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Guelph couple 'lost a child'

JOANNE SHUTTLEWORTH
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GUELPH

Dana Laferriere has been imagining a family for nearly two years -- ever since she and her husband Darryl started the adoption process with the Cambridge-based Imagine Adoption.

But since the not-for-profit agency filed for bankruptcy this week, the Guelph couple's dream of having a family has been dashed.

Laferriere is having trouble imagining getting through another day, never mind starting the process all over again.

"Throughout this whole journey, I knew there would be highs and lows. I knew I'd have to wait. Maybe I wasn't entirely prepared for the emotional toll, but in the end it would be worth it. I would have a child. Now I don't know if I can start over again," she said yesterday.

"Yes, we lost money, but it's not about money. I just lost a child."

The Laferrieres are not alone. Some 450 families across Canada were left high and dry when the Kids Link International Adoption Agency, which operated under the name Imagine Adoption, filed for bankruptcy.

The federal and provincial governments have stepped in and are trying to help those couples who have already been matched with a child in Ethiopia.

Guelph MPP Liz Sandals said federal officials are trying to hasten the process for issuing visas and immigration papers to families where a child is waiting in a transition home in Ethiopia. There's concern the money to operate the transition home will run out before these children can be taken to their new homes in Canada.

"The intent is to sort out the adoptions that have already been approved to go ahead," Sandals said yesterday.

"But in many cases, the families have paid, but the process had not progressed that far. I can certainly understand that families who had so much hope will be distraught. It will take time to determine the legal status of these other cases.

"It's a mess."

Indeed, BDO Dunwoody, the bankruptcy trustee, is working with both levels of government and Imagine's lawyer to develop a plan for affected families.

"The bankruptcy trustee is trying to collect information from families to put the pieces together. This is not just financial information, but personal records, too," Sandals said. "The Ministry of Children and Youth Services will be meeting with the trustees and lawyers to work this out."

Laferriere said she and her husband had a home study done in December 2007 and were approved by the ministry to adopt. Then they went to Imagine Adoption, who filed papers with the Ethiopian government, "and we've been waiting for a referral for a child," she said.

"It's been 12 months and 16 days. We were told we were very close."

Laferriere said she had paid about \$20,000 to Imagine, including money for followup sessions with a social worker post-adoption.

Details about the bankruptcy have been sketchy. Laferriere found out about the bankruptcy through a blog and a message posted on Imagine Adoption's website.

"The ministry is looking at the people who have referrals as losing a child. The rest of us they see as just losing money. But I was expecting a child, too," Laferriere said.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

The Canadian government is trying expedite the visa and immigration process for children who are currently waiting in transition in Ethiopia.

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MPP aids families left in lurch

Deb Matthews is trying to unite parents and kids after the agency went broke

By **CHIP MARTIN**

Ontario's minister for children says she's doing her best to ensure foreign adoptions started by a bankrupt private adoption agency are completed.

London MPP Deb Matthews said yesterday she's following the situation at Kids Link International Adoption Agency, which operates under the name Imagine Adoption.

About 400 families are in limbo since the Cambridge-based firm declared bankruptcy Monday.

Matthews said "job one" is to complete about 20 adoptions awaiting federal paperwork such as visas. And she's working with Jason Kenney, the federal citizenship and immigration minister, she said, "to speed that process."

"We are trying to get the kids who in fact have already been adopted and are waiting for their Canadian visa," the London- North-Centre MPP, reached in Newfoundland, said.

"We are trying to get that work done and get them into their new homes as soon as possible. . . we'll get them home."

About another 30 children have been matched with parents already but aren't as ready to leave Ethiopia as the first 20, she said.

"Others have been matched, so they have been told and sent photographs of their child," Matthews said. "Parents form very strong bonds with their kids and it is a very important moment when that match happens. Those are the kids we are really focussing our actions on to see what options there could possibly be."

Matthews said her ministry is considering all its alternatives to deal with the situation.

It is also attempting to ensure the safety of children still in a transition home in Ethiopia.

"It's too early to tell how successful we are going to be, but we are looking at every possible option."

Imagine Adoption had its licence renewed in October and met all the requirements for such operations, she said.

"The licence states that they can perform adoptions that comply with Ontario law," she said, adding "It does not speak to the financial viability of the company. These are private companies."

In filing for bankruptcy, Kids Link revealed it owed \$800,00 to 400 families and its assets of \$723,004 were \$363,000 less than its liabilities.

Matthews said bankruptcy trustees are sensitive to the plight of the children and families.

