A CASE STUDY OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Transitioning Firefly Orphanage

Summary

Firefly Orphanage* was a privately-run and privately-funded residential care institution established in 2007. In 2010, Firefly's principal donor, a UK-based charity called Together for Change*, initiated awareness raising efforts to introduce Firefly's director and other institutions they supported to the concept of family-based care. This sparked a lengthy and complex process of deliberation and transition that resulted in the reintegration of children into families and communities, the closure of the institution, and the transition of services into non-institutional programming. Over time the director became an influential advocate for family-based care and transition, and he continues to engage in community development work in rural areas to address issues leading to the institutionalization of children.

This case study highlights some of the key dynamics that arose throughout the transition process and examines how those dynamics both influenced the transition and determined the type of support provided as well as the most appropriate transition strategy. The case study is organized around the various stages of transition and explores some of the key themes outlined in the Transitioning Models of Care Assessment Tool. It also features a timeline that provides a visual representation of the key milestones and duration of each of the stages.

Names and locations of organizations and individuals have been changed; however, the details represent a true account.

Background and Initial Engagement

While visiting overseas for an international conference, a UK-based non-profit organization called Together for Change came into contact with the director of an institution housing children who had reportedly lost their parents.

Together for Change made the decision to financially support the institution and soon became its principal donor. The director of the institution went on to broker funding for dozens of other institutions within his extensive network, and over the next decade, Together for Change transferred the equivalent of more than 1 million US dollars into the director's personal bank account. Amidst growing evidence of widespread financial misappropriation at the hands of many of the institution directors they had been supporting, Together for Change gradually came to discover that the director had authorized himself to take a 10% commission of all of the funds they had transferred.

Following the termination of their relationship with the institution director, Together for Change employed another director, Ethan, whom they had long supported and trusted. Ethan had earned overseas university-level qualifications and established Firefly Orphanage upon returning to his home country. As institutional care was the most common form of support for vulnerable children in his community, and many of his extended family members also operated institutions that were funded by Together for Change, it was for these reasons that Ethan came to establish his own institution.

While Ethan had a genuine concern for children and believed that he could improve their lives by providing them with access to higher quality education in the capital city, his decision to become involved in institutional care also stemmed from the knowledge that he could sustain his livelihood from it. Thus while the connection to institutional care was made via a relationship, his decision to become involved in institutional care was a rational one, not an emotional one.

In addition, as he commanded respect from his community from having obtained tertiary education qualifications overseas and having connections to foreign funding through Together for Change, the recruitment of children from his home village into Firefly established his role as patron to the families of those children. The resulting status and identity around his position as patron, as well as the associated social obligations, would later complicate efforts by social workers to reintegrate children out of Firefly and into his home community.

Aside from operating Firefly, Ethan's newly assigned responsibilities included oversight of all of Together for Change's partner institutions and disbursing monthly funds for their operations. Ethan was also tasked with assisting Together for Change in collecting photographs and information on all of the children in their partner institutions. As the child sponsorship model was Together for Change's primary means of fundraising from their individual donors, they requested details about the personal histories of the children and the directors supplied them, both sides unaware of the protection rights entitled to children living outside of parental care.

During this period, Together for Change came into contact with an international training organization that delivered workshops raising awareness of the over-reliance on institutional care in low- and middle-income countries. Excited by the prospect of a different solution for the children they had been supporting, Together for Change arranged for the training organization to deliver a mandatory workshop for all of their partner institution directors to learn about the harms of institutional care.

Following the workshop, Together for Change continued to facilitate training on family-based care concepts to their partner institutions for a two-year period, and strongly encouraged the directors to transition their programs into non-institutional models. However, the workshop and subsequent directive to transition did not result in any action by the institution directors to move away from institutional care. Together for Change sought and secured a partnership with Project Families, an organization providing technical support to those seeking to transition their partner institutions away from residential care.

Securing Buy-In and Formalizing the Partnership

After a period of strengthening Together for Change's organizational policies and drafting written agreements outlining partnership standards, Project Families launched a series of monthly working groups for the institution directors.

The following twelve months entailed frequent and extensive meetings dispelling common misconceptions about reintegration, discussing realistic ways to uphold child rights in a context with weak regulatory systems and few resources, and concretely mapping out a range of programmatic areas in which directors could continue to serve children post-transition.

While the majority chose not to pursue transition and a few were categorized as warranting safe closure, Ethan actively engaged with the process and made the decision for Firefly to move forward with transition. Project Families connected

him with respected peers within his own country who had already gone through transition and provided him with case studies of successful transition from the geographical region. Stories of individuals who remained involved in post-transition programming were highlighted, particularly in cases where they retained their salaries or were able to maintain comparable standards of living through the support of the principal donor.

