three months in an institution, children lose a month of development. When children are old enough to leave the orphanage, they are often ill-prepared to live independently, which can then lead to unemployment, exploitation and homelessness, causing long-term costs to society.

Orphanages cost significantly more than strengthening families. Estimates show that we can serve six to 10 children in families for each one in an orphanage, helping our resources go further, while providing far better support to the child. Even when children are not able to grow up in their biological family, there are many paths to provide the care they need, such as kinship care, foster care and adoption. These are all significantly better

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A family in a difficult period gives birth to a child they feel that they cannot support. Instead of being overwhelmed and seeing no alternative to handing the child to an institution, the parents are supported so they can care for their child at home. This support could come in many forms, from the provision of very basic assistance to improve a family's economic situation to providing psychological and social services.

Now, the child would not be stripped of her family or community identity. She would be much less vulnerable to abuse or exploitation. Her needs would be heard and addressed by parents and members of her community.

We know this vision can be achieved for every child, whether poor, with a disability or displaced from family because of humanitarian or emergency reasons. We have seen success. Many countries are working to strengthen families rather than placing children in orphanages.

Eighty to 90 percent of children in orphanages have a living parent. The vast majority of those parents would willingly give these children the love and affection they need if they just had appropriate support. An institution can never replace the love of a parent, and no matter how much is invested, "improving orphanages" is not the answer.

We must not forget our own history. The United States and much of Europe moved away from a reliance on orphanages decades ago, deeming this model unsuitable for children. A global movement is needed to ensure that we do not promote, support or revert to this model.

The horrific situations in Belarus, Guatemala and India are glaring reminders that no institution can ever replace the love of parents and the support of families. That is what all children deserve. We ask that you join us in making sure it's what children receive.

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