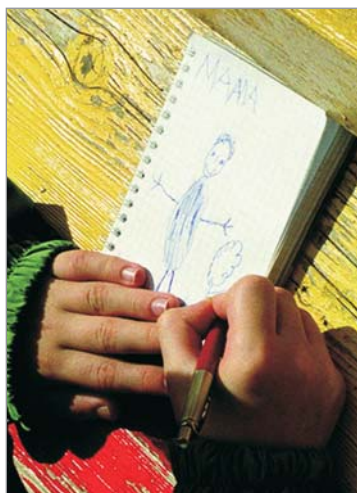


IREX/ASSISTANCE TO RUSSIAN ORPHANS (ARO) PROGRAM



Russian Government Turns to ARO Partner to Prevent Child Abandonment

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was devastated by poverty and social instability, resulting in a sharp increase in child abandonment. Rising alcohol and drug addiction rates also placed many children at risk of abuse and neglect. In response, Russian social workers founded the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NFPCC), which has advocated for innovative child welfare models and policy change since 1994. Since teaming with IREX to implement the USAID-funded Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program, the NFPCC has established itself as an expert voice on child welfare issues. As Russia places a new focus on child welfare, leaders from all levels of the government are turning to the NFPCC for consulting and technical assistance, tapping into the organization's rich experience developing successful models of child abandonment prevention throughout the Russian Federation.



Although a booming gas and oil industry has seen Russia prosper in recent years, child abandonment remains a major problem, with over 730,000 orphaned and abandoned children reported by UNICEF in 2007. However, these issues were virtually ignored by high-ranking officials until 2006, when then-president Vladimir Putin publically addressed child welfare and child abandonment in particular. ►►►

Summary:

In July, ARO's successful child welfare models were highlighted at the Second International Forum for Social Workers of Siberia and the Far East, held on the theme "The Rural Russian Family and Social Services: Cooperation and Collaboration."

ARO services for HIV-positive mothers and their children are in full swing in St. Petersburg, with support groups and health awareness seminars being conducted on an ongoing basis. ARO's support to families affected by HIV is funded under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

ARO-developed programs continued to attract federal and regional government support. The Russian Federal Ministry of Health commissioned an in-depth analysis of child abandonment trends and social services in the country from IREX's key implementing partner on the ARO program, the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The Novosibirsk regional government also called for the expansion of ARO-developed child and family telephone help lines in 10 districts through the region.



Moving children out of orphanages and into loving families became a national priority, and government subsidies were introduced for foster parents. 2008 was named Year of the Family, and Putin's successor Dmitri Medvedev has also adopted the issue, advocating for support systems to save children and families in crisis.

The Russian federal government is now taking notice of the NFPCC's accomplishments in developing and launching new child welfare services, which have garnered local funding in Tomsk, Khabarovsk, and other regions, ensuring their sustainability. The Ministry of Education and Science and the Federal Agency of Education selected the NFPCC in 2007, and again in 2008, to conduct an all-Russia project competition and conference on family-based forms of care for orphaned and abandoned children. The \$150,000 government grant was the first of its kind in Russia and fell under the federal "Children of Russia" program (2007-2010), which seeks to improve children's quality of life and health.

The NFPCC will continue its expert role by conducting an in-depth analysis of child abandonment trends and social services for at-risk families and children in Russia, including foster care centers. Commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Health in June 2008, the report will include practical recommendations on the use of innovative social welfare models and technologies developed under ARO to improve the quality of social services and decrease rates of child abandonment and family crisis.

As the NFPC continues its mission to save children and families, it is encouraged by the growing cooperation and dedication of the Russian government, without which the prospects of bringing sustainable change to Russia's child welfare system would be bleak. "Conducting grant competitions and analysis for the Ministry allows us to see the situation across the whole country and analyze the work developed in many regions," said NFPC President Marina Egorova. "There is quite a lot of experience in the child welfare sector in Russia, and each region has innovative models. Working with the Ministry allows us to see what's going on all over Russia and helps us understand how best to protect children and families."