Significantly, as Ethan had experienced a period of separation from his own family as a young child, he was able to empathize with the children living in institutions and realized that the institutional setting made it impossible for directors to provide the love and attention children needed to thrive. He said, "Being an orphanage director for 12 years, I know my relationship with the children. Even if we are open to them, they cannot be open to us. It is still the teacher-student relationship, not the parent-son relationship. In front of us they do not dare to tell us their feelings." Despite holding a range of mixed motivations for involvement in institutional care and being naturally inclined to a rational approach, Ethan was able to empathize with the children in his care through his personal experience and demonstrated genuine concern for them.

Alongside the monthly working group meetings with the participating directors, Project Families' donor engagement work with Together for Change included identifying other donors that were also financially supporting their partner institutions, as well as seeking to bring them onboard a transition process. For those donors who agreed to transition, a peer group was established to bring all of the involved donor organizations together to provide support to each other as well as to ensure consistent messaging to the institution directors regarding the agreed expectations of transition.

All of the participating directors and donors signed written agreements outlining concrete markers of progress and standardized responses to any child protection allegations emerging throughout the transition process. Together for Change frequently reiterated their commitment to fund the institutions fully participating in transition, as well as their commitment to phase out of funding those that chose to continue with the institutional care model. It was only after this preparation period that full buy-in was secured and the social work process could commence.

During the course of Project Families' donor engagement work, Together for Change learned of another donor organization, Smiling Hearts Foundation, that had also been a long-time supporter of Firefly. Photos of Ethan with the children in his care were discovered on Smiling Heart's website; however, the name of his institution was not listed as Firefly but instead identified as Smiling Hearts Children's Home, named after the donor organization. Neither Smiling Hearts nor Together for Change was aware of the existence of the other donor as Ethan had not disclosed this information to either of his donors. Together for Change contacted Smiling Hearts, and with some effort managed to secure their support for the transition. From that point forward, both donors worked together to cross-check and verify past and future requests for financial support from Ethan.

Planning for Transition

The partnership between Ethan and Together for Change was a highly relational and unstructured one, with absolute trust placed in Ethan and a profound lack of accountability for finances.

Firefly was neither registered to operate as an institution, nor was it operated by an organization or any other entity. Ethan was treated as an employee of Together for Change for years before a written employment contract was put into place.

Despite Ethan's repeated requests for Together for Change to conduct a financial audit of the meticulous records he had kept of his own accord, they dismissed the need and continued to transfer large amounts of funds into his personal bank account. At times Ethan would have the equivalent of US$200,000 of transferred funds in his bank account and he would often be asked to withdraw and store tens of thousands of dollars at his home until he could distribute the cash to other institutions supported by Together for Change.

Together for Change also relied on a child sponsorship model as their primary method of fundraising and private information about children was shared publicly and widely, without an awareness that this violated the rights of children to privacy. Visitors from overseas interacted with children at Firefly during annual visits, distributing gifts and requesting private details about the children's histories.

As part of the onboarding and preparation work required in advance of commencing the social work process, Project Families worked in collaboration with both stakeholders to develop and implement a transition strategy. Key gaps were identified through the organizational assessment and plans were put in place to mitigate the numerous risks inherent in the relational partnership. This included the development and strengthening of organizational, governance, financial, and child protection policies and frameworks.

For children whose families were in a patron-client relationship with Ethan, concerns were raised around his interference with some of the family assessments, presumably to prevent children from returning home before he could fulfill his social obligations to provide long-term support for their education. Social workers responded by discreetly reporting their concerns to Project Families, and plans for his post-transition role were moved forward to justify his removal from social work and reintegration programming in a way that allowed him to save face. Where possible, community development initiatives aiming to prevent family separation were directed towards Ethan's home community so that he could fulfill his social obligations as a patron and maintain his status in the community in alternative ways that did not rely on the institutionalization of children.

Post-Transition Outcomes

Together for Change now employs Ethan in a new role through which he delivers awareness-raising workshops on the importance of family care.

He travels extensively to villages within his home state and speaks to parents and community leaders from his perspective as a former institution director intimately familiar with the realities of institutional care. He is also involved in community development initiatives to improve local government schools so that parents can care for their children at home instead of sending them to institutions in the hopes of accessing better education for them. All but two of the children at Firefly have now been reintegrated with birth families or placed into kinship care. The remaining two children are working together with a Project Families social worker to prepare to leave care and transition into independent living.

In later conversations, Ethan shared his reflections on the initial awareness-raising workshop delivered by the international training organization, as well as subsequent training sessions they delivered on social work processes. Two particular messaging tactics did not contribute whatsoever to his decision to transition away from institutional care: the child rights framework and the introduction of foster care. As these concepts were abstract and largely unfamiliar to most of the institution directors, he found them to be irrelevant to his situation until multiple in-depth conversations with Project Families guided him through breaking down such theoretical arguments into practical applications.

Notably, Ethan cited one specific message from awareness-raising workshops as particularly impactful on his decision to transition Firefly. Evidence of care reforms already taking place in other countries in the region led him to the realization that regardless of whether directors came on board with the idea of family-based care, institutional care would eventually be phased out in his country. Although Ethan became involved in institutional care through mixed motivations, his disposition towards a rational approach meant that a logical explanation of why it would no longer be feasible to remain in the business of institutional care, as well as hearing examples of others who were able to successfully retain their positions post-transition, were most effective in achieving buy-in for transition.

