

Church Ministries / Offices

Office of Humanitarian Aid and the Adoption Referral Service

Director	Arlene Kallaur PO Box 675 Syosset, NY 11791	Office Email	humanitarianaid@oca.org
	Office 516-922-0550, ext. 126 Fax 516-922-0954	Office Web	www.oca.org /DOdept.asp?SID=5&LID=12

Members
Lorraine Babaian
Laura Detke
Alexis Swan

Accomplishments/Progress Since the 13th All-American Council

In 2004 we completed another successful **Christmas Stocking Program** for the eleventh straight year, with donations totaling \$83,087 which enabled us to reach a new and greater goal of providing 18,000 Christmas gifts for children, up from the previous year. We had a record number of contributors: 632 parishes, FOCA chapters, youth groups, organizations, and individuals. A most sincere thanks to all who participated!

Again many church schools, FOCA junior chapters, and other parish youth groups undertook a variety of fundraisers. Photos of these activities are placed on the OCA web site each year, and can be seen at this council in the display area.

Children in the country of Georgia were new recipients of the Christmas stockings this past year. They were amazed and delighted to be remembered, according to one of the Georgian priests, who conveyed this to the OCA in a thank you letter. Children in Ukraine unfortunately were not able to receive the stockings this year, due to the political crisis in their country at that time. Other recipients included children in Albania, Belarus, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, and several villages in Alaska.

This program continues to have a threefold benefit: Our parishes, and especially our young people, are encouraged to reach out to others beyond our borders; the workers with cerebral palsy who fill the stockings are able to earn a little income and grow in self-worth; and the children who receive the gifts, along with their caregivers, enjoy a brighter holiday, not only through the gift, but also knowing that we continue to think of them.

The **Russian Adoption Program** (Orthodox Christian Adoption Referral Service, or OCARS) is active and continues to serve Orthodox families of all jurisdictions. We have placed 54 children to date. The children are beautiful and have brought great joy into the homes that have received them.

In 2002, because of difficulties with the Moscow office of adoptions, our Russian representative chose to work in another region of Russia, that of Bryansk, some five hours by car southwest of Moscow. The US licensed agency with whom we were affiliated, Adoptions Together, does not work in that area, so we have entered into a new partnership with The Cradle, a licensed, not-for-profit agency based in Evanston, IL.

Our hope for the OCA to establish a licensed adoption agency is a wished-for, but unrealistic, goal at this time. In the state of New York, in order to become licensed, an agency needs to prove that it can facilitate domestic adoptions as well as international adoptions. This would require more staff time, knowledge, and financial resources on our part. Also, Russia requires that an office be kept in Moscow as well, with an ongoing liquid account of some \$15,000.

This office continues to promote the **“Gift of the Heart” Kits Program**. This involves the assembling of health kits, school kits and layettes, which are then mailed to a warehouse in Maryland. From there they are distributed to victims of disasters in the US and throughout the world, and to areas where people are trying to get on their feet economically, particularly after a disaster or war. This past year a new kit was introduced, the Heart to Heart Kids Kit, which

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includes, toys, craft supplies, a toothbrush, and toothpaste.

A group or individual can participate in this program at any time of the year, making up as many kits as are within their means. This ongoing program is sponsored by Church World Service (CWS), the humanitarian aid arm of the National Council of Churches of Christ. It is now jointly endorsed by International Orthodox Christian Charities. This is a wonderful way to join with fellow Christians to extend a helping hand. The mechanism is already in place for us to use.

As an OCA representative to Church World Service, I receive weekly bulletins on the trouble spots in the world, indicating where the kits have been sent. Thousands of kits have gone to Iraq, to tsunami victims, to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Liberia, and Senegal, among other countries, as well as to areas in the US that have been hit recently by tornadoes and floods. Due to the magnitude of the current needs, the program has issued an urgent request for help in replenishing supplies.

A number of our parishes have begun to participate in this program. Specific instructions can be obtained from the 2004 installment of the Resource Handbook for Lay Ministries, available also on the OCA web site; by going to the CWS web site - www.churchworldservice.org - and clicking the "Tools, Blankets & Kits" bar; or by contacting this office.

This office continues to coordinate the shipment of small amounts of valuable medicines that are funneled to hospitals and orphanages in Russia. Two parishes have undertaken the crocheting of blankets for orphans and the elderly in Russia - and these have been well received. Many parishes also have their own programs of help to specific parishes and hospitals in eastern Europe and other parts of the world.

This office continues to match specific donor wishes with needs in eastern Europe.

- ◆ **Russian Adoption Program**

There continue to be unforeseen problems in Russia with the continual changing of adoption laws and, therefore, demands on couples who wish to adopt a child. This has sometimes caused delays in the completion of an adoption in a timely manner. The change to working with a new licensed agency in a new region of Russia has taken some time and adjustment. Though the input of the OCA in the adoption process has diminished because we are not licensed, there are still benefits to working with the Church program, and I continue to guide Orthodox couples through the process.

Plans for the Future

- ◆ To continue the Christmas Stocking Program:
Investigate and consider sending some of the Christmas gifts to new locations where there is need. Continue to monitor places where money is sent to buy gifts "in country."
- ◆ To continue to assist with the Russian Adoption Program:
Promote the need for more adoptive parents. Respond to inquiries for information. Keep in touch with our Russian representatives, and with families who have completed adoptions.
- ◆ To continue to promote the assembling of "Gift of the Heart" kits:
Continue to promote this program, asking parishes to keep me informed when they participate. Photos would be great.
- ◆ To continue to channel money and medicine to hospitals and orphanages in eastern Europe:
Continue to match specific donors with specific needs.

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Accountability

Outreach is and should be a very important part of Church life on all levels. Programs to help those in need, both in and outside the parish community, continue to be on the rise in many of our parishes and are a very positive sign. The specific programs of this office encourage such outreach. Such programs provide not only material support, but also moral and spiritual support to our brothers and sisters, particularly in central and eastern Europe.

The office relates to the following departments and offices:

- ◆ The Department of Christian Witness and Service by encouraging outreach programs in the parish, by publishing articles about outreach programs in the Resource Handbook for Lay Ministries, and by beginning to track community outreach programs in OCA parishes. (See chart in the display area.)
- ◆ The Department of Christian Education by encouraging resources for outreach in the church school curriculum and by promoting participation in the Christmas Stocking Program.
- ◆ The Department of Youth, Young Adult, and Campus Ministry in encouraging youth groups to engage in the Christmas Stocking Program and other outreach projects. This office recently helped the Young Adult Ministry to identify and coordinate outreach projects in Ukraine and for children in Beslan, Russia.
- ◆ The Department of External Affairs and Interchurch Relations, in that the office's director is one of the OCA representatives to Church World Service (CWS). That agency and the member communions that make up its body have been helpful in sharing humanitarian aid efforts in central and eastern Europe over many years. Another part of their program is the settling of new immigrants, many of whom have been Orthodox, and providing information on immigration issues. Since September 11, 2001, CWS has provided continuing professional training workshops in grief counseling that have been attended by a number of Orthodox chaplains and other clergy. Within the past two years, CWS and IOCC have joined forces in a number of programs that provide humanitarian aid and redevelopment in many regions of the world.

Facilitating the evolution of OCARS into a licensed adoption agency serving all Orthodox in this country is still a worthy, if currently unattainable, goal.

The area of assisting immigrants to resettle in North America, and to find spiritual growth in the Orthodox Church, needs attention and the development of resources. Many of our parishes are receiving new immigrants and are making great efforts to help them. They often have questions and would like someone, someplace, to turn to for help and resources.