ARO Models Highlighted at International Forum for Social Workers in Novosibirsk

On July 22-24, the Second International Forum for Social Workers of Siberia and the Far East was held in Novosibirsk. Representatives from IREX's implementing partner on the ARO program, the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NFPCC), and ARO-trained delegates and partners from Tomsk and Novosibirsk regions shared their

experience in preventing child abandonment and providing support to children with disabilities in rural areas. At the forum's plenary session, NFPCC President Marina Egorova presented on child abandonment prevention in rural districts, and NFPCC staff assisted the Novosibirsk city administration with their presentation of child protection models in the city's Leninsky district.

ARO to Create Comprehensive Network of Helplines in Novosibirsk Region

Each year, over 10 million children around the world call telephone helplines seeking guidance and support from an adult they can trust. In Russia, however, very few of the estimated 300 helplines functioning in the country specialize in the unique issues children face, despite steadily growing rates of child abandonment and abuse; in 2007, the Russian government reported over 742,000 orphaned and abandoned children. In response, the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NFPCC), IREX's key implementing partner on the USAID-funded Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program, created the Child Helpline Program to improve the quality of emergency psychological assistance provided to Russian children and adolescents. In 2008, based on the overwhelming response to an NFPCC helpline initiative in the city of Novosibirsk, the regional governor called for the creation of a helpline network to reach at-risk children and families throughout Novosibirsk region.

Helplines play a key role in the prevention of child abandonment by allowing trained specialists to identify troubled families in the early stages of crisis and begin working with them before problems escalate. Although the Novosibirsk city administration had once opened a helpline for adults in the city's Iskitim district without assistance from the NFPCC, it was soon shut down due to professional "burnout" among the telephone counselors and a lack of calls. When the city administration began collaborating with the NFPCC on the ARO initiative to introduce a municipal system of child abandonment prevention in early 2007, the decision was made to revive the helpline in Iskitim, only this time with a focus on at-risk children and families and with technical support and training from NFPCC experts.

Signaling its dedication to the project, the Novosibirsk city administration allocated office space and purchased equipment for the Iskitim helpline using funds from the city's budget. NFPCC experts screened and assembled a team of dedicated helpline counselors, providing them with valuable training at ARO seminars on best practices in psychological counseling of at-risk youth by telephone. The helpline counselors also had the opportunity to participate in an ARO study tour



to Barnaul in the Altai region, where they observed a successfully operating child helpline.

On February 27, 2008, following a full-scale advertising campaign to increase awareness of the helpline and its services, the NFPCC and the Novosibirsk city administration launched the Iskitim helpline. In its first three months of operation, the helpline received 438 calls: 65% from at-risk children under the age of 12, and 32% from adolescents between the ages of 13-18. Helpline counselors analyzed the calls and collected statistics to help paint an accurate picture of the social issues facing different groups of the population. Meanwhile, NFPCC experts provided monthly supervision and professional support for the helpline counselors to prevent professional “burnout” and ensure high-quality psychological assistance.

Seeing the significant demand for the free and anonymous helpline in Iskitim, the governor of Novosibirsk region ordered that the service be expanded into a network of 10 helplines for at-risk children and families throughout the region. In April 2008, at the request of the head of the Novosibirsk Department of Interdepartmental Coordination on Demographic and Family Policy Issues, the NFPCC readily agreed to provide technical support during the organization and implementation of the helpline network in the Novosibirsk region.

The NFPCC has aided in the creation of over 20 helplines and currently cooperates with over 100 organizations in 50 regions of the Russian Federation as part of its Child Helpline Program. The NFPCC created the Child Helpline Association (www.sirotstvo.ru/telefon) in 2007 to unite helpline professionals and develop standards of practice for child helplines. As the Russian government turns to the NFPCC for expert consulting on child welfare issues and technical assistance on an increasingly regular basis, the NFPCC has been successful in promoting policy change in Russia, including the creation of a toll-free, 24-hour helpline service. By advocating for children's rights and providing innovative training for child welfare specialists, the NFPCC is working to secure a brighter future for Russia and its children.

