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**Marshall Center, U.S. Department of State**  
**Intercountry Adoption Symposium 2019**  
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**ASSISTANT SECRETARY RISCH:** Good afternoon. Welcome to the Marshall Center in the Department of State, and welcome to our Adoption Symposium.

This is a special moment, and I am happy to be a part of it.

If no one has said it to you yet today, let me be the first: Thank you. Thank you for participating in this Symposium. Thank you for caring. Your presence today underscores your devotion to children in need.

We share that devotion. My organization, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, takes seriously our role in promoting intercountry adoption as a viable option for children in need of permanent, loving homes. With the help of everyone here, Americans open their homes and hearts to these children.

Each year, the President has expressed his support for adoption. In his most recent Proclamation designating November as National Adoption

Month, he recognized it as a “life changing act.” I am sure many in this room would agree with that assessment. As an adoptee myself, I know that it changed my life in ways I still cannot fully fathom.

The President’s Executive Office through the Domestic Policy Council underscored that support with action. In May, the Council convened a roundtable discussion of intercountry adoption stakeholders. At that meeting, diverse voices had an opportunity to express opinions about the state of intercountry adoption. We are indebted to Les Ford and the Council for starting a conversation we hope to build on today.

Let me start with this clear statement: The Department of State supports intercountry adoption.

All of us care for the safety of children. All of us recognize their vulnerability. All of us want to protect them from those who would do them harm. Bringing all of us together, as this Symposium does, provides us with an opportunity to meet those goals in cooperation rather than in competition.

When the United States became a signatory to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption in 1994, our government made a commitment to its basic principles. The Preamble “recognize[s] that the child...should

grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding.” Intercountry adoption is one method to ensure that children can find that atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding.

The Department of State is deeply committed to safeguarding intercountry adoption as a viable option for children in need of permanency. We believe this option should be available throughout the world when it is in the best interests of the child. Our role in carrying out this commitment is varied and based in law and treaty obligations.

We work with foreign governments to learn about their child welfare systems and legislation. We serve as the Central Authority under the Hague Adoption Convention. We advocate for the Convention with international partners. We provide regulatory oversight of the entity that accredits U.S. adoption service providers. We provide updated information on adoption procedures and developments through [adoption.state.gov](http://adoption.state.gov). It is especially rewarding when we issue the immigrant visas for children traveling with their adoptive families to a new home in the United States. The State Department takes great pride and care in the exercise of each of these responsibilities for intercountry adoptions.

We work hard at this role. In 2018, diplomats in this Department traveled to five continents to engage with policy leaders from dozens of countries. We make those trips to cooperate on intercountry adoption issues, to develop strategies to improve current practices, and to work to resolve any hindrances to intercountry adoption. In addition, the Department provides guidance to help prospective adoptive parents navigate the complicated journey of intercountry adoption.

Always bearing in mind the best interests of children and our goal to protect the interests of American citizens, we analyze the legal and procedural frameworks of countries of origin. Based on that analysis, we develop action plans to improve our understanding of country conditions and identify barriers to intercountry adoption. We then work with our embassies and consulates and with foreign adoption authorities to overcome those barriers.

We take our regulatory role seriously. We know that it protects both children and prospective adoptive parents. Consequently, one of our most important responsibilities in support of intercountry adoption is our supervision of the designated accrediting entity, Intercountry Adoption Accreditation and Maintenance Entity, Inc. We work to make certain that they appropriately and adequately monitor adoption service providers' compliance with accreditation regulations.

Harm to even one adopted child is unacceptable. Deception of any prospective adoptive parent is indefensible. One case of corruption calls all authorities into question. These awful situations undermine confidence in our system worldwide. We owe it to the adoptive families, to the birth parents, and most importantly to the children, to ensure that intercountry adoptions are ethical and transparent. Our dedication to appropriate monitoring and oversight bolsters foreign adoption authorities' confidence in the U.S. accreditation system. This confidence in our work protects intercountry adoption as a viable option for children in need of permanent homes.