She directed those affected to her ministry's website at www.ontario.ca/children for developments.

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Imagine bankruptcy leaves couple stranded

ADOPTION

Posted -3 sec ago

Peterborough resident Gary Sellars was channel-surfing Tuesday evening before turning in for the night, when he heard the word "adoption."

As a prospective adoptive parent, he stopped and paid attention. He almost wishes he hadn't.

Sellars and his wife Mary were in the process of adopting a Panamanian child through Imagine Adoption -- whose bankruptcy was being reported on the news.

Cobourg adoption practitioner Sandra Webb has worked with couples who worked with Imagine on their adoptions.

She'd heard no adverse comments about Imagine. Even their staff were not aware a bankruptcy was looming. She'd never even heard of an adoption agency going bankrupt.

She has clients who only arrived home with their new son from Ethiopia six weeks ago. Then there are the Sellarses. Their problem is that, while Imagine was licensed for adoptions in Ethiopia, Ghana and Ecuador, it had obtained a temporary special license for them and one other couple to adopt from Panama.

Kids Link International Adoption Agency merged with the St. Ann Adoption Centre to form Imagine, Sellars said. It was licensed.

"I am assuming, because it was licensed, that it met all the regulations and rules. That's what the government is there to do -- to protect their citizens, supposedly."

Yesterday its website had only three lines:

- * No further payments or donations can be made.
- * A bankruptcy occurred effective July 14, 2009
- * Please go to www.bdo.ca/imagineadoption for further information.

The Peterborough couple worked with Imagine for three years, spending more than \$20,000 in the process (not counting that heartbreaking investment in baby furniture and equipment).

They had wanted to adopt from Honduras, but it fell through. Imagine did get a temporary special license for the Panamanian adoptions.

"I just don't want this to fall through the cracks," he said.

"I have called everybody today to see if I can get anywhere."

The Sellarses' MP and MPP are trying to find him some contact. There is no way to contact anyone at Imagine. The website is useless and the phone number only leads to a full voice-mail box.

"The other problem we are addressing is, everybody knows who you're dealing with in Ethiopia. I don't know who our contact is in Panama. I can't direct them to other agencies (other than Imagine).

"Two weeks ago, our agency in Panama was actually physically going to the orphanages looking for a child -- that's how close we are. Everything has been finalized except for the actual 'Here is your child'."

In international adoptions, you have to deal with licensed agencies that also have a licence for the country you're adopting from, he explained. A licensed home-study worker -- in this case, Webb -- assesses a couple's fitness for adoption. Then there are other hoops to go through, like the international police checks.

To say he feels stranded is an understatement.

Ben Walters and Alison Elliott of Bewdley find themselves stranded in an earlier stage of adoption from Ethiopia.

They retained Imagine last October and have only spent \$6,000 to date, which finds them at the point that they have been assessed for their Ontario Ministry approval, which they expect to receive at any time. If they start over again with another agency, at least their loss is less.

"We are not as bad off as other people -- we feel awful for those people. We are not in the situation where we were matched with a child who now is left in the lurch," Walters said.

"It's very sad," Webb said in another understatement.

"At this point, we have no idea what's going to happen. There have been e-mails back and forth from some of the other professionals, but I've heard nothing from the Ministry yet."

Webb would like to refute the myth that only rich people adopt.

"That's so untrue. Most of the families I work with are average every-day families.

"It's huge for them. They have waited for years. The process is complex and difficult. This is crushing for these families," she stated.

As hard as it is on the prospective parents, Walters thinks the real victims are the children.

Once Imagine matched a child with a family, he or she would be moved into a transition home owned and run by Imagine. They would be there three to six months as the adoption is finalized.

"There are all these children who have been taken from a government-run orphanage to an orphanage run by a bankrupt agency," he pointed out.

He has heard that the home only has enough cash on hand to keep it running for eight days. After that, he said, "who knows what's going to happen to the kids? That's probably the worst part of it all."

While Webb expects the government may step in to help the families get the children who have been matched with them in Ethiopia, she hasn't heard anything about Panama.

"Hopefully they will release their files," she said of the Sellars case.

"I don't know what's going to happen to their money."

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Families left in lurch as agency folds

Bankruptcy of Imagine Adoption organization follows volunteers' scrutiny of high expenses

July 17, 2009

BRIAN CALDWELL
WATERLOO REGION RECORD

CAMBRIDGE, Ont.—Up to 450 families across Canada were left in the lurch when the Kids Link International Adoption Agency – which operated under the name Imagine Adoption – folded this week.

