

CASE STORY OF TRANSITION

Story International



Changing the Way We CareSM (CTWWC) is a global initiative designed to promote safe, nurturing family care for children, including reforming national systems of care for children, strengthening families, family reunification and preventing child-family separation, which can have harmful, long-term consequences, development of alternative family-based care, and influencing others toward family care.

CTWWC is committed to supporting the transition of residential care facilities such as residential institutions, orphanages and children's homes by helping to safely reunify and sustain children with

families or in family-based alternative care and helping organizations to divest or transform into new family and community services. This case story is meant to illustrate transition, the actors involved, the challenges and the success factors; recognizing that each transition is an individual process with different starting points, different dynamics and different evolutions. The case story complements the *Transitioning Models of Care Assessment Tool* by illustrating one or more stages of change. *Story International's* transition example demonstrates the ups and downs of divesting from the orphanage model.



Background

In 2015, Alycia and Greg Pinizzotto began working full time in an orphanage in Huehuetenango, in the norther highlands of Guatemala. This orphanage was, and continues to be, the only residential care facility in the area. With their US-based organization, Story International, they began funding the facility and its programs, primarily focusing on the private school where children from the community and from the facility attended. They soon began to take on more responsibilities in programming and by 2016 had become the sub-directors overseeing all the programs, both residential and educational. The nominal directors of the organization was a family that had founded the orphanage and later moved to Guatemala City where they transitioned into a more passive role in providing direction and oversight. The residential care facility has never been accredited by the supervising government authority (Consejo Nacional de Adopciones, CNA) in Guatemala and had between 75-120 children and youth before the divestment process.

Story International provided up to 90% of the funding for the orphanage and this income was highly dependent on a sponsorship model. In this model, Americans could sponsor individual children and have a relationship with them receiving photos, updates and being able to visit them on mission trips. An average of 8 mission teams traveled per year from churches in the United States.

Phase One: Learning and Exploration

As Alycia and Greg managed the orphanage, they began to realize that the model was not effective in adequately protecting the children and youth in their care. The houses were overpopulated, and it seemed children were not always safe. Additionally, they realized that they were taking care of some children whose mothers had also been institutionalized in their childhoods and they felt that they were not effectively breaking cycles of separation or making lasting changes in families.

In efforts to mitigate the negative effects of these situations, they started by hiring house parents for each of the groupings of children. They reduced the number of children in each group. They later reduced the caretaker to child or youth ratio by receiving fewer new cases and adjusting to low child to caretakers ratios.

By witnessing the cycle of separation perpetuated through this model, Story International came to the conclusion that they needed to start working with families. They began to search out and work directly with the biological families of the children in their care.

Alycia recalls that as she sought more information on family versus residential care, she felt attacked by the proponents of transition, who felt divestment from the orphanage completely undermined all of their hard work and investment.

There had been little or no focus on family reintegration previously and when the children were reunified, per court order, there was no monitoring or follow up. Story International began focusing on how the children could be reunified with their biological families in safe and sustainable ways. A high percentage of the children and youth had been in the orphanage for several years despite having biological family that would visit consistently. This new focus on families was not well received by the previous Guatemalan leadership who felt strongly that the children needed to remain in residential care, citing it was their “home”.

A TIMELY ALLIANCE AND MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

In 2017, a few members of the Story International team began talking with U.S. based Faith to Action regarding the different options they had moving forward. In October of that same year, they attended an in-person consultation on family-based care



organized by Faith to Action where they learned about the risks of residential care, the benefits of family-based care and the practical steps to take to transition.

Even as Alycia and Greg began to implement the changes they had learned about and understand the reasons behind the importance of family care, they were still hesitant to fully embrace complete transition of their model. They had invested so much in the lives of the children, youth, and staff. Greg and Alycia were responsible for the funding of the programs, and they worried that the financial transition would be too difficult to navigate. They felt a great deal of responsibility to continue to provide for the children and youth in their care, even while they pursued community family strengthening.

As they began to focus more on family reintegration, they discovered that most families were interested in having their children reunified with them, but

they were not always able to do this safely due to a lack of resources and access to services. Plus, on a leadership level, there was more resistance from the Guatemalan founders who were not interested in shifting the traditional orphanage model of care in any capacity.