Bearing that incredible responsibility in mind, our Symposium brings together a broad range of those who care about intercountry adoption. Here today are professional adoption practitioners; advocates for adoption policy change; and representatives of interest groups, such as adoptive families and birth parents. We have also invited adult adoptees; academic researchers; and government officials from the Agency for International Development, Citizenship and Immigration Services, Health and Human Services, and this Department. There are Congressional staff observers and representatives of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. This is an historic meeting to consider how we can strengthen the practice for the future of intercountry adoption.

We began Monday morning, meeting with U.S. accredited and approved adoption service providers, our accrediting entity, Citizenship and Immigration officials, and a variety of offices within the Department. We focused on intercountry adoption practice, the challenges providers face in the current environment, the regulatory framework in which they operate, and the trends affecting our work.

Over the next two days, we will focus on the roles of the U.S. government in relation to child welfare and intercountry adoption. We want to recognize the different voices of adoption stakeholders. One of those voices joining us this afternoon is that of a very special guest who will be speaking this afternoon, Ms. Laura Ingraham. While many of you know her as a television commentator, she comes today as an adoptive parent to speak from the heart about her personal experiences. Introducing Ms. Ingraham will be the Deputy Secretary of State, John Sullivan, and the Department's spokesperson, Morgan Ortagus. I am very pleased to welcome these honored guests. Their participation today reflects just how important intercountry adoptions are to the Department of State.

We have also invited representatives from different members of the community to be on a panel to share their perspectives. We have invited them to express what their stakeholders consider the most important

issues for the U.S. government to address in relation to intercountry adoption.

We bring this group together to create a deeper understanding of our respective views and interests. We aim for a clearer comprehension of the roles of the different governmental offices in intercountry adoptions. Through this, we know we can establish a cooperative approach to improving and strengthening intercountry adoption.

We are more likely to achieve the future we imagine and wish to create if we work together in a spirit of cooperation, trust, and mutual respect. To build that respect, we need to listen – both to the substance of the ideas expressed by all of you and to the motivation, the spirit of service behind it.

We all have passion to make a difference. We have expectations, experience, and ideas. Use this historic meeting to express yourself. Communicate your viewpoint. But use this meeting also to listen, to learn the point of view of other participants. That is certainly *our* priority for this symposium – to listen and better understand *your* perspectives. And let me ask us all to do something very difficult. Let us all suspend judgment about how all these sometimes-contradictory

views will be reconciled until we have a deeper understanding of each other.

The role of intercountry adoption in protecting children involves many government agencies. To clarify those roles, our colleagues from across the interagency are here with us. We welcome Sarah Geiserich and her colleagues from the United States Agency for International Development, who will update us on the U.S. Government's latest efforts toward "Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity."

Speakers from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, together with offices within State will help us clarify the roles of the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

And while our colleagues from Health and Human Services were unable to join us today, we welcome Melinda Lis from Spaulding for Children and her colleague Debbie Riley, from Center for Adoption Support and Education, who will outline some of that agency's projects. They address a continuum of adoptive parent training and preparation, as well as issues arising in post placement and post adoption, including disruptions and dissolutions.

We are calling this symposium ‘historic’ not only because it is unusual, but also because of its ambition to inform our policy focus in the years to come. This is an ambitious undertaking: to integrate our understanding of each other into our daily work in support of children and families. As we in the Department of State plan strategically for the future, we seek a broader view, a more comprehensive approach to inform intercountry adoption policy. Laws and treaties define much of our work. But of equal importance is the future we imagine we can achieve. We want your vision to be part of that future.

Seize this opportunity. Inform yourselves of the interests and motivations of other stakeholders. Perhaps more importantly, make sure that others here experience your viewpoint, your perspective. We aim to inform best practices. We hope to provide a moment of reflection to evaluate with new eyes our firmly held beliefs about how to meet the needs of children in adversity.

Adoption is about family. It is about our deepest emotions and most basic instincts. While it is a human function, it is also a legal one. When more than one nation is involved, reconciling differing legal systems adds layers to the complexity of adoption. This complexity

demands much of each participant, each professional, each volunteer. We can cut through this complexity together to get this right.

Each person involved in adoption, whether domestic or intercountry, contributes to the story of America. Each adoption is part of our American story. We need to get it right. I know that this Symposium will help us do exactly that. We owe it to each other, and we owe it to the children.

Thank you again. I wish you all a very productive meeting and extend my best wishes to your success in the future.