Foster Family Support Specialists Trained in Tomsk Region

On July 29-30, 20 social workers from Tomsk region gathered at the Zyryansky Orphanage in Tomsk region for a seminar led by NFPCC expert trainer Antonina Shepina on the selection of foster parents and support services to existing foster families. Second in a cycle of educational seminars on support systems for foster families, the event trained social service providers in the skills necessary to ensure stable foster placements. In August, social workers from Novosibirsk region will

also travel to Zyryansky to observe the orphanage's successful experience implementing support services for foster families.

Troubling Statistics on Foster Care Underscore Need for ARO Services

12-year-old Olya* and her 10-year-old biological brother Viktor* were more than a little nervous the day they left the Zhyryansky Orphanage in eastern Siberia to move in with their new foster family. Will they like me? Am I good enough? they wondered. Despite best intentions on all sides, the transition to life as a family was bumpy. Olya's creative and independent nature led to frequent clashes with her conservative foster mother, and though Viktor had adjusted well at home, his performance at school was suffering. Viktor and Olya's frustrated foster parents could have opted to return the children to the orphanage, resulting in heartache for all involved. However, with the ongoing, personalized support provided by specialists at the Zhyryansky Orphanage, the issues were resolved and Viktor and Olya continue to live in the same family nearly five years later.

Their happy ending was possible largely thanks to the USAID-funded, IREX-implemented Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program, which began working with the Zyryansky Orphanage in 2003 to implement an innovative support system designed to train foster parents, giving them the tools necessary to solve potential conflicts and preserve these families. Since the program's inception, it has funded nearly 30 projects aimed at helping institutions like the Zyryansky Orphanage re-profile as "schools" for prospective foster parents and support centers for existing foster families. However, as the Russian government prioritizes moving children out of state institutions and into family care, ARO's services are needed more than ever before.

Unfortunately, many Russian children are still falling through the cracks. 130,000 orphans were placed in foster care last year, the Russian newspaper Novaya Izvestiya reported in July.** However, in that same year, 6,000 children were returned to the state by their foster parents, adoptive parents or guardians, leaving a devastating psychological scar on those “twice rejected.” Poor training, a lack of thorough screening and few support services for foster parents continue to plague the country's foster care initiatives, according to Novaya Izvestiya. Recent legislation passed by the Russian State Duma allows “emergency custody” without parental background checks as well as placement in temporary host families with no monitoring of orphans' progress, posing further threats to children's well-being.

* All names have been changed to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of ARO's clients.

** July 10, 2008 (<http://www.newizy.ru/news/2008-07-10/93629/>)



Despite the bleak statistics, ARO has made significant strides to improve the quality of family care and keep foster placements intact. While Russia still lacks federal standards for foster care, the best practices developed by IREX's Russian implementing partner, the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NFPCC), have been successfully introduced across the country, from Khabarovsk in the Far East to Tambov in Western Russia.

Individual successes like Olya's and Viktor's are becoming more widespread as Russian regional governments increasingly choose to institutionalize ARO services. As a result of ARO initiatives, Siberia's Tomsk region recently mandated and implemented foster family support services in all 15 of the region's orphanages. In 2007, the first year of ARO pilot reform programs in Tomsk region, 42 orphans there were placed in foster families, a vast improvement over the two placed in 2006. Impressed with the program results, the local government has also invested \$123,000 from its budget to support ARO-developed services in Tomsk region.