In March of 2017, as the aforementioned elements grew in importance and reasons to change were more compelling, an unfortunate event served as a final and compelling motivation for change. The largest state-run residential facility in Guatemala, one that provided care for youth, had a tragic fire that claimed the lives of 40 teenage girls. As the government scrambled to place the surviving and now homeless girls, the orphanage funded by Story International opened their doors. Greg and Alycia heard the stories and saw with their own eyes just how damaging and dangerous residential care could be.

There was a strong emotional bond wrapped up in these relationships that had always existed in the context of residential care. It would be hard to break.

Phase 2: Preparing for Transition & First Steps of Divestment

This event and the voice of the girls who survived was the final impetus to convince Story International of the need to restructure and refocus their efforts through a family-based care lens. As tension grew between Story International and the orphanage leadership regarding changes being implemented in the home, it became clear that there was not sufficient missional alignment to continue in partnership. Story International ultimately decided to pull funding from the orphanage and begin their own programs that would focus on prevention and family-based interventions. The decision was to not only divest financially, but to also begin a new ministry that would focus on family care. They communicated this decision with their donors. Meanwhile, the orphan-age leadership was unwilling to take any more steps towards transition, Story International decided to pull out from the orphanage and begin their own programs.

After caring directly for children and youth outside their families for many years, their new focus would be to strengthen vulnerable families and provide family-based alternative care when needed. To keep children in families.

Though this decision was made with much counsel, based on evidence and in the best interest of the child, it was not without its obstacles and resistance. Many of Story International's most influential donors had personal relationships with the children and youth at the orphanage and were not pleased that Story International was breaking away.

The decision to divest came at a great cost to Story International as they eventually came to break ties with the orphanage and with some

donors. Once the different boards and levels of governance were informed of the decision, Story International immediately began diverting the funds to their own programming and staff. Several of the staff members who were employed by Story International at the orphanage were convinced of the reasons for change and remained on staff in their pursuit of new programming. Though these select staff members shared the new vision, most of the caregivers stayed on at the orphanage to continue their work in residential care.

Phase 3: Divestment of the Orphanage

This entire divestment and repurposing process took nearly 12 months to complete and was met with much resistance and emotional stress. Much of this came from not being able to continue helping the children and youth that had been part of the residential program. This emotional stress contributed to Greg and Alycia's own struggle in feeling that they were abandoning the children in the transition process.

Many donors, even entire churches, expressed concern that the change to programming meant, not that children wouldn't be as well cared for, but that they, the donors, the churches, would no longer be able to sponsor or visit "their kids" each year.

Greg and Alycia realized that donors needed to be educated on how the old model was not sufficient in protecting children and youth and was counterproductive in ensuring the long-term wellbeing of those who called the orphanage "home". They began to have virtual meetings with donors and churches, showing them that there was a newer, more cost-effective and sustainable way of helping children, youth and entire families.

In the divestment process Story International lost about 50% of their donor base.

The growth in their donor base has been slow but is now made up of larger donors who are fully committed to the vision and model and see the overwhelming benefits of supporting family care.

They openly talk with donors about the reasons that they do not have a child-sponsorship program emphasizing their priority in safeguarding children and families and how this practice undermines this. Realizing the importance of emotional connection between the donors and the work they are funding; they have sought to find ways to tell stories and illustrate their work while not harming the families they are seeking to protect. They have also provided opportunities for donors to connect more with the Guatemalan staff that is doing the work on the ground.

Phase 4: A New Model

It took all of 2018 to develop the different prevention and intervention models, focusing on providing follow-up to reintegrating children and families, community after-school programs, and beginning a foster care program. After a year of transitioning an entire donor base and creating a programmatic

After fully divesting their support, the orphanage that originally housed up to 60 children is now caring for 20-25 children. They have been able to continue operating with a few donors that have continued to financially support the orphanage. This is hard for Greg and Alycia, but they are proud of their new models.

framework for their model, they began to flesh out the different components of a prevention and family-based care focus.

In their prevention of separation component, Story International has re-purposed a facility into a community center that provides after-school care for children ages 5-18 where the children and youth receive lunch, tutoring and participate in different educational and recreational programs each day after school. This allows for the parents of these families to have sufficient time to work while the children and youth in the program receive proper nutrition, educational and recreational opportunities that would not otherwise be available for their families. The access to these services are provided without compromising the stability of the family and encourages the family to remain together.





In their family strengthening program, they currently have 20 families that receive stipends, psychological care, work opportunities and other forms of support. This support is provided in a tiered system where families work their way up to a place of independence from the program. Many of the families in this program are cases where a child has been reunified from residential care back with the family. Other families in the program have been referred to Story International by local churches that have identified the need for interventions in order to prevent the child and family from being separated.