Clients hoping to adopt children from Ethiopia and Ghana were devastated to learn the non-profit organization didn't have enough money to stay afloat.

Volunteer directors of the agency began scrutinizing its finances about a month ago after noting unusually high expenses for senior staff, including executive director Susan Hayhow. Preliminary bankruptcy documents show the Cambridge-based agency had leased a Lexus and a Nissan Pathfinder, with an estimated \$80,000 in remaining payment obligations.

Susan Taves, a bankruptcy trustee for BDO Dunwoody in Kitchener, said the vehicles will be seized and returned to the leasing company.

Bankruptcy officials are also trying to determine why the agency was renting three properties in Cambridge with payment obligations of \$13,000 a month.

Only one was used for agency offices.

An early accounting shows Imagine Adoption, which had been in operation for about six years, has a \$363,000 shortfall. Taves said that amount could rise because the largest liability – \$800,000 in fees collected from families – is a conservative estimate. Officials haven't had time to thoroughly go through seized financial records, and it's not known how much money, if any, might be returned to families who have spent up to \$20,000.

Clients are urged to submit detailed claims once they receive information packages going out this week.

"We really want them to submit documents confirming what they think they have paid in," Taves said.

Efforts so far have focused on about 40 children at an Imagine transition home in Ethiopia already matched with Canadian families, but still waiting for adoptions to be legally completed.

Taves said it has been confirmed they are being properly cared for after agency directors anticipating the bankruptcy sent operating money to the home two weeks ago.

Meanwhile, she has been working with the province and federal governments to complete adoptions that had reached the match stage.

Deb Matthews, Ontario's minister for children, told The Canadian Press she's doing her best to ensure foreign adoptions started by the bankrupt agency are completed. She said "job one" is to complete about 20 adoptions awaiting federal paperwork such as visas.

Nine cases involving adoptions in Ghana, however, are bogged down amid concerns an orphanage that Imagine dealt with there may have been involved in child trafficking.

The 16 employees of the bankrupt agency included Valerie Goodyear, wife of federal cabinet minister and Cambridge MP Gary Goodyear.

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In a statement this week, Gary Goodyear said his wife helped place children with families and wasn't involved with the agency's finances.

Information about the bankruptcy is posted at: www.bdo.ca/imagineadoption.

Agency's collapse crushes adoption dream

Couples left in lurch by bankruptcy

BY KRISTY NEASE, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 17, 2009 6:24 AM

OTTAWA — Three years ago, Christine Côté of Orléans was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome and was told that having children was an impossibility.

Côté and her husband Jean-François, both 38, have had family experience with adoption, so that made their decision easy. They wanted a family, no matter the cost.

They began the years-long process of securing documentation, an agency and the finances necessary to make it happen.

In April, they gave a deposit to Imagine Adoption of Cambridge, Ont., which is operated by the Kids Link International Adoption Agency, one of 19 international adoption agencies approved by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services. They decided to adopt a child from Ethiopia.

Three months and \$12,000 later, and still without a confirmed adoptee, the couple learned on Monday that Imagine Adoption had declared bankruptcy.

"It's day by day," Christine said about dealing with the news while sitting at the dining table with her husband. "It's something I've dreamed about, being a mom, for a long time, so then to find out I can't be one biologically, and then deciding on the adoption ... and then now going through all that, it's not easy. The home study is an invasive process; they talk about everything. Everything."

Jean-François said one would expect the agencies themselves to be as thoroughly scrutinized and checked as potential parents were.

"I mean, they even come to our house and inspect our house to see if we're safe for a child," Christine said. "So what's the ministry doing to inspect these agencies?"

"I don't know. It doesn't look like a lot."

The Côtés say they've resigned themselves to the fact their \$12,000 is probably gone forever. They sit at the bottom of a list of creditors, and they're unsecured, along with every other affected family.

However, they would like to get back their home-study application package, a bevy of original documents they need so they can look elsewhere and start again. The ministry only accepts originals.

If they don't get it back, they'll have to start over, securing police checks, fingerprints, medical certificates, reference letters and more. It would cost them about \$500 and months of time more than they have already spent on those matters.

Christine e-mailed their MPP, Phil McNeely, and received word that BDO Dunwoody Ltd., the financial recovery company handling the bankruptcy, would first look after the children in Ethiopia who had already been assigned adoptive parents. The response also said McNeely would be in contact with the ministry to see what further steps could be taken for families such as the Côtés who hadn't yet been paired with children, Christine said.

