



## INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION DISPATCH

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Since 2019, the Office of Children’s Issues (CI) has issued periodic Intercountry Adoption Dispatches to keep ASPs abreast of adoption-related information that supplements the public information found on our website and through [Intercountry Adoption News and Notices](#) sent to our stakeholder listserv. Dispatch readership has been low, and we have received some feedback that the Dispatch has been easy to miss, repetitive, or otherwise not the best forum for communicating information of interest. Based on this helpful feedback, we have decided to make this our last volume and focus on other ways to engage.

We’ll be devoting attention to opportunities to informally engage with ASPs in a more dynamic way through regularly scheduled town hall-style meetings open to all ASPs. We look forward to maintaining strong lines of communication and will continue to be accessible to you. As always, ASPs are welcome to share agency-specific input, feedback, suggestions, and requests for assistance by emailing us at [ASPAdoption@state.gov](mailto:ASPAdoption@state.gov).

### **MESSAGE FROM ADOPTION OVERSIGHT DIVISION CHIEF, MARISA LIGHT:**

2022 was an instrumental year for advancing oversight work that serves as the foundation for maintaining the viability of intercountry adoption in an ever-changing world. Taking a step back to reflect on the big picture, I’d like to share three key areas of intense focus with direct impact on the ASP community.

#### **Supporting ASPs at the Forefront of the Ukraine Response:**

We started the year with preparations for a worst-case scenario in Ukraine. The crisis has impacted hundreds of Ukrainian children in the process of being adopted by U.S. families and the U.S. citizens in or planning travel to Ukraine for adoption-related processing. For several months we engaged in a near constant flow of obtaining and relaying information between State Department staff, ASPs, PAPs, other U.S. government agencies, Congress, and of course, the Ukrainian government. We were able to provide current and accurate information vital to assisting with evacuations and finalizing as many eligible adoptions as possible. We also had the rare opportunity to connect directly with PAPs at every stage of the process, including making calls to PAPs in Ukraine to provide direct and immediate crisis response. The extraordinary coordination between the Department and ASPs helped us to secure permission to proceed with in-progress cases nearing finalization. Throughout this process, we provided assurances that ASPs and their local partners continued to operate with full respect for Ukrainian laws amid the crisis. We are grateful for the efforts of all Ukraine ASPs during this very difficult time and believe this has set a new standard for what can be achieved with open communication and collaboration.



## **The Fifth Special Commission for the Adoption Convention:**

In July 2022, a delegation led by Special Advisor for Children’s Issues, Michelle Bernier-Toth, represented the United States at the fifth Special Commission for the Adoption Convention. The Special Commission, held approximately every five years, provides an opportunity for Convention countries to review the operation of the Convention and identify areas of focus for the Hague Permanent Bureau and member states. The 2022 Special Commission focused on illicit practices and post-adoption services. It also addressed several contemporary issues impacting intercountry adoption, such as how technology was used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-three of the 105 countries party to the Convention participated in the virtual meeting. This Special Commission also included observers from different organizations and several panels with adult adoptees.

During the Special Commission, we advocated proudly for the strength of our regulatory framework and the indispensable role that ASPs and AEs play in facilitating safe, legal, transparent, and ethical adoptions that are fully compliant with the principles of the Convention. Our multilateral advocacy ensured that our views were reflected in the final [Conclusions and Recommendations](#) document, and set the stage for continued conversation with many countries. Whereas many receiving countries in recent years have reduced the number of countries, particularly non-Convention countries, from which they will allow their citizens to adopt, the United States stands firm in our commitment to promote intercountry adoption as an appropriate means of permanency for those children who need it most. The Special Commission concluded with member states reaching consensus on 54 conclusions and recommendations (C&Rs), including a Toolkit on Preventing and Addressing Illicit Practices in Intercountry Adoption and six new model forms, each of which will be finalized in March 2023.

## **Incorporation of a Second National-Level Accrediting Entity (AE):**

On June 2, 2022, the Department of State designated Center for Excellence in Adoption Services (CEAS) as an AE under the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 (IAA) for a period of five years. On December 1, 2022, CEAS fully assumed its role as AE, joining the Intercountry Adoption Accreditation and Maintenance Entity (IAAME), whose accreditation the Department renewed for another five years. Both AEs undertake accrediting, approving, monitoring, and oversight of ASPs according to their respective jurisdictions. CI identified these jurisdictions based on existing federal regions, in consideration of equitable distribution of workload between the AEs. CI, IAAME, and CEAS worked diligently and collaboratively to prepare for and implement the transition from one to two AEs.