An additional component of Story International's transition to a new ministry model has been how to change the hosting of mission teams from the United States. Initially, they continued receiving teams but found that even when they reduced the contact these teams had with the families and children they helped, these teams had very little positive impact in the communities. Because of these observations and learning, they have been steadily phasing out mission trips as part of their ministry. COVID-19 also helped to curb this practice. Soon they will no longer have mission's trips down to visit their programs. Instead they are rolling out a new 20-hour virtual training for interested Americans. It will include their history of missions, history of Guatemala, trauma informed care, and more topics

related to strengthening families and keeping children in family care. The participants will receive a kit to cook a Guatemalan meal and other cultural items in order to learn about the specific cultural nuances of Guatemala. After this preparation and training piece, the individuals will visit Guatemala on a trip with purely educational and tourist purposes. The groups that go through the program have the option to fund a specific project and have Guatemalan workers do the work. The visiting team may also meet the staff of the programs, but they would not have any direct contact with the kids or families they serve. Greg and Alycia are really excited about these innovations!

A Pioneer Foster Care Program

Story International works with the Guatemalan Government to recruit, train and provide follow-up for foster families. They are on track to having 10 local foster families by the end of 2022, providing 15% of all foster care in Guatemala. These foster families are connected to local churches that provide them with support. Story International now works with local churches to recruit families in the community who are later evaluated, trained, and accompanied by social workers and psychologists who work with them once the children are placed in their home.

Key Lessons Learned

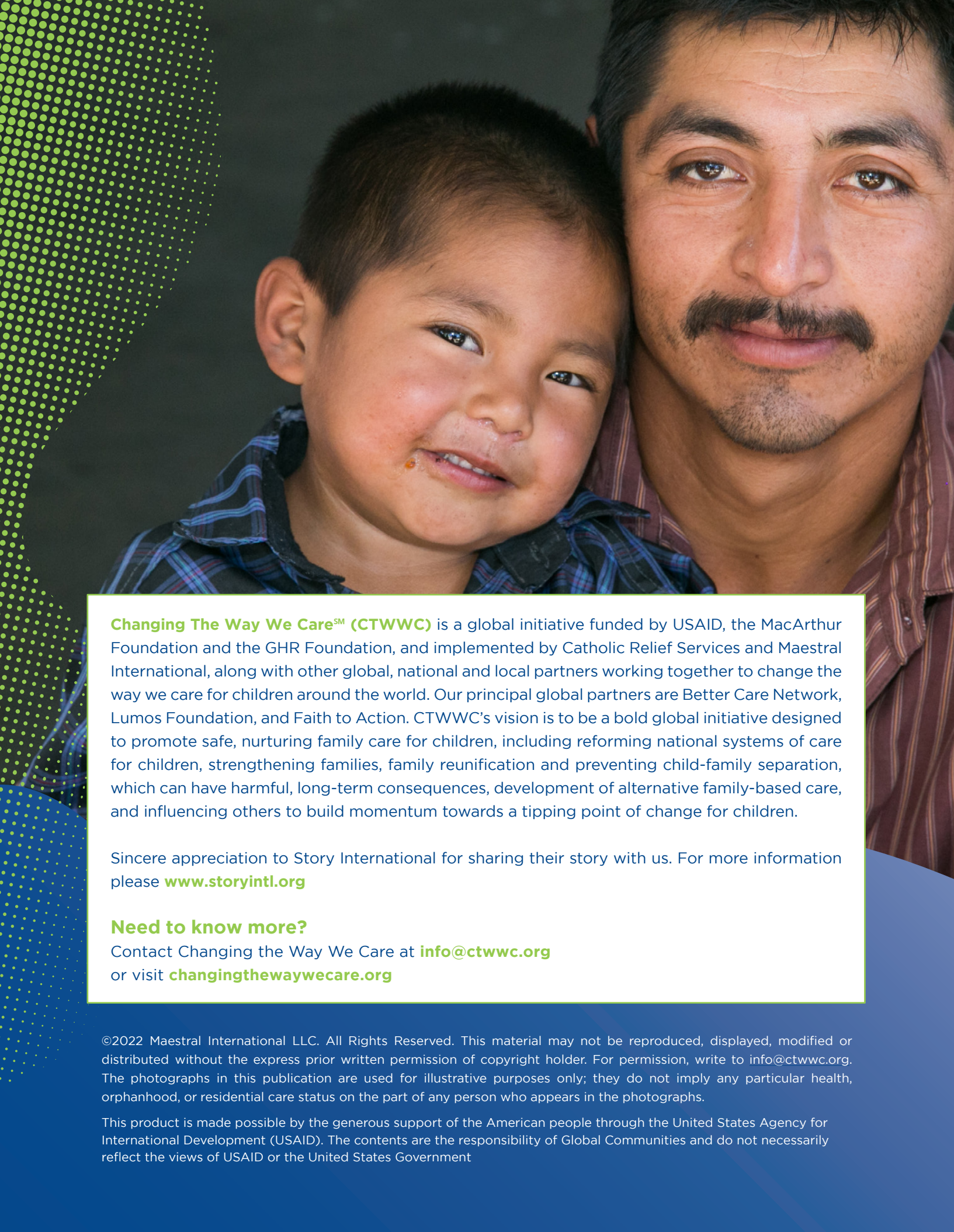
-  Those that work in orphan and vulnerable children care, specifically within faith callings, have incredibly deep and emotional and spiritual attachments to their work. One cannot simply appeal to rationale with facts and theories. Alycia remembers the moments when she was presented with information yet was not fully convinced on the need to change. There is a great deal of fear of failing and because it is faith-driven, there is a fear that they may be going against what God has called them to do. This emotional and spiritual aspect has to be recognized in the transition.
-  It is critical to understand the emotional dynamics of the transition in the lives of the directors, workers and donors. As the majority of orphanages exist within faith communities, those involved feel a sense of calling toward the specific new ministry. They are emotionally connected to the children and youth, see how their model benefits their lives (at least in the short term) and feel emotionally distressed to think about transitioning to something else. There will be losses in the transition, but before any of the leaders, staff and donors are able to buy in to a change, they must be listened to, understood, validated and kindly redirected. Change can be managed.
-  It is necessary to be strategic with the transition of donors and funding. Having a clear plan to follow is helpful. In hindsight, Greg and Alycia wish they would have simultaneously engaged new donors with the new model before they began to transition out of the residential model. It would have been beneficial to talk to existing donors regarding the changes they were considering before taking any steps. As they were transitioning to their new model, they were worried that they wouldn't have enough donors and the process of educating and informing new donors was slow. Being more strategic in this area would have provided them with a smoother transition.
-  A lot of work must go into educating donors building on their desire to do good. They need to be educated in the evidence regarding child and community development and the dangers of residential care. Before the donors are willing to agree with a transition, it is important that the emotional ties they have to the children, programs and work are recognized and validated. Donor education is essential for a transition of this kind where a new model is focused on providing families for kids and strengthening families.



