

Looking Forward: A Global Response for Homeless Children
Opening Comments to Conference
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On behalf of Holt staff and our partners I welcome you to Eugene, Oregon and the Looking Forward conference.

Today we come together from over 30 countries knowing that there are hundreds of thousands of children, in each of our regions of the world (if not millions in some regions) who are either not living in families with parents or other supportive adults, or who are at serious risk of falling outside of family care, particularly with the loss of one parent. Although often referred to as “orphaned and vulnerable children”... there is no unifying or adequate word or phrase to describe these children...though our conference takes liberty in calling them “homeless” but these are the children we will focus on at this conference...., such children who are in dire need of safe, supportive and loving family environments.

We are here to *look forward* on how we best can best address these most precious yet vulnerable children, keeping in mind these children don't have political power and their voices are not heard about a need and right that I am sure we all can agree to: to grow up in a family.

We are here to address this need and right in two essential ways:

- To look at what it takes for children to be in family environments: to do this by highlighting lessons learned, and the best practice services and systems that can most realistically support these children and families
- And to look at ways that we can better collaborate with each other, recognizing we each have both collective and individual responsibilities in this endeavor.

Over the next 3 days we will spend together, let's not forget the faces and names of the children who we all have at one point or another, or in one way or another, have all met...

These are children with disabilities living in institutions often in squalor conditions, who have been abandoned or brought to institutions by parents who feel they are unable to properly care for them

Children born to very young mothers, who know that both they and their child face ***tremendous challenges and stigmas*** in some societies in being born out of wedlock

Or ***children left in visible public places*** to be found by well meaning people, who would ensure that the child is able to get placed into a center and possibly into adoption

These are Children left homeless or loss of parents in *disasters*...natural disasters and human disasters (must admit that sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference) ...

There is *Nadezda in Russia* who has been in and out of preutes, or shelters, and on the streets at times, coming from an abusive family situation;

And *Asha in India* who is living in a government remand center after her father had run away from the family and mom died of illness;

Then there is *Esperanza in Guatemala or in the Philippines*, whose birth mom struggles in severe poverty with many other young children who she can barely feed and cannot keep healthy, and who feels she must send Esperanza to a child caring center run by a church;

There is *Sanyu in Uganda* who has lost both parents from AIDS, being taken care of by her Grandma who herself is frail and not able to support Sanyu (let alone her other siblings) in expenses for education or proper nutrition

And finally there is *the youngster named Hope, in United States* who has bounced from one foster family to another, not experiencing the stability and complete dedication that we know children need for emotional stability and ...

All of these children in are precarious situations, outside of permanent and/or supportive family situations.

Yes, Asha, Sanyu, Esperanza, Nadezdha – these names all translate to Hope in their native languages...and *hope* is what all of these children need, that spark to persevere and reach out for a future.

There is hope because there is no culture on earth that does not love children and value them in families, and intuitively know that this is best for them.

...and hope because children are able to succeed at tremendous odds, and the chances of them succeeding is so greatly enhanced with family and community-based interventions in their lives that are not just possible, but so close at hand because of what we know in this hall today, what many of you are accomplishing, and what we will discuss over these three days.

Who has come to the Looking Forward conference?

In our midst at this conference *we* have representatives from so many of the key sectors that are necessary to make this happen and need to work together to make this happen

We know the importance of laws that are in the best interest of children...in this realm we have both lawmakers (Parliamentarians), judges, and those who advocate for these laws on behalf of children.

We need people who can take the time to study crucial issues related to our work, to help guide our work...such as child development, care modalities, etc...we have noted researchers and teachers from great universities here...

And there are those committed individuals, those who work on the front lines with children and families. In my experience these are mostly women in the program and services community. These individuals face both tragedy and triumphs first hand. We salute these direct service practitioners!

We have those in government, who have many conflicting political pressures who, if they chose to, can really champion the cause of one child or many children through courageous stances or initiatives...from ministries and departments of social welfare, children and families; from foreign ministries and departments of justice; and from child protection divisions.

We have adoptive parents and foster parents who, like the founders of our agency 50 years ago, Harry and Bertha Holt, found room in their hearts and homes for children

We have the leaders of nonprofit agencies and their Trustees and members of Board of Directors - who understand the need for strong and sustaining non profit service and advocacy organizations, and the need to educate, and tap the hearts and bank accounts of the civilian population to aid us in this mission of helping children.

We have supporters of child welfare work, including business leaders who give generously as donors and in other ways such as volunteering and in their faith conviction to this cause.

And we have the beneficiary of services here as well; adoptees and families involved with adoption...whose voices need to be heard about how to improve service; and in advocacy, about their life experiences.

There is no one at the Looking Forward conference who is not from an essential sector, is not an essential ingredient needed to address the global crisis of children in need of families.

We must acknowledge that at times all of the groups I have mentioned are at odds with each other; we have different funding bases, political realities, missions and biases. We know our worlds well but perhaps not others. Sometimes we compete with each other...these differences and barriers are facts of life.

For example, there are undoubtedly differing opinions here on how intercountry adoption can be most ethically and efficiently implemented in the best interest of children.

Conversely some involved with intercountry adoption don't feel they have much capacity to be involved in services that can help children be in families in other ways.

But there is far more about what we share in common, and the great opportunities we have to learn from each other, to be working together, and indeed to be doing more for children.

The Schedule for the Conference

We have lined up an outstanding bank of speakers with excellent moderators to help highlight and sharpen key learnings and discussion...

The Looking Forward conference has a deliberate "flow" to it that we aim to cover much ground in addressing the global crisis of children in need of families

We start off by examining the dimensions of the crisis, the state of the world's children in need of families and underlying factors to this crisis.

We then move into looking at the specific needs of children and effective responses.

On our second day, we zero in on "Getting it Right" for children in need including the standards and systems and directions that are so vital for our working together. And we concretize this within regional perspectives from different parts of the world.

In our last morning on Saturday, we will have a most special time when we can hear and learn from adoptees and their families.

All of our formal presentations and Q&A will be done in plenary session in this room...so we can all benefit from the knowledge of people in this hall.

Many of you may want to meet with colleagues and discuss special subjects or topics, we are calling these caucuses. We have rooms reserved for these at various times.

At various points in our conference, there will be awards given out. These are closely tied to the work of Holt International and it's intersect with the outside world. I invite you to consider them part of your community as well...a celebration of not just the witness of individuals we are honoring, but the many other agents of change for children that you undoubtedly know and honor.

Every evening we will involve you in fun and cultural aspects of Oregon and our community...you might find it with a bit of an international flavor at times.

Over these next 3 days please consider our city your city. We are very pleased that you all took the time in your busy lives and work to honor us with your presence here in Lane County Oregon, and to spend quality time together for the children. It is the children who

we must acknowledge, bring us here to work together, and who make the world a smaller and more meaningful place.

Thank you for being here and joining us in looking forward to helping children to be in families.