These important milestones were part of a long-held goal of the Department and many members of the broader adoption community. Achieving this objective strengthens the intercountry adoption accreditation system by reducing reliance on a single AE and introducing additional perspectives on effective accreditation, approval, monitoring, and oversight of ASPs. We firmly believe the combined experience and judgment of two national-level AEs provide opportunities for collaboration, learning, and process improvements that will enhance each entity’s execution of AE responsibilities in the long term, which benefits all adoption stakeholders and those we’re trying to serve. This transition to a dual national-level AE system was made possible through the support, patience, and cooperation of the ASP community. We are grateful for the open communication and collaboration between IAAME and CEAS in designing and implementing as smooth a transition as possible.



### **Looking Ahead:**

Supporting the transition to a dual national-level accrediting entity system is one of our highest priorities and we will continue to increase our investments in the long-term strength and durability of our accreditation and oversight system. We know it's reasonable to expect some bumps in the road, and we anticipate the intercountry adoption community will encounter new challenges as the transition to two AEs continues to unfold. We are counting on ASPs to be forthcoming about any concerns that develop and to engage productively with us.

The Adoption Oversight (AO) division will conduct the first of a series of townhall meetings with all ASPs on accreditation and oversight issues in April and expects to continue these approximately quarterly thereafter. We believe it is important to offer space for ASPs to raise questions and concerns beyond the existing formal channels of communication and hope that this spurs more open conversations about the realities and challenges ASPs face in the day-to-day work. The AEs know we intend to take a concerted look at several aspects of AE processes beginning in 2024 to identify good practices as well as any areas that might appropriately be streamlined without losing any of the robust integrity of the system.

One final note about the year ahead – because I believe it's important that all Adoption Oversight Officers have a bigger window into the questions, needs, and concerns of ASPs, you'll now see a variety of AO staff responsible for monitoring the [ASPadoption@state.gov](mailto:ASPadoption@state.gov) inbox. After many years of being the primary point of contact through the inbox, Stefanie Eye has gained tremendously valuable insights and developed strong working relationships with many of you. Stefanie is now training other colleagues to take on this important role, and I'm confident you'll see the same level of responsiveness and service. Please keep in mind that, owing to strict rules about not providing information about proposed or contemplated regulatory changes, we are sometimes limited in our ability to respond fulsomely to some questions and feedback about suggested actions. Even though our response may be to simply thank you for your feedback, I assure you that all ASP input is closely noted, discussed, and where appropriate, slated for further information gathering and/or action.

### **KEY UPDATES:**

#### **National Adoption Month 2022:**

In November 2022, CI organized various activities and publications in recognition of National Adoption Month. We began the month with a [public statement](#) by Rena Bitter, Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, reaffirming the Department's commitment to intercountry adoption. CI also [published an article](#) in State Magazine highlighting many recent important developments in adoption and providing an overview of how the Office of Children's Issues operates. On November 3, we convened a virtual town hall with U.S. adult intercountry adoptees to discuss adoptee participation in the Special Commission. We also hosted a Department-wide panel on the past, present, and future of intercountry adoptions featuring intercountry adoption experts from academia and the private sector. Throughout the month, we published multiple social media posts highlighting our commitment and efforts on intercountry adoption to the general public.

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## **Bilateral Engagement with Foreign Governments:**

During 2022, as pandemic-related restrictions were increasingly lifted globally, CI staff traveled to multiple countries to expand our bilateral and multilateral relationships with our foreign counterparts. This outreach included travel to Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, South Africa, Colombia, and India. During these trips, we held productive meetings with adoption authorities in foreign governments, U.S. embassy personnel, and representatives of non-governmental organizations operating in these countries. We look forward to additional trips this year and will continue to work with our partners overseas to address barriers to safe and legal intercountry adoption.

