

LIRS Celebrates the Passage of Legislation to Assist Vulnerable Haitian Orphans

BALTIMORE, December 2, 2010—Yesterday, the House of Representatives passed by voice vote a revised version of the Help Haitian Adoptees Immediately to Integrate Act of 2010 (Help HAITI Act), bipartisan legislation that would provide permanency to over 1,000 Haitian orphans who were evacuated to the United States after the devastating January 12, 2010 earthquake and placed with American families. The legislation is now headed to President Obama for his signature. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) celebrates the bill's passage and applauds Representative Fortenberry (R-NE-1) and Senator Gillibrand (D-NY) for their important leadership on this issue.

On January 18, 2010, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced a humanitarian parole policy to allow certain orphaned Haitian children who were already in the adoption process at the time of the earthquake to enter the United States to ensure they received the care they needed. At the request of the government of Haiti, on April 14, 2010, DHS stopped accepting new parole requests. During this three month period, more than 1,000 Haitian children arrived to the United States to live with their prospective American adoptive parents. Federal immigration law requires children to wait for two years after being in the custody of the adoptive parents to file to adjust their immigration status. To provide these Haitian children with permanency in the United States, the Haiti HELP Act would waive the two year wait and allow them to immediately apply for U.S. citizenship upon completion of the adoption.

LIRS has an extensive history of working with migrant children and advocating for their protection. For over 30 years, LIRS has partnered with the federal government to serve unaccompanied refugee children admitted to the United States and is one of only two national agencies that serves these youth. In 2003, LIRS began working with unaccompanied immigrant children in the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services. LIRS has also worked with domestic and international child welfare experts to establish protocols for children who become separated from customary caregivers in times of crisis. A couple of weeks after the Haiti earthquake, LIRS briefed Congress and called for durable solutions that meet the needs of these children.

“These children have been through so much,” noted LIRS President and CEO Linda Hartke. “They experienced the earthquake, a very traumatic event, lost their parents, and then moved to a new country where few people speak their language or know their culture. Stability is absolutely what these vulnerable children need.”

LIRS welcomes migrants and refugees on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church

in America. Founded in 1939, LIRS assists and advocates on behalf of refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, immigrants in detention, families fractured by migration, and other vulnerable populations and provides services to migrants through over 60 grassroots legal and social service partners. LIRS also partners with denominational entities and sister Lutheran organizations such as Lutheran World Relief and Lutheran World Federation, who have been operational in Haiti and the Dominican Republic for many years and have been providing assistance during this period of crisis.

If you have questions about this statement, please contact Eric B. Sigmon, LIRS Director for Advocacy, 202/626-7943, esigmon@lirs.org.

The January 18, 2010 DHS press release announcing the special humanitarian parole program for certain Haitian orphans can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/yctrfus>

The January 27, 2010 LIRS statement on Haitian children can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/2wzcc7w>

The April 7, 2010 DHS press release announcing the end of the parole program can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/38dal2q>

The July 27, 2010 LIRS statement on the passage of the Help HAITI Act can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/36gamtt>