

Put kids first, really

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Are you opposed to state laws like the one in Massachusetts that gives same-sex couples the right to adopt children?

Consider the social cost of discriminating against homosexual households.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about 118,000 children under the age of 16 are currently awaiting adoption in public foster care. The National Adoption Center places the total number of children awaiting adoption at about 126,000. And each year, thousands of additional kids will be relinquished by their parents at birth.

Experts agree that permanent adoptive families would be better for most of America's eligible children than group homes or the uncertainties of foster care.

But do Americans want to adopt?

A lot of people say they're interested. But when it comes right down to it, only a few are willing to complete the process required to call a stranger's child their own.

According to survey data compiled by the federal government, more than 200,000 women (married, divorced or widowed) took steps toward adoption in 2005, but experience suggests that fewer than a third of these women -- about 31 percent -- will go on to complete the process. Of those that do finalize adoptions, a good number will adopt their own step-children or kin.

Adoption, like child-rearing, is hard work. Appropriate concern for child welfare demands onerous adoption procedures. Prospective adoptive parents have their lives and personal values scrutinized like never before.

I am a two-time survivor of the adoption process, so I know how difficult it can be.

You start with a month-long face-to-face assessment called a "home study," in which social workers determine your suitability to provide a good home. You undergo a criminal background check, a medical examination and a financial evaluation. Your house is inspected -- social workers count the number of bedrooms, windows, smoke detectors and electrical outlets. My husband and I were asked to write personal essays, and to attend multiple interviews and group meetings. One of our adoptions involved several meetings with the baby's birth parents.

People looking to adopt often want healthy newborns. That's what I wanted, and I was lucky enough to find two infants in my own state, after a very short wait.

But not many people, gay or straight, are interested in adopting the neediest U.S. children. These kids may be victims of abuse or neglect. Most are racial minorities, school-age, part of a sibling group that cannot be separated, or have emotional, physical, mental or developmental disabilities.

Rather than adopt these children here at home, Americans in large numbers are traveling to Russia, China or other countries, paying tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of an international adoption.

Bottom line: There are vastly more U.S. children awaiting adoption than there are people ready, willing and able to adopt them. The situation is so bad that citizens of other countries now see the U.S. as a place to come for a child.

If the public cares about child welfare, it cannot afford to tolerate discrimination against gay and lesbian households that otherwise meet the strict safety and competency criteria for adoption. As a society we should be glad when qualified adults are willing to lend a heart and a hand.

There has been some progress on this front. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 48 percent of Americans oppose gay adoption, while 46 percent approve; in 1999 a similar poll found that 57 percent opposed these adoptions, while 38 percent approved. And just last week, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a major player in the adoption field, said it supports the rights of gays and lesbians to adopt.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, however, would rather discontinue offering adoption services altogether than adhere to a Massachusetts state law that permits homosexuals to adopt.

Around the country, Catholic Charities agencies offering adoption services have traditionally given priority to Catholic couples married in the Catholic Church willing to raise their adopted children as Catholics. This is true of the Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Newark. Licensed by the state to facilitate private domestic and international adoptions, Newark's Catholic Charities places children only with married heterosexual couples who have been together at least three years. The Dioceses of Metuchen, Camden and Paterson follow similarly restrictive rules.

Of Catholic Charities of Boston's 720 adoptions since the mid- 1980's, only 13 have been placements with same-sex couples. But that's apparently 13 too many under the current thinking of the Vatican. A 2003 statement from Rome condemns homosexual marriages, now legal in Massachusetts, and also condemns adoptions by gays and lesbians. (New Jersey already has a liberal domestic partnership law, and a case that could legalize gay marriage is pending in the state Supreme Court.)

It would be a shame to lose the benevolent adoption services of Catholic Charities. Around the country, whether licensed by states to facilitate private adoptions or under contract with states to perform public adoption services, Catholic Charities has placed thousands of children in good homes over the years, sometimes waiving the criteria of Catholicism and heterosexuality in the case of individuals willing to adopt children or teens with special needs.

But it would be a greater shame, in the face of so much unmet need, for state governments to compromise their child-welfare missions by partnering with organizations that refuse to work with an eager class of prospective parents.

To keep Catholic Charities in the adoption business, states could choose to exempt religious organizations from the requirement of serving both gay and straight households seeking adoption. But to do so would be tantamount to state-sanctioned discrimination in a context where exclusion is not clearly in the state's or children's better interest.

There is no data establishing that gay households are bad for child welfare. We do know that millions of children do well despite not living in the idealized male-female, two-parent family.

In the name of religious freedom, government does and must allow churches to discriminate on the basis of sex and sexual orientation when it comes to the hiring of clergy and other essential religious personnel. But facilitating adoptions is not like hiring clergy to perform Mass or to administer the sacraments.

Adoption under state license or contract is an essentially secular matter, the legal transfer of custody and care of a child from one set of parents to another parent or two. When a church elects to take on secular functions, it has to play by the rules everyone else has to observe.

Better that the states should build new partnerships with secular and church agencies that are fully on board with the mission of placing the country's unwanted and neediest children in permanent homes. Going forward, this is how to really put kids first.

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