Until a long-awaited decree on foster care standards is adopted by the Russian government, ARO services fill a much-needed gap in the social welfare system. As plans for reform are developed, the NFPCC continues to establish itself as the leading voice on child welfare issues in Russia. The most recent vote of support from the Russian authorities came in the form of a June 2008 grant from the Federal Ministry of Health, which commissioned an in-depth analysis of child abandonment trends and social services by the NFPCC.

In addition to developing foster care support systems, over the last six years ARO has also implemented programs to prevent child abandonment, preserve families in crisis, and provide services for orphans with disabilities. As these initiatives become increasingly institutionalized, ARO continues to empower regional managers and direct service providers with the tools to fix broken systems and ensure that children live in loving families free of cruelty and neglect.



ARO services strive to keep orphanage beds like these empty.

ARO Provides a Lifeline to Women and Families Affected by HIV/AIDS

When 30-year-old Kira* checked herself into a St. Petersburg hospital in early 2008, she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. HIV-positive and in the final stages of pregnancy, Kira was desperate to be free from a heroin addiction that had plagued her for over 12 years and already cost her the custody of her 8-year-old daughter. Kira was concerned for the health of her unborn child, but years of drug abuse had estranged her from the baby's father and her family, leaving her with no one to turn to for support. It was not until Kira began working with the staff of the district branch of the Department of Crisis Support for Women as part of a project launched for women and families affected by HIV by the Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program that she found the strength to overcome her addiction and begin picking up the pieces of her life.

Sadly, Kira's story is far from unique. According to UNICEF,** HIV infection is spreading faster in Russia than anywhere else in the world, with intravenous drug use accounting for 66% of its new infections in 2006. A disturbing new trend has also seen women become one of the fastest growing groups of HIV infections in Russia, making up 43% of newly reported cases. Paralyzed by the stigma attached to the virus, many HIV-positive women choose to hide their HIV-status from their loved ones and neglect medical treatment altogether. Those who do seek professional support often find a lack of services for HIV-positive people, resulting in a sense of hopelessness that prompts many mothers to give their children up to state care; rates of child abandonment among HIV-positive mothers are significantly higher than among their HIV-negative peers.

In 2008, with financial support from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the ARO program launched two projects to provide comprehensive support services to HIV-positive women and their families at the Family and Child Social Support Center and the Department of Crisis Support for Women in St. Petersburg. As part of these projects, HIV-positive women receive psychological and social support from specialists trained by ARO experts on how to effectively deal with issues facing HIV-positive mothers and their families. Clients receive counseling and assistance in finding employment and registering their children at school, in addition to advice on medical treatment. Specialists also help HIV-positive women and their families integrate into their communities by organizing family picnics and cultural events.

* All names have been changed to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of ARO's clients.

** http://www.unicef.org/russia/deti_jenchini_i_vich_eng.pdf



At the district office of the Department of Crisis Support for Women, Kira began meeting regularly with a psychologist, who eased her anxiety about living with HIV and encouraged her to stay off drugs. The psychologist also worked with Kira to reestablish contact with her mother and the father of her baby, who began attending group therapy sessions with Kira. Meanwhile, a social worker at the Department helped Kira file documents to register her baby for free medical treatment at the local AIDS Center and arranged for Kira to receive the antiretroviral therapy she so desperately needed. Specialists also taught Kira how to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission and properly care for her future child.

Since the birth of her baby son, Kira has continued to regularly attend events at the Department of Crisis Support for Women, including support group meetings and educational seminars on HIV-related issues. Kira's relationships with her mother and partner have helped further reinforce the support network she developed at the Department, and her relationship with her older daughter has also begun to heal as she mends the damage done by years of addiction.

Drug-free for nearly half a year, Kira has a new start on life, in no small part thanks to the comprehensive HIV-support services she and her family received through ARO projects in St. Petersburg. By helping HIV-positive mothers tackle their fears and lead a healthy lifestyle, the ARO program is not only saving lives, but also preserving families.



