

Moves to Stop Volunteering at Overseas Orphanages

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The push to stop Australians supporting and volunteering at overseas orphanages is gathering momentum, after a major volunteer travel company agreed to end its association with orphanages.

World Challenge, the largest school-based volunteer travel company worldwide, has decided to stop offering trips to orphanages, after a disturbing link between orphanages and child trafficking was uncovered.

Students heading overseas to volunteer at orphanages (known as “voluntourism”) is a popular practice, which has been facilitated by the tourism industry for years.

But advocacy agency ReThink Orphanages has warned short-term Australian volunteers were doing “more harm than good”.

ReThink Orphanages’ coordinator Leigh Mathews, told Pro Bono News that these volunteers were only intensifying the issues which children in institutional care faced.

“We know that demand for orphanage voluntourism experiences actually drives the institutionalisation of children in these destination countries. We also know that institutional care itself is harmful for children, and orphanage volunteer tourism exacerbates those harms experienced by children,” Mathews said.

“Institutional care itself is documented not to be the best form of care for children. A constant stream of unskilled, short-term volunteers engaging with these children who often have very complex and traumatic histories, is more harmful than helpful.”

Mathews said that voluntourism was not the only problem, with the overarching issue actually the operation of overseas orphanages, which are not run to benefit the wellbeing of children.

“There are very strong links between children being in orphanages and modern slavery. When children are in orphanages they are effectively fully owned by that orphanage. In some cases, they are forced to participate in activities such as cultural performances, forced interaction, invasion of privacy and forced begging...which are done for the purpose of economic gain for the orphanage,” she said.

One person who knows this all too well is Andrea Nave, the CEO of not-for-profit organisation Forget Me Not, which used to run and support overseas orphanages but has since shifted its model.

Forget Me Not was established in 2005 and through fundraising was quickly able to open an orphanage in Nepal. After successfully running the orphanage, the organisation was asked to support an orphanage in Uganda, which housed 39 children with no funding.

Forget Me Not agreed to help, and started finding sponsorships to support the children. But Nave told Pro Bono News they soon realised the money wasn’t being put to good use.

“We went there after three months of funding, to do our due diligence and check on the children directly and found that the children weren’t in a better state than the original reports and photos we received,” Nave said.

Through some forensic probing, Forget Me Not said it realised there was “something rotten going on” and alerted authorities.

“It turned out those 39 children in Uganda were in fact trafficked from their families for the purpose of profit, getting international agencies like Forget Me Not to fund them,” Nave said.

“So we had [those involved] arrested and rescued the 39 children, with 27 of them returning home to waiting families.”

This experience made Forget Me Not re-evaluate its entire operation, and soon found many children at its own orphanage in Nepal were not in fact orphans.

“[The girls at the orphanage] slowly, one by one, began revealing their truths: ‘I want to go home, I want to see my mother, I want to see my father’. [We realised] these children weren’t orphans, they had families and they had been keeping the lie alive, under threat.”

After an 18 month legal battle with the organisation it was funding in Nepal, it won custody of the children and had them transferred to their new country partner, The Himalayan Innovative Society, who are experts in reintegration and family tracing for children.

“We completely turned our organisation upside down. We changed our model completely to family based care,” Nave said.

“The research tells us that upwards of 80 per cent of children in institutional care, across the developing world and beyond, are not orphans but have one or more parents alive who could care for them, if they were supported. From our experience, it’s closer to 98 per cent of those children.

“So our organisation now, with the help of the Nepalese government, assesses the orphanages and children’s homes, looking for children within those organisations that are not orphans and could go home.”

[The Australian government is aware of this issue](#), and a parliamentary committee has recommended banning Australia’s involvement in orphanage tourism, which it said is unwittingly aiding the trafficking and exploitation of children overseas.

Mathews noted there were “no good orphanages”, but said overseas orphanages could be divided between those which purposely set out to exploit children, and those with good intentions which operate with an antiquated model harmful to children.

“There’s no such thing as a good orphanage. But there’s certainly very bad ones. These are the ones that are purposely exploiting children for economic gain and trafficking children in to meet this demand for these experiences,” she said.

“And on the other side you’ve got organisations that genuinely care and want to support vulnerable children in communities, but are potentially not operating from a best practise stand-point.

“In some cases this is because they do not have the systems and support around them to be able to transition their model. But what we’ve been saying is that we know that it’s not the best way to care for children and NGOs have a responsibility to ensure their programs are in the best interests of children.”

Volunteering Australia has supported this push to end orphanage tourism, and is not worried this will dissuade Australians from volunteering in the future.

In a statement provided to Pro Bono News, CEO Adrienne Picone said: “It is essential that Australian volunteers thoroughly research the organisations they will be partnered with, prior to considering international volunteering opportunities.

“Volunteering Australia urges all volunteers and Australian organisations that engage volunteers, to conduct volunteer programs in line with our [National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](#), and not engage in harmful practices. Volunteering Australia will continue to work with the sector, the government and stakeholders to inform on best-practice volunteering.”

Forget Me Not has so far helped to return 88 children to their families, and Nave encouraged Australians to shift their thinking on how they could best support overseas children in need.

“Many families we find are grieving. They gave away their child with some money and the hope of a golden opportunity for education, off to a child trafficker who takes them to orphanages in the cities which are funded by organisations like schools,” she said.

“No matter how well an orphanage is run, children within them end up in a situation where they have attachment disorders, they have dysfunctions, and they have all sorts of traumas associated with their institutionalised care. And that’s on the back of [the support of] well-meaning Australians.”

“Now we help other organisations change their model, and we speak to the Australian public at large, about why they support this continuing myth of orphanages doing good service. There’s a body of 60 years of research, when we’re ready to listen to it, that tells us otherwise. Children do better in a family based unit.”



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