

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN AN AGENCY IF I LIVE OVERSEAS?

Suggestions from Michele Jordan, Consultant for Children's House International

An individual who lives overseas and was interested in international adoption contacted me today. We first talked about her countries of interest and which countries work best for a family living overseas. We discussed how she would complete an adoption while living overseas and how she would bring her child home to live in her residence outside the U.S. Finally, we discussed her status living overseas and how this could affect her adoption. Interestingly, she had already spoken with other agencies and none had raised the issue of how her adoption could be affected by her overseas residence.

I regularly receive calls from families who have signed with adoption agencies or social workers, only to find out a year (or years) later that they have issues unique to living overseas that cannot be resolved or they have paid an independent social worker for a home study that cannot be used.

Overseas families that are pursuing an adoption, regardless of whether they are military, government, temporary workers or "expats", can be affected by having a residence outside the U.S. These families can have a completed adoption from the foreign country but the inability to get a residential visa for their child in their overseas residence. They can also find themselves doing much of the legwork or research themselves while an experienced agency could assist them.

So what should an overseas family look for in an adoption agency?

As a result of working with overseas families for more than 10 years and working in the field of adoption for over 35 years, here are my recommendations.

1. How will you communicate with your agency?

Consider the following issues:

Understandably, the agency is probably open from 9-5 EST, PST, etc. If you have an urgent issue outside of these hours, is there someone you can reach and get answers from? Will your agency respond to you within 24 hours? Is your agency willing to work within your resident time zone? Are they willing to call you outside the U.S.? Do they respond to your emails on weekends if they are urgent?

I often receive emails from families during their morning, which is my late evening after I have finished work. If I wait to respond until my next workday, they have already lost much of their workday. I frequently answer emails at

11p.m. so that my families can move forward with their task and not have to wait for me and, effectively, lose a day.

It is good business practice to respond to emails within 24 hours. I suggest that you send a few emails to agencies you are interested in and take notice of how fast they get back to you. An agency is like a boyfriend: If it does not respond quickly during the time period when they should be trying to impress you, ask yourself what will they be like when they already have a commitment and your funds?

I frequently communicate with families via Skype text or Skype phone calls. This saves money for my families and is very convenient. They can send a Skype message during their day and I will respond when I start work the following morning.

2. Will the agency encourage you to speak with other adoptive families?

I recommend that you ask to speak with several overseas families who have adopted in your country of interest in the last one to two years through this agency. The world of adoption is a rapidly changing one. What happened five years ago is not relevant to your adoption. Speaking with a family in the U.S. will not tell you how the agency is equipped to deal with overseas families. If the program you are pursuing is a new program for the agency, talk with overseas families who have recently completed an international adoption in another country. Ask these families what recommendations they would have for you.

3. How much does your agency assist you with the entire adoption process, including the home study, USCIS pre-approval, and dossier?

There are numerous documents and processes that must be completed in a specific way. Some questions to ask in order to determine the extent to which they are willing to assist you with the process include: Do they expect you to hire a dossier prep service or complete your dossier on your own or do they assist you with this process? Do they assist you with obtaining a passport and Certificate of Citizenship for your child so you can return to your country of residence within a reasonable amount of time? Will they assist you to get a visa for your country of residence? Will their overseas staff assist you with a Shengen visa should you need one?

4. How well does your agency personally know you and your circumstances?

Do you feel confident enough to confide in them about personal issues that could affect your adoption?

When the Hague Treaty was about to be implemented, I spoke with the majority of my past adoptive families living overseas and encouraged them to file another 1600A if they felt they would adopt again in the next couple of years. This proved to be beneficial, especially for some families who would not have been able to adopt again through the U.S. system after the Hague was implemented.

OTHER GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Does the agency employ a social worker overseas who lives close enough to your home so that travel costs will not be exorbitant?
2. Can the agency assist you with notarization of documents? Finding a U.S. notary overseas can be very difficult and expensive.
3. Regardless of whether you are doing a Hague adoption, is the agency Hague accredited?
4. Does the agency have enough country programs for an overseas family so that should your present country close for an extended period or permanently, you have an alternative country or countries that you can switch over to? If the agency only works in one country and that country closes, you could lose the funds you have invested. Also determine what, if any fees, you need to pay, in order to switch countries should your program close.
5. If you move to another foreign country or back to the U.S during the adoption process, will the agency continue to assist you?

I wish you the best with your adoption. Feel free to contact me at michele.t.jordan@sbcglobal.net if I can be of help.

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