ARO HIV Program Coordinator Anna Poluarshinova and USAID Medical Consultant Dina Zelinskaya during a visit to an ARO HIV-support service center in St. Petersburg.

Volunteer Service Strengthens Partnership Between Russian and Alaskan Child Welfare Specialists

Volunteers and interns from around the world are a regular fixture at Hope Community Resources, an Anchorage, Alaska non-profit providing services to people who experience disabilities. However, the organization rarely gets to benefit from volunteers as highly trained and experienced as foster care specialist Dr. Antonina Shepina, who earned her PhD from the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Psychology. In May 2008, Shepina took a month off from her work at Moscow's National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NFPCC) to volunteer in Anchorage. Shepina heads the NFPCC's Expert Consultant Group, coordinating training initiatives and leading seminars on case management and foster care support for Russian child welfare professionals.

Shepina's service at Hope strengthened an already fruitful partnership between the NFPCC and the Alaskan child welfare community. Her impulse to volunteer arose after collaborating with Dr. Eileen Lally, Director of the Family & Youth Services Training Academy at the University of Alaska at Anchorage. In July 2007, Shepina led a group of Russian social workers on a two week study tour to Lally's department as part of the USAID-funded, IREX-administered Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program.

During their visit, the Russian professionals met with peers at Alaskan organizations, including Hope Community Resources, and observed foster care services in the state. Interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the Alaskan social service system, Shepina decided to return as a volunteer. While most Hope volunteers assist clients with daily living skills and community inclusion activities, Shepina's background allowed her to do psychological consultations for the Behavioral Health Services program. Through her work with Hope clients and colleagues, Shepina gained new perspectives on services for people who experience disabilities. "In Alaska, they have a very different view on how to support people with disabilities," she said. In Russia, Shepina noted, programs for people with disabilities are focused on children; there is distinct lack of initiatives aimed at those over 18, such as independent living skills training and supported employment. Shepina was also surprised that Hope was able to find foster parents for children with disabilities. Due to negative attitudes about disability in Russian society, she said, prospective foster parents usually ask about the "health" of the child first in order to determine if a disability is present.



“The best part of volunteering was the chance to see how it all really works,” Shepina said, adding that she now has a much clearer picture of Hope's service model. However, Shepina contributed to Anchorage organizations' development as well, educating colleagues about the challenges faced by children in Russian orphanages and the causes of specific behavioral problems in orphanage settings. She also provided educational materials to the Alaska Center for Resource Families, which works with families who have adopted Russian children. Shepina's experience shows that exchanges and study tours benefit not only those who travel, but the communities and institutions that host them as well. “Antonina was a true pleasure to have here,” said Marti Romero, Director of Behavioral Health Services at Hope. “Her knowledge, skills and experience were invaluable to the teams and the clinicians in developing strategies to reduce behavioral challenges and to increase the quality of life for folks we serve.”

The NFPCC's partnership with the University of Alaska at Anchorage will continue this fall under the Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program. In October, Shepina and Lally will conduct a training of trainers on case management and early intervention services

in Moscow, followed by a seminar in Astrakhan for supervisors at children's crisis hotlines. Lally, who has been an IREX consultant since the launch of the ARO 3 program in 2006, continues to cooperate closely with the ARO team to develop standards of practice for Russian social workers and create new curriculum materials for schools of social work at Russian universities, including Tomsk State University, Novosibirsk State Technical University, and Tambov State University.



Shepina during her volunteer service in Alaska.

Program News and Activities • Program News and Activities • Program News and Activities • Program News and Activities

Upcoming Activities:

August 6 (St. Petersburg):

Seminar for HIV program clients on the health issues of infants and pre-school children born to HIV-positive mothers.

August 11-13 (Novosibirsk):

Seminar on the prevention of early/at-birth child abandonment.

August 14 (St. Petersburg):

Support group for HIV-positive women.

August 20-21 (Novosibirsk):

Seminar on the community integration of orphanage graduates.

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