Final Reflections and Rationale for Transition Strategy

The combination of several potential risk factors led to a moderately complex but unexpectedly successful transition process. Ethan's mixed motivations and personal vested interests could have posed a significant challenge to transition, particularly around retaining his status and livelihood as well as fulfilling social obligations to his clients.

However, as his decision to establish an institution was primarily a rational one instead of an emotional one, a rational approach to addressing his motivations and concerns around maintaining his status and livelihood post-transition proved effective in achieving buy-in for transition. While this message had to be delivered indirectly and sensitively so as to avoid accusing him of harboring personal vested interests, it was possible to openly connect him with others who had undergone transition to help him visualize how he could continue in a new role post-transition.

Although Ethan did not have relevant professional qualifications or experience, his tertiary education provided him with the capacity to quickly absorb new theories and processes around safe reintegration and community development. As such, he was involved in some of the case work for children in his care and, relying on his knowledge of the children's histories and their time in care, he was able to make valuable contributions to the child assessments that social workers were undertaking. These contributions are typically missing from other transition projects where directors are either unable to grasp the importance of the assessment process or refuse to cooperate in providing information, resulting in gaps that can easily lead to inappropriate placement decisions and potential harm to children.

Overall the highest risk to the transition process was the lack of formality and structure to the partnership between the director and principal donor. As part of establishing organizational-level processes designed to work towards a contractual partnership, new structures were put into place around financial reporting and accountability systems. Direct dialogue was also facilitated between Ethan and Together for Change about the need to change past practices, and the conditions and expectations for Ethan's future involvement in post-transition programming were clarified.

The director and principal donor's inadvertent engagement in unethical fundraising was addressed by putting in place a robust child protection policy outlining ethical communications, as well as reforming the child sponsorship model to a family support model of fundraising that no longer distributed individual photos or disclosed private details regarding the children in the institution.

While Together for Change and Ethan were quick to genuinely buy into the concept of family-based care, the process of risk mitigation was critical to ensuring a safe transition process. Culturally sensitive approaches and creative solutions were required to address the Ethan's mixed motivations and to resolve some of the issues emerging from Ethan operating within his role of patron to the families of children in his care.

Despite the presence of some significant risks that threatened to block transition at various points throughout the process, the strategic and careful navigation of all of these aspects led to a largely positive transition, and Ethan has emerged as a strong candidate for a national care reform advocate.

Firefly Orphanage Timeline of Transition

Period of inaction by institution directors following donor decision to transition: 2 years

Decrease in financial support without transition strategy or provision of technical support results in a second stalled period of minimal change: 3 years

Time from first organizational assessment to final revisions in organizational policies: 4 years

Buy-in was achieved in 2015 through signing of formal partnership agreements but governance strengthening continued through 2019

Signing of formal partnership agreement to first child placement: 2 years

Transition from institution director to community advocacy role: 2 years

Start of social work process to final child placement: 3 years

| 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |

Stage 1 Engagement

Stage 2: Preparation & On-boarding

Stage 3a: Full Transition

2007

Director establishes institution

Principal donor begins funding institution

General Advocacy

Principal donor is introduced to the concept of family-based care but messaging is too broad and ineffective

2010

Targeted Awareness Raising

Principal donor makes decision to transition after learning about drivers of residential care in low-income countries

Principal donor arranges workshops on harms of institutional care and instructs directors to send children home or place them into foster care

2012

Following two years of awareness raising that failed to spur movement towards transition, principal donor launches 7-year plan to annually decrease their funding to pressure directors into sending children home

Most directors seek funding from new donors without sending children home, some operate with less funding, others send 'misbehaving' children home to account for the decrease in funding

2014

Principal donor explores partnership with technical support agency

2014 to 2015

Buy-In

Principal donor signs partnership agreement

Director embarks on intensive 8-month onboarding process that addresses common challenges of transition and provides contextualized solutions

Director signs partnership agreement

2015

Organizational Level Processes

Discussion of director's post-transition role as an advocate for family-based care within his own communities

Director conducts first community awareness raising workshop on the importance of families and harms of institutional care

2015

Organizational Assessments

Assessments conducted of institution and principal donor's organization

2015 to 2019

Governance Strengthening

Principal donor institutes child protection policies, reforms child sponsorship program to adhere to ethical communications in fundraising, conducts financial audits on institution, and strengthens financial policies and accountability

2016

Reintegration Processes

External social workers hired and trained

Case management system established in the absence of national procedures for reintegration

Social work process begins through trust-building activities with children

2017

Organizational Level Processes

Director conducts additional awareness raising workshops and phases out of involvement in social work processes

Reintegration Processes

First child placement

2019

Organizational Level Processes

Director leads a team of social workers to conduct awareness raising workshops in multiple sending communities

Director formally moves into advocacy and community development role with institution closure

Reintegration Processes

Final child placement

Monitoring of 17 placements continues