

[From: Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Foundation, Orphan Alert: International Perspectives on Children Left Behind by HIV/AIDS, July 2000, pp. 22&23.]

**Transitioning from institutional care of orphans
to community-based care:
*The experience of Ethiopia's Jerusalem Association Children's Homes***

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Jerusalem Association Children's Homes was founded in 1985 as an indigenous NGO in response to the needs of Ethiopian children who were orphaned by civil war, drought, and the resulting famine of 1984. JACH established four residential institutions for children during the height of the orphan emergency in the 1980s.

In 1996, JACH made the decision to transition from institutionalized child care to community-based care. Guided by a six-year strategic plan for the transition, JACH has shifted its focus to promoting child-focused, sustainable development in communities near JACH children's homes.

Why de-institutionalize orphan care?

A number of JACH's experiences during its first ten years of caring for orphans contributed to the 1996 decision to de-institutionalize. As the years passed and the children in JACH homes grew, JACH staff observed that the children had little knowledge about their society and the world at large due to their lack of exposure to community life. Many orphans felt alienated from their nonorphaned classmates. Some orphans exhibited aggressive behavior in school, partly because they were labeled as orphans and mocked by other students.

Children who had grown up in the institutions had little trust of others and limited knowledge of social norms and values. When they 'graduated' and left the institutions, many of the orphans had a difficult time sustaining themselves because they had no networks of family and community on which to rely and inadequate coping skills for 'real world' challenges.

In addition, the costs of residential care were high. JACH staff recognized that the

organization could assist many more orphaned children if it employed alternatives to institutional care. In light of the huge number of children projected to be orphaned by HIV/AIDS in the late 1990s and thereafter into the 21st century, JACH became convinced that it was imperative to shift to a community-based approach.

The process of de-institutionalization

JACH's board and management consulted with local authorities and with JACH's partner organizations to develop a strategic plan for de-institutionalization. One of the earliest elements of the plan was enabling children to travel to their birthplaces during school holidays to trace their families and relatives. Older children accompanied the younger children on their trips. Children were encouraged to visit marketplaces, churches, and other sites where large numbers of people congregate to begin their search. The children documented their findings on a form provided by JACH.

This approach was remarkably successful in reuniting children with families. Of 1,000 orphans, some 285 children found families and relatives. Twenty-five children even found biological parents who had no idea that their children were alive. In some instances, foster parents, a new concept in Ethiopia, agreed to accept the children. All families were provided with a grant of 2,000 birr (equivalent to US\$250) to cover resettlement costs for the reunified child. (In contrast, it cost over 5,500 birr per year to care for a child housed at JACH). Reunified children were assigned JACH social workers to monitor their adjustment in their new families.

While the younger children were receptive to the idea of reunification, most of the orphans

aged 15 and over wanted something different: independent living as self-reliant citizens. An earlier attempt to enable the older children to become self-supporting by setting up small income generating projects for them was deemed a failure because the young people were not involved in formulating the projects. JACH used a new approach instead: orphaned youth were given responsibility for developing their own ideas for becoming self-sufficient. They were encouraged to spend time at area markets, shops, and workshops, learning about business and trades and discovering opportunities. JACH assisted the youth in developing business plans and provided a startup grant for youth with viable proposals.

Another approach that JACH used to improve older orphans' abilities to support themselves was arranging apprenticeship training for orphans interested in metal works, auto mechanics, hair care, photography and other trades. Following their apprenticeship, the youth received a small grant from JACH to start their own business. In addition, agricultural training was provided at JACH homes for all interested children. Finally, JACH provided financial support to youth choosing to pursue higher education. Overall, this multi-pronged strategy was successful in guiding older orphans to independent living.

Challenges of de-institutionalization

The proposed plan for de-institutionalization was met with resistance from staff, children, and donors. Middle management and support staff were concerned about job security. The children were uncomfortable with the prospect of venturing into the unknown world. An additional challenge was the lack of sufficient funds to operate the program as envisioned.

JACH's leadership faced the challenges head on. It was convinced that staff themselves had to be transformed into change agents who understood and supported the shift. Frequent discussions with staff were conducted, presenting strong arguments that reintegration of children into communities was in keeping with Ethiopian culture and religion and with Ethiopian traditions of raising children in an extended

family setting. Over time, JACH was able to garner the support of staff.

The children living in JACH houses were apprehensive about the prospect of leaving the institution. They were uncertain what lay beyond the institution's walls and feared the unknown. JACH worked to help the children understand that orphanages are artificial homes, far removed from mainstream life. Staff discussed with the children how residing in orphanages deprives them of the vital opportunities for socialization which enable them to survive and succeed in their adult lives. Children were encouraged to embrace the opportunity to learn about their roots and their identity. The children too eventually understood and accepted the de-institutionalization initiative.

Donors were initially not convinced that the concept of de-institutionalization was viable, and thus limited their contribution to this effort. However, after observing the positive outcomes of the early stages of the reunification and reintegration processes, donors made additional funds available to support de-institutionalization.

Next steps

To date, JACH has reunified and reintegrated 810 children. The success of de-institutionalization has allowed JACH to close one home. Only 190 children reside in the three remaining homes. No additional children are accepted into these homes. In the near future, JACH plans to reintegrate all the children and close all the homes.

The need for orphan care has grown again in recent years because of the resurgence of conflict with Eritrea, drought, famine, and the HIV/AIDS crisis. JACH is working with communities in both rural and urban areas of the country to facilitate community development and to reinvigorate traditional mechanisms of caring for orphans.

JACH is sharing its experience of de-institutionalization through a national network of organizations working in support of orphans. A number of Ethiopian orphanages are beginning to follow JACH's example. The national effort to shift from

institutionalized child care to community-based care is gathering momentum.

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