



Open Arms Infant Homes

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Open Arms Infant Homes (OAIH) Family House Strategy

Since its adoption, Open Arms Infant Homes (OAIH) has worked to achieve the UN Resolution 64/142 concerning the guidelines for the alternative care of children. The resolution prioritises care in family settings and includes a reintegration policy whereby orphaned and abandoned children are reintegrated with their extended families as soon as is practically possible and appropriate.

By 2015, however, we were caring for 28 older children/teenagers (8-18 years) who had not been reintegrated.

Although we continued to champion reintegration with the vast majority of children returning home, this proved difficult for the 28 children in question. Thanks to our supporters, we purchased five family houses by 2015, where the children live as a family unit with 'brothers and sisters' under the care of a House Mother, Assistant House Mother and together with the Mothers' own children.

As some of the children move through their teenage years, OAIH has been planning for their futures. We have identified three key requirements that each child will need to meet as s/he moves into independent adult life. The requirements are: a skill to earn an independent income; somewhere safe to live and a family to offer that essential family support.

What's Been Done So Far..?

Initially, a number of steps have taken place to support the children, starting with an in-house Nursery, homework support and paying for private boarding school education.

We have been developing individually tailored plans for each of the 28 children and young adults since 2018. Through consultation with the children, individual ambitions have been taken into account and options for their futures are taking shape.

Accordingly, a number of young adults (over 16 years) have been following vocational training courses including: Tailoring & Design, Videography, Hair and Beauty. We are anticipating more vocational training over the next few years. These courses are intended to lead ultimately to personal income generation. Not all of our children will take a vocational training route and the several showing more academic ambitions will be fully supported through higher education.

At the same time, we have been working hard to identify 'functional branches' of the children's families. Once identified, we are making initial introductions between the children and their respective extended families and we are exploring reintegration options. Where mutually beneficial relationships can be established, they are being supported to develop into stronger and more permanent kinship. In most cases, the kindling and consolidation of extended family connections will provide the key to a safe place to live.

It is difficult to predict accurate timescales. Nor will there be one 'blueprint' which fits all children, and each case will need to be managed with sensitivity to the individual details and requirements of that child/young adult.

Some of our children have physical and/or non-physical disabilities, which will need additional support and we understand that reintegration may not always be feasible. We also acknowledge that psychologically, each child/young adult will need support before, through and after his/her re-integration.

Next Steps

To date, we have reintegrated one young adult and one child. These situations are being supported carefully through our outreach program with sponsorship where needed. We will continue to stay in regular contact with the families and the relevant Social Welfare officers to build packages of support tailored to each individual's needs.

This is new and challenging territory for Open Arms and we too have many questions for which we are developing pragmatic answers and structured solutions.

It is anticipated that this reintegration programme will continue for some years. As always the children's wellbeing and future development will be at the heart of our decision-making. Family allegiances and loyalties are incredibly strong in Malawi and where reintegration for these older children is possible, the limited evidence we have to date, shows it to be hugely beneficial for both child and family.

There is a significant amount of work to do as we continue to work with each individual child/young adult. We look forward to keeping you up to date with our progress and the impact of your valuable support.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact Open Arms Malawi or Open Arms Infant Home directly.

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