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Adoption practitioner Sandra Webb recently returned from a trip to study how the Russian adoption system works.

Russian orphanages growing more progressive

By Cecilia Nasmith
cnasmith@northumberlandtoday.com

Her second look at the orphanages in Russia has convinced local adoption practitioner Sandra Webb that they are becoming more progressive.

Mrs. Webb recently returned from a trip she took with other adoption professionals in order to understand their system better. As well as tours of orphanages and their villages, the trip involved meetings with such officials as the chief of the department of education (which is also responsible for child protection).

Mrs. Webb's first trip to Russia was in 1997, and she reports that things have changed. For one thing, with more adoptions, more money is coming into the system, resulting in more equipment and brighter surroundings.

"We saw walkers for the toddlers," Mrs. Webb said. "We didn't see walkers last time."

She expressed appreciation for the local adoptive families who donated clothes and toys for her to take along. She is heartened by the caring touches she has seen, such as mobiles for the cribs, murals on the walls and colourful drapes and bedspreads in the dormitories.

But when all is said and done, they are still institutions. They don't even have names, but are known by such appellations as Orphanage #19.

One orphanage in Shulya has no



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A toddler peeks through the bars of a walker.

insulation — or computers. Adoption and child-welfare records are kept the old-fashioned way: on paper.

Still, Mrs. Webb said, most of the staffers are bright, well dressed and obviously caring.

There are two kinds of orphanages: baby orphanages for children up to age four and orphanages for older children.

These institutions are beginning to incorporate progressive ways.

One may offer a range of programs from dramatic and visual arts to sewing and wood working. Another might regularly allow the children to visit a nearby town — something that once would have been unheard-of. One had a benefactor who paid for visits from a dentist five days a week. Mrs. Webb saw an orphanage that had an apartment for the convenience of visitors to the children.

One is devoted to handicapped children.

"You don't see handicapped people," she noted.

"They are in institutions or kept at home. I imagine that will change, as it has everywhere in the world."

Little things like this gave Mrs. Webb the flavour of life in Russia today — such as the fact that her hotel in Moscow had a guarded gate.

Though their hotel in Ivanova was supposed to be one of the best in town, it cannot offer hot water between October and April — and many of the homes in that town do not have indoor bathrooms.

The government still distrusts a system like Ontario's that has practitioners

operating privately. These private agencies are accredited in Russia, but have hoops to jump through.

For instance, there are post-adoption reports due to the government at intervals as long as three years later. That much time after an adoption, parents are averse to taking the trouble and going to the expense of a report — but if they don't, the adoption agency could lose its accreditation.

And there is a 1950s-style veil of privacy surrounding adoptions. A woman adopting a baby often wears a pillow so she can pretend she is pregnant.

"As for contact with a child's natural parents, their attitude is, 'That's history — move on and don't talk about it,'" Mrs. Webb said.

Only now are children beginning to be placed with guardians and in foster homes, though there is no system or training for foster care.

The preference is to have the children adopted by Russian families, and advertisements are taken out in the newspapers for each child toward that end.

If that cannot happen, officials want to ensure the children adopted internationally are going into the best possible situation by making the process as thorough — and complicated — as possible. They have been known to ask to see the deed to an adoptive family's home. Sometimes problems surface if, for example, a grandfather was an alcoholic or a mother is recovering from cancer.

There were 7,000 Russian children adopted internationally last year, 3,000 of whom were under the age of three.



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Russian newspaper ads 'sell' children to be adopted.