

Adoption agencies feeling the pinch

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FOUR-YEAR-OLD twin girls have spent their whole lives in an institution after being abandoned at birth because social workers can't find anyone to adopt them. The problem, say the social workers, is that one of the girls is HIV-positive.

"The twins love each other to bits. They are very protective over each other. There's no way you could separate them," said Joburg Child Welfare's adoption supervisor, Pam Wilson.

South Africa has more children needing adoption than there are families willing to help. The reluctance to adopt HIV-positive children is one of the reasons for this.

The other, more recent problem, seems to be the current economic crisis. According to Wilson, they've seen a marked decrease in the number of people wanting to adopt since the crisis began to have an effect.

At the same time, there's been an increase in the number of abandoned children, linked to the financial crisis. "Moms are so destitute that they can't care for their babies," said Wilson.

Joburg Child Welfare currently has 43 children waiting to be adopted, and only 10 homes ready to adopt.

The children could go to other countries (the organisation has about 30 foreign families waiting to adopt), but the law says that attempts should first be made to place the children in South African homes.

About 50 percent of the children are being given up by their birth mothers, and the other 50 percent have been abandoned. Babies are left in the veld, in rubbish bins, or handed to strangers in taxi queues. "The mother will say she's just going to buy some sweets. She never comes back," said Wilson.

It can take as long as two

years to get the children ready for adoption, and then there's no telling if there'll be a family to adopt them. "It's awful for them to have to wait. Every month in their lives counts," said Wilson.

It's particularly difficult to place HIV-positive children. But the reality is that these children are on medication, and many will live to adulthood. "They are going to miss out on the opportunity to be in a healthy family environment simply because of their HIV status," said Wilson.

Furthermore, some adoptive parents have specific requests. Black parents more often request girls, because boys go on to carry the family name, and the parents are worried their ancestors will be angered if they bring in a non-related child, said Wilson.

There is generally a lot of stigma around the adoption of non-related children in black communities, despite the fact that it's common to take in related children such as nephews or nieces.

However, this is changing. According to Wilson, a lot of upwardly mobile black couples are choosing to adopt non-related children, rather than take in their brother or sister's children. They know they will be spending a lot of time, love and money on the child, and they don't want the child to finally return to the family of origin.

But the trend is not reversing fast enough to cope with the large numbers of children needing adoption. Wilson says other adoption teams are also struggling. "We have long lists of babies, but no one's got families."

She says South Africans need to be made aware of the situation. "We need a national recruitment campaign."