## **Leveraging Diplomacy to Strengthen Child Protection:**

Michelle Bernier-Toth authored a guest editorial in January 2023 for the Volume 4 newsletter of Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity ([APCCA](#)), an inter-agency U.S. government platform to advance child protection and wellbeing. In her editorial, Bernier-Toth highlighted the critical role diplomacy plays in navigating the complexities of intercountry adoption, as well as international child abduction – another key area of work within CI. In relation to intercountry adoption, Bernier-Toth explored the example of support to U.S. citizens with inquiries related to the Ukraine adoption crisis and referenced the collaboration between CI and ASPs. You can read her article [here](#).

## **Foreign Authorization Section on Adoption.State.gov:**

CI has been working with U.S. Embassies in Hague Convention countries to get a list of authorization requirements for U.S. based ASPs and contact information for the Central Authorities responsible for authorization. While we do not have confirmed information from every country, the countries that have provided their authorization procedures are listed on the travel.state.gov website. Look here for more information: [Country Information for Adoption Service Providers' \(ASPs\) \(state.gov\)](#).

## **USCIS New Processing Times:**

In November 2022, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) [announced](#) new processing times and methods for orphan and Hague applications and petitions, in line with its commitment to processing intercountry adoption cases as quickly and efficiently as possible. The new processing times announced by USCIS are:

Form	Months
I-600A	5.5
I-600	19.5
I-800A	3.5
I-800	2

These changes are now reflected on the USCIS website, where you can [check case processing times](#) by form type. For additional information, visit the USCIS [Adoption](#) page.

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## **COUNTRY SPOTLIGHTS:**

### **Ukraine:**

Since Russia's war against Ukraine, CI has worked consistently to obtain and convey accurate information from the Ukrainian government to the U.S. adoption community regarding the status of intercountry adoption, hosting programs, and other key updates. At the same time, CI has maintained an ongoing dialogue with the Ukrainian government regarding the interests of U.S. citizens in supporting Ukrainian children. CI has also worked closely with U.S. families for whom Ukrainian courts issued final approvals of an adoption prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and their ASPs. This included facilitating departure of children with final adoption decrees and issuing immigrant visas by the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw. Throughout 2022, CI also shared information and updates with a larger group of families who had initiated, but not yet completed the process to adopt children from Ukraine. To ensure timely and accurate delivery of information, we held a series of virtual town hall meetings in April with ASPs and their clients who have active adoption cases in Ukraine, those who have not yet entered the Ukrainian court process, and those in earlier stages of the process.

CI continues to closely monitor the situation in Ukraine. Our office still receives frequent inquiries about how to foster, host, house, or adopt Ukrainian children during this time of crisis. The Government of Ukraine has repeatedly confirmed its position that intercountry adoption is not possible at this time. This position is consistent with international norms and principles of child welfare. The Ukrainian government announced in June 2022 that they will permit children in institutional care (or deprived of parental care) to participate in hosting programs abroad only as part of organized groups in institutional care. If an orphanage has been evacuated from Ukraine, most to Poland and other EU countries, the National Social Service of Ukraine (NSS) is not authorizing any further relocation for participation in a hosting program and will not authorize any individual children in institutional care to be relocated elsewhere to stay with host families. NSS makes all decisions regarding the participation of children in hosting programs. The Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy (MSP) and NSS have continued to confirm that they are not accepting any invitations for children who are orphans or deprived of parental care to stay with host families. ASPs with case-specific questions are invited to contact us at [ASPAdoption@state.gov](mailto:ASPAdoption@state.gov).

### **China:**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) suspended intercountry adoption in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. CI, along with our colleagues at the U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou, are working towards finding a solution by communicating frequently with PRC officials. CI continues to closely monitor news, policy, and travel requirements from the PRC and their impact on the suspension of intercountry adoptions from China. PRC officials have not provided any information on plans to permit travel related to intercountry adoption, despite relaxations of travel restrictions overall, but we continue to advocate for U.S. families. We would especially like to thank ASPs who are working closely with PAPs who have had referrals since the suspension began and who continue to provide these families with support during this difficult time of uncertainty. We were glad to have an opportunity to engage with prospective adoptive parents on intercountry adoption issues in the PRC most recently on a call on January 27. Please continue to monitor our website for updates and contact us at [ASPAdoption@state.gov](mailto:ASPAdoption@state.gov) with any specific questions.