A notice posted since Monday on a BDO Dunwoody website dedicated to the Christian non-profit agency's bankruptcy says there are not enough funds in the bank to service the families using Kids Link.

The notice, by Susan E. Taves, senior vice-president of BDO Dunwoody, also says Susan Hayhow, director of Kids Link, and her partner, Andrew Morrow, who also works for Imagine Adoption, had arrived in Africa on Monday and had been contacted by BDO.

According to other documents on the site, the agency has \$1,086,004 in liabilities and \$723,004 in assets. An additional claim of \$800,000 has been put forward by BDO Dunwoody for the affected families.

A call to Taves, who is based in Kitchener, late Thursday afternoon was not immediately returned.

Christine Côté said she had been told that BDO Dunwoody would send letters to all affected families today with more information.

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Bankrupt adoption agency owed money to 400 families

Financial records show potential parents paid up to \$25,000 to Imagine Adoption

Jennifer MacMillan

Toronto — From Friday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Friday, Jul. 17, 2009 02:28AM EDT

Susan Hayhow's stonework century home in Cambridge, Ont., is the envy of her neighbours. With an indoor hot tub, manicured backyard and top-of-the-line appliances, it's perfectly appointed – much like Ms. Hayhow, who appears neatly coiffed and well-dressed in the dozens of photos posted to the websites of her adoption agency and charity. They show Ms. Hayhow during her frequent trips, handing out toys to children in Ecuador and posing in the lobby of the luxurious Sheraton hotel in Ethiopia's capital.

But Ms. Hayhow's financial records paint a very different picture of the 43-year-old's lifestyle – heavily in debt she is now dealing with the bankruptcy of her agency, which has left hundreds of adoptive families in the lurch.

Companies still owed money by Imagine Adoption include a swimming pool business, a home-renovation contractor and a landscaper that confirmed the work was done at Ms. Hayhow's private residence. Also owed money are 400 families, some of whom paid as much as \$25,000 upfront to Imagine Adoption, which also operates as Kids Link International.

Ms. Hayhow and her partner, Andrew Morrow, 48, left for Ethiopia a week ago to assist at the transition home caring for 40 children matched with Canadian parents and have been in touch with the bankruptcy trustee. Last month, Ms. Haywood and Mr. Morrow took out a \$500,000 mortgage at a rate of prime plus seven per cent on their home, currently assessed at \$232,000. The couple had put the home up for sale with an asking price of just under \$500,000, but took it off the market.

One adoptive mother said the agency seemed to be flourishing, moving from a smaller basement to a bright, storefront office just over a year ago. The agency was paying \$7,000 a month for the new offices, but bankruptcy documents report the rent had not been paid in 10 months.

Sarah, who did not want her last name used, adopted twins from Ethiopia said shortly after she arrived home with the children, she received a letter asking for a \$15,000 donation to another charity run by Ms. Hayhow called Global Reach Children's Fund.

“I was just astounded,” Sarah said. “I've never been asked for that kind of money.”

Global Reach Children's Fund operates in Ethiopia and Ms. Hayhow had been fundraising to build a complex called Faith Village that would provide such services as schooling, health care, and food. According to the charity's website, one unnamed family agreed to donate \$400,000 last September. Photos posted in December show a poured foundation but there have been no updates.

Imagine Adoption was separate from the charity and maintained its own staff, which included Valerie Goodyear, wife of federal cabinet minister and Cambridge MP Gary Goodyear. Mr. Goodyear attended the grand opening of the agency's new offices last year.

He confirmed his wife, named as co-ordinator of the African adoption programs in an agency newsletter, was

laid off on July 10 along with the other 15 employees.

“She was responsible for helping to place children with new families, and was not involved with the financial operations of the agency,” Mr. Goodyear said in a statement.

Deb Matthews, provincial minister for Children and Youth Services, said Thursday the province is working with the federal government to expedite paperwork for the children at the transition home in Ethiopia.

“Our highest priority is to get those kids here and in their homes as quickly as possible,” Ms. Matthews said.

There are also nine children in Ghana who had been matched with Canadian families. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services said the adoptions were suspended when it learned the orphanage, which is not operated by Imagine, was under investigation for child trafficking. Ministry spokesman Kevin Spafford said the orphanage was closed last month.

Ms. Matthews, whose ministry is in charge of licensing adoption agencies, says the province will be following the bankruptcy trustee's investigation of the finances of Imagine, which had a license in good standing.

“We're always looking at how we can improve services for families and this will be an opportunity to do that,” Ms. Matthews said. “We're obviously concerned.”

With a report from Stephanie Chambers

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