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Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper ‘Capturing the voices of the intercountry adoption community in the redesign of the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service’ (“ICAFSS”).

The NSW Committee on Adoption and Permanent Care Inc (“the Committee”) is a non-profit organisation, with membership comprising non-government agencies, support groups and individuals interested in, involved in, or affected by adoption and permanent care or related issues.

**3.1 Addressing the needs of those who use the ICAFSS**

The Committee acknowledges the lifelong issues associated with intercountry adoption, especially in regard to issues relating to identity and developing an understanding of their life story. Furthermore, children adopted from overseas have typically already suffered trauma and are likely to have attachment issues, therefore it is important that ICAFSS professionals have adoption specific and trauma informed parenting knowledge and experience.

Before the establishment of ICAFSS, there has been limited intercountry adoption specific support and services. The Adoption and Permanent Care Association of NSW are past members of the Committee and rely on dedicated volunteers to coordinate support groups, events and playgroups. The Committee recommends ICAFSS makes a concerted effort to support and coordinate intercountry adoptive parents support groups and peer support groups, as these volunteer groups often operate in a silo to professional organisations but they can be very complementary.

**3.2 Ideas for different forms of support**

The Committee supports all the initiatives included in the Discussion Paper and recommends a greater emphasis on intercountry adoption related peer support and mentorship. The Committee recognises the importance for intercountry adoptees to meet other intercountry adoptees, especially those from the same cultural background, as this greatly assists their cultural connection and identify development.

Adoptees and their families often do not seek support until a situation is at crisis point. Peer Support and Mentor programs are often preventative as they engage families through information and support before a crisis develops. Being part of a group that shares information and anticipates future needs (e.g. adolescent exploration of identity in an adoption context) provides proactive rather than reactive post adoption support.

Adult intercountry adoptees could provide mentorship and share common experiences about what they have learnt. Obtaining language skills is also invaluable especially if a visit to their country of origin or a reunion with their birth family occurs. Language skills will also connect the adoptee to the country specific community in Australia.

The Committee also suggests ICAFSS replicates the Forced Adoption Support Services Small Grant Funding, which allows for eligible groups and organisations to apply for grants to fund projects to support people affected by past forced adoption policies and practices. The establishment of an ICAFSS Small Grant Funding could provide financial support for intercountry adoption peer group events or travel costs associated with a return to their country of origin. Centralising the allocation of funding for community groups and organisations that have evolved to meet intercountry adoptee needs would likely result in the centralised team becoming aware of the supports already available, or emerging in the community, allowing them to develop a referral pathway to these services.

**3.3 Search for origins**

The Committee believes Australian intercountry adoptees have a right to access specialised support when they embark on a potentially very emotional and complex journey to access their overseas records and reconnect with birth family. People impacted by Australia’s forced adoption practices have access to professional counselling, support, tracing and reunification services through Federal and State Government funding, therefore the Committee believes these services should be extended to the intercountry adoption community given adoptees experiences share many similarities regardless of their adoption pathway. Collaboration between funding bodies to ensure existing services have the resources and skills necessary to support all adoptees minimises the unnecessary duplication of service delivery.

It can be very challenging to navigate access to overseas records and obtain information from an adoptees’ country of origin without professional support. The Committee also believes Australia has an obligation as a signatory to the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption to support intercountry adoptees (children and adults) as they search for their origins. This service must provide practical assistance alongside counselling support. Assistance should include helping intercountry adoptees articulate their motivation to search (i.e. building their identity, medical purposes etc) and understanding the multitude of outcomes and potential issues that may arise at each stage, assistance with passport and citizenship issues, how to access adoption records in Australia and overseas, and intermediary support during the complex reunification process.

Search action cannot be considered separate to counselling and emotional support and both must be timely, flexible, culturally aware, trauma informed and have experience in assisting individuals navigate grief and loss. Both practical and emotional support must allow for trusting case work relationships to develop. This work is labour intensive and any funding for service provision must reflect the employee related costs associated with providing this essential service for people removed from their country of origin.

Furthermore, the Committee acknowledges Article 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that people have a right to know about their biological and cultural heritage, therefore it is important to provide Australian intercountry adoptees with opportunities to connect with their countries and families of origin, thereby fulfilling Australia’s obligations under this most widely ratified human rights treaty.

**3.4 National accessibility**

Currently many potential service users are unaware of the ICAFSS service. It is imperative that there is a significant online presence for the funded service.

Accessibility is not solved by online presence alone. Older adoptees may have limited scope to access services that are only offered via social media, web conferencing (‘skype’) and similar. Feedback from service users across the Committee’s member agencies shows the current provision of a helpline is inadequate and inappropriate for many potential service uses who are seeking face to face intervention in the first instance. Priority should be given to physical service reach across urban and regional Australia, perhaps a network of support professionals should be situated within relevant adoption support services in each state.

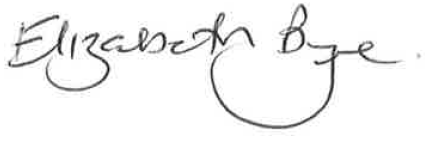
The Federal Government could gather adoption information through the Australian Census, as this could create data of number of adopted people, age, adoption pathway (i.e. intercountry, domestic or Out-of-Home Care adoption). This data could assist adoption service providers and ICAFSS to target programs to specific communities.

**3.5 Capacity building**

There are services who possess extensive knowledge and experience across the post adoption continuum (from information provision and training to clinical intervention). These should be drawn on to develop ICAFSS services. Existing post adoption services in each state have many years of experience and knowledge in trauma informed adoption practice and culturally appropriate search action. They have extensive experience with intercountry adoptees and parents who have adopted children from overseas. In NSW these, services are the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) and International Social Service Australia (ISS).

Peer support groups that currently exist are also in a position to provide input in the development of these programmes. The Committee’s membership includes many of the service providers ICAFSS should work with to develop cross collaborative post adoption support programs to meet the needs of the intercountry adoption community. We would be happy to provide further information about these specific services.

Yours sincerely,



Elizabeth Byrne

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In consultation with the Committee’s Legislative Review Sub-committee:

* Jane Adams, Committee Member, (Senior Practitioner, Post Adoption Resource Centre)
* Renee Carter, Vice Chair (CEO, Adopt Change)
* Damon Martin, Public Officer (Manager, International Social Service Australia)