

# Uniting Families

Part 2 of the Stronger Series:

Orphanages  
are *NOT* the  
answer!



**OVERTURE**  
INTERNATIONAL  
EMPOWERING HAITI'S MOST VULNERABLE



## Prayer for families.

Heavenly Father,

We humbly come before you today with heavy hearts, seeking your divine intervention in the lives of families in Haiti. These families are facing the weight of generational poverty, disasters, violence and other unimaginable challenges.

Lord, we ask for guidance and protection for the children who have been separated from their families and communities. May your comforting presence be with them during this time of confusion and despair. Keep them safe from harm until they can be reunited with their loved ones.

We also lift up the families who are struggling to make ends meet without their children. Grant them strength and courage to move forward, even in the face of adversity. Provide them with the resources they need to care for their families and bring them back together as soon as possible.

Father, we ask for wisdom and endurance for those serving vulnerable families and children. Protect them throughout their journeys and shield them from those who seek to hinder their work.

Lord, we acknowledge your unyielding power to transform lives and restore broken families. We beseech you to pour out your grace and mercy upon these families, leading them into a future filled with hope and prosperity.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your unwavering love and support. We trust in your ability to bring healing and restoration to those who need it most.

In the name of Jesus, we pray.

Amen.

# Introduction.

Welcome to the second installment of our Overture Stronger Series: Orphanages are NOT the Answer. In our previous booklet, we discussed the detrimental effects of orphanages on a child's well-being. **Now, we aim to expand your awareness around the damages caused by separation and the complexities surrounding reunification.** We'll also share our experience of transforming an orphanage into a thriving community center.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOKLET

As you read this booklet, you will find that it is a mix of clear, practical steps for uniting children with their families or a foster family as well as a narrative case study of Overture's experience with evolving the ESPWA orphanage into a vibrant, effective campus for education and strengthening programs for the surrounding communities. The ESPWA case study is interwoven throughout the booklet to help you envision how the reunification steps were applied while transforming the orphanage into a community center.



## Key take-aways from Part 1 of the series: Orphanages are NOT the answer!

1. **Orphanages are counter to creating sustainable families and communities — and to the Christian worldview.** As people of faith, we're called to care for society's vulnerable and marginalized. Psalm 68 reinforces that **family is where God wants us to flourish.**
2. **Research shows children grow and develop best in families.** Orphanages deprive children of the love and stability of a family while also putting them at significant risk of abuse and neglect.
3. Many children are in the orphanage because the staff "recruited" them by **convincing their parents that they would be better cared for in the orphanage.**
4. **Nearly 90% of the children in Haitian orphanages have BOTH parents living** and only 1% are truly orphans. In most cases, children are placed in orphanages due to poverty or lack of educational opportunities.
5. Children separated from their families have **emotional scars that remain even after they leave the orphanage.**
6. Orphanages are breeding grounds for abuse, exploitation and corruption, which can lead to **significant opposition from those operating them.**
7. If the basic costs for education and healthcare were covered, most children living in Haitian orphanages **could live at home with their families at a cost far less than that of staying in an orphanage.**
8. Keeping Haitian **children with their families is possible when financial resources are paired with education and social services** that equip families and their communities to move from dependence to self