

CASE STORY OF TRANSITION

Formalizing a Foster Care Program



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. This case story complements the *Transitioning Models of Care Assessment Tool* by illustrating one or more stages of change. The story of Identity Mission tells how a program focused on *supporting vulnerable children by providing family-based care solutions alongside the local church* came to be and what the challenges were to creating a mission focused on family. It is the story of one person's own transition.

Definition of family-based care

The short-term or long-term placement of a child into a family environment, with at least one consistent parental caregiver, a nurturing family environment where children are part of supportive kin and community.



Photo Credit: Dany Alvarado for CRS



Background

Tara Garcia came to Honduras in 2004 as a teacher in her twenties and immediately witnessed the widespread disparities in private residential care (“orphanage care”) throughout the country. She saw firsthand how some orphanages provided bilingual learning services or closets of supplies to providing shoes for impoverished children. This disparity spurred Tara to create and direct a ministry that sought to fill in the gaps in care for children without parental care; one that aimed to focus on family. In 2010, Tara moved to Honduras full-time to run this ministry and fulfill its mission.

The ministry’s ultimate goal was to connect struggling orphanages to state resources and to the ministry’s network of support.

Tara started programs to provide everything from dentistry to fruits and vegetables to age-appropriate Bibles. After three years of work, the network had grown and the ministry had connected to over 45 orphanages throughout Honduras. In hopes of providing greater opportunities for networking

and sharing resources and best practices, they also began to host a regional orphan care conference; the first of its kind in Honduras.

After working with the ministry for eight years, Tara began to notice that youth who had aged out of the orphanage system were having their own children brought back into residential care. These observations were confirmed by others in the network who noticed a similar trend. Tara realized that much of the work trying to fill in the gaps was simply putting a Band-Aid on a badly broken system. Despite their best efforts, the ministry was not having the impact that they were hoping to see. The improved services in orphanages were not helping to prevent children from entering the institutions.

In 2015, Tara and her husband left the ministry to start Identity Mission - an organization dedicated to providing family-based care solutions in Honduras to vulnerable children alongside the local church. In collaboration with the Honduran Government, Identity Mission went on to establish the first formal system of foster care in the country.

Transition Process

Tara marks the start of her transition process in 2012 when she was first introduced to government-run orphanages in Honduras. She witnessed the condition of hundreds of children in care, including infants in beds covered in fecal matter and flies. The ministry immediately helped hire a nurse, and Tara herself began to change diapers and feed the infants. After the second year of working in the public orphanage, Tara noticed an increase in the amount of sick infants in need of protective care. In particular, several babies had contracted pneumonia due to reflux from milk entering their lungs as there were no workers available to hold the infants while they were fed. Despite Tara and the staff’s efforts, there were not enough resources to care for each child properly.

Within that second year, the director of the public orphanage approached Tara to share that a baby

in the hospital was very close to death. The director feared that if the baby was to return to an orphanage, she would die. They specifically asked Tara if she could find the baby a temporary home, in a family. She obliged and proceeded to place the baby, whose name was Scarlet, with a friend that worked as a nurse. After two months of care in the nurse's home, Scarlet was soon back to full health, setting into motion the domino effect that would later launch the Scarlet Project into motion.

The Scarlet Project aimed to young children from orphanages into foster family care. Eventually, 40 children were living in foster families through the Scarlet Project.

Fearing the negative publicity that could ensue, the director continued to ask Tara to place children into families and Tara continued to oblige. She recognized her minimal training or experience in foster care at this point, and was simply acting in an attempt to save children's lives. As the Scarlet Project continued to grow, it became clearer that the children were doing far better being outside of any orphanage.

In the early stages of the Scarlet Project, foster families filled out official paperwork with the state authorities, but there was no formal vetting process by the Scarlet Project itself. At times, the welfare office performed psychiatric evaluations or would conduct follow-up visits, but this was inconsistent. The only consistent follow-up came through monthly visits by the staff of the Scarlet Project. Eventually, Tara was introduced to the Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO)¹ and Casa Viva² who helped provide training and resources in order to run a proper foster care program.

As the Scarlet Project continued to grow organically over a period of two years, differing views related to their technical approach began to grow between Tara, as director, and the ministry's board of directors. Tara attributes these challenges to a lack of communication and being unable to properly convey the importance and positive outcomes of children living in family-based care. After two years, Tara hoped to use the Scarlet Project to move beyond the organic and unofficial system of foster care and to create a more formal foster care system. The ministry board saw the transition to foster care as taking away from the original purpose of the organization, which was to fill in gaps in orphanage care. The board eventually concluded that the Scarlet Project would need to be limited to ten families per year.

In 2014, Tara left the ministry, with her husband and another former staff member and started a formal, small-scale foster care program within Honduras. Tara returned to her hometown in the United States for a scheduled speech at her home church. She used the opportunity to share the vision and create buy-in for foster care in Honduras. Tara was also able to continue a partnership with some of her previous donors who offered to support for the new organization, Identity Mission. Identity Mission formed a new board of directors with advice and support from the Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO) and Casa Viva based in Cost Rica, both organizations that provide resources to help small programs focus on family care. Identity Mission's program was approved by the Honduran government that same year. This approval coincided with the election of a new Honduran President, Juan Orlando Hernández, who revamped the welfare system in Honduras and established DINAF³. DINAF was willing to partner with Identity Mission to help establish this new pilot foster care system in two regions of Honduras.

1 CAFO is a coalition of 190 Christian organizations whose members join in coordinated initiatives that grow effective adoption, foster care and global orphan care rooted in the local church.