Key Lessons Learned (continued)

- ✎ It is important to consider practical components of change such as how to re-purpose existing buildings and infrastructure. Directors of residential care feel great responsibility as stewards of the buildings that were built with the purpose of housing children. Although they can use the facilities that were dedicated to housing kids for after-school programs or community centers, these ideas need to be portrayed in thoughtful ways. The facilities and building will still be full of kids, but now the kids will not live there and return each day with their families.
- ✎ From the time the decision was made, the entire divestment and formation of new program process took about one year to complete. One of the hardest components of this change was the transition of Story International's donor base. In this process, nearly 50% of this base was lost. In general, a divestment process will include loss and making hard decisions. In this case, the orphanage was able to continue operating at a reduced capacity due to their committed donors through an enduring sponsorship program. Now, Story International has the capacity to impact so many more children and youth in their families and larger communities.





Changing The Way We CareSM (CTWWC) is a global initiative funded by USAID, the MacArthur Foundation and the GHR Foundation, and implemented by Catholic Relief Services and Maestral International, along with other global, national and local partners working together to change the way we care for children around the world. Our principal global partners are Better Care Network, Lumos Foundation, and Faith to Action. CTWWC's vision is to be a bold global initiative designed to promote safe, nurturing family care for children, including reforming national systems of care for children, strengthening families, family reunification and preventing child-family separation, which can have harmful, long-term consequences, development of alternative family-based care, and influencing others to build momentum towards a tipping point of change for children.

Sincere appreciation to Story International for sharing their story with us. For more information please www.storyintl.org

Need to know more?

Contact Changing the Way We Care at info@ctwwc.org
or visit changingthewaywecare.org

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