

**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Hearing on “National Adoption Month: Stories of Success and Meeting the Challenges of  
International Adoptions”  
November 18, 2015**

Next week, millions of families in this country will gather around a table to give thanks for the many blessings they have received. For proud parents and grandparents, this of course includes their children and grandchildren. It is fitting that this month we also recognize National Adoption Month, which honors the adoptive families who selflessly open their hearts and homes to children from the United States and around the world who are in need of a safe and loving family.

Today we raise awareness about some of the barriers to international adoption and recommit ourselves to work together to improve the international adoption system. We must unite as families, communities, and policy makers, to find permanent, loving homes for all children.

We will hear inspirational stories of international adoption. I am honored to welcome Christine Hutchins from Cambridge, Vermont. She and her husband, Jonathan Hutchins, welcomed their son James from Sierra Leone last year. I would also like to welcome Christine’s sister-in-law, Jennifer Smithers, and her husband Gregory Smithers, who adopted James’ twin sister Grace. Their journey to parenthood is one of courage and perseverance. They represent many other Vermont families who have similarly opened their hearts to a child in need through international adoption. I have been inspired by each family my office has helped through the adoption process.

- These families include Rabbi Joanie Chase and her husband Harley Parry from Rutland, Vermont, who adopted their son Ezra, from Ethiopia. My office helped to expedite the adoption process due to Ezra’s health issues at the time. Ezra is now four years old. He is very healthy, active and much loved by his family, especially by his 10-year old sister, Arielle.
- Sarah and Paul Messenger of Townshend, Vermont, adopted their son Leyeyo from Tanzania, after having sponsored him to study in the United States. He came to Vermont when he was 9 years old, speaking no English and is now a successful high school student who plays soccer, ice hockey and lacrosse and is applying to colleges.
- Jen Violette and John Gerding from Wilmington, Vermont, have two adopted sons from South Korea. Niko is 6-and-a-half years old and his biological brother Bennett, who was adopted two years later, is now 5-and-a-half. My office became involved in assisting with Bennett’s adoption. These boys are full of energy and deeply bonded with each other and their adoptive parents and bring joy to everyone around them. These Vermonters are just a few examples of the many Americans who have chosen to create a family through international adoption.

I am happy that Vermont is not alone in reaching out to children across the globe. Just last year, American families adopted 6,441 children through international adoption. These families welcomed children from 99 different countries. We know that adoption of any kind – international or domestic – is unlikely for the vast majority of orphaned and abandoned children

in many foreign countries. We can help those countries strengthen their child welfare systems and do a better job of caring for their children. But when international adoption is an option it provides children with a loving home and bright future filled with possibility. It can also be complicated, both legally and diplomatically. It can take an emotional, physical, and financial toll on a family.

We also know that corruption is a serious problem in many countries of origin for adopted children, and there have been instances when governments have suspended international adoptions altogether as a result of reports of abuse.

Many of the families we will hear from today have experienced delays during their adoption process, some for this very reason. As lawmakers, we must do our part to ensure that our laws not only provide protections for vulnerable children, but also to provide clarity to American families who want to be a “forever family.” That is why we are here today.

I thank Chairman Grassley for convening this hearing on such an important humanitarian issue. I also look forward to hearing the compelling stories of the families with us today.

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