2 Casa Viva is an organization that helps to promote foster care throughout Latin America by crafting individual transition plans for facilities, offering training and resources, and conducting research.

3 Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia. DINAF is the Hondouran state agency tasked with creating the policies and regulations to protect the rights and welfare of children, adolescents, and families.



Photo Credit: Schimbator Studio for CRS

“It has been a great blessing for me, my family, my whole family. Give them a roof, love, what they need. A child in a family home is not the same as in an orphanage. They develop very differently. And being able to help these children is a great blessing. And a great opportunity to change lives.”
QUOTE FROM A FOSTER CARE MOTHER

Using the Casa Viva model of foster care, Identity Mission and their board of directors helped Honduras design a formal foster care system including creating a training manual for families, hiring caseworkers, a psychologist and implementing an effective evaluation system for families. The CAFO network, Faith-to-Action⁴, and Casa Viva were instrumental in helping Identity Mission learn and integrate new policies and procedures that would be necessary for the program. Tara continues to rely on the

CAFO network and leans heavily into the existing collaborative work that is taking place throughout the region. Additionally, Identity Mission continues to hold their conference on orphan care to share their own experiences and lessons learned in hopes of providing training and guidance to others.

Tara’s learning took place as she came to work in and understand the local context of protective care for children in Honduras. Her connections

Today, Identity Mission provides foster care and wraparound services in San Pedro Sula and the Comayagua region of Honduras. Identity Mission works with nine churches across two regions in Honduras helping to provide foster care and family preservation services. Using a team of case managers, psychologists, and a small administrative staff, Identity Mission supports, trains, and assists foster families in partnership with local churches. Identity Mission also works to prevent family separation by identifying vulnerable family’s situations and helping to meet their immediate needs. This can come in the form of construction projects, micro business support, education sponsorship or meeting other needs as they arise. Identity Mission also hosts their annual Identify Solutions: Conference on Orphan Care to equip residential care institutions with resources and training. They also use this conference to connect with institutions that are looking to transform their care model to incorporate family-based care.

⁴ The Faith to Action is an initiative that serves as a resource for Christian groups, churches, and individuals seeking to respond to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children around the world.

within the local system and national counterparts contributed to Identity Mission's success and the collaboration with the hospital and informal access to local families made the Scarlet Project possible. In creating Identity Mission, Tara worked together with her husband, a Honduran national and the National Director of Identity Mission. Through many points in the process, his knowledge and influence made much of the work possible.

Breaking from the ministry and starting Identity Mission from scratch required Tara to build up donor support around a new vision with a direct strategy to persuade stakeholders of the importance of family-based care. Particularly in US based churches, Identity Mission explained how their previous efforts were hurting children and that it was time to embrace a new model of care. This strategy was also direct, pleading with donors to stop building orphanages abroad as kids deserve and are better cared for in families.

With the creation of Identity Mission, Tara was able to establish a new board of directors that were committed to family-based care. Having a board of directors and CEO that were aligned on a technical approach and dedication to best-practice, Identity Mission was able to create programs that served children without being hindered by internal conflict with co-leaders committed to an alternate vision. In addition, founding Identity Mission allowed Tara

and others to do a deep dive into best practices and procedures of foster care. Therefore, Identity Mission has been able to build skills and capacity in their foster care program, building on evidence-based models and training materials, rather than depending on a more ad hoc system.

Tara attributes the early success of establishing 40 foster families to divine intervention. Additionally, due to the smaller size of the program, the Scarlet Project was able to maintain close contact with the community church which provided stability and opportunities for growth. At that time, a network of faith leaders met regularly to discuss the different ways that they could recruit foster families. The leaders preached to their congregations about the needs of these children and the pressing need of placing children created a sense of urgency to act and respond. The scale was small, specific, and the goal was achievable.

Tara's husband would share that if only one family from every church in Honduras volunteered to take a child, there would be no children left in institutions.

Learnings

- ① Perhaps because it lacked knowledge on best practice, the unstructured and reactionary approach of the Scarlet Project was not scalable. It was not positioned to guarantee the wellbeing of families or long-term care of children. Additionally, the lack of formalized assessments of and follow-up services for foster families posed risks to children's safety and the family's ability to provide stable, ongoing care.
- ① Identity Mission was careful to make the message clear and direct but also tactful. Tara intentionally utilizes personal stories over statistics when making her pitch and is careful to place blame on the systemic model of care rather than on the intentions or work of the caregivers. Tara identifies her personal experience providing foster care for why she was able to successfully start Identity Mission. In her talks with donors and churches, Tara and her husband were able to tell a genuine story of transformation of both the organization and their own family around foster care. Tara uses pictures to demonstrate how different babies looked both before and after being in foster care and seeks to provide credibility by pointing to her own family's journey.
- ① A number of organizations, alliances, and networks are available to provide guidance on transforming services and improving the way children are cared for. It is recommended that organizations interested in transitioning towards family-based care find an expert as a mentor and utilize the abundant resources that have been created to support child protection programs.
- ① Recruiting foster families has proven to be a major challenge for the organization, especially finding families for children above age five, sibling groups, and children with special needs. Identity Mission continues to learn from others and leans on networks to learn and share challenges and successes with others.
- ① The relationship with local churches is extremely important and the presence of a liaison whose responsibility is to build and maintain relationships within the church, unite faith leaders, and communicate the needs of children locally to recruit families has proven to be extremely beneficial.

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Sincere appreciation to Identity Mission for sharing their story with us.
For more information please www.identitymission.org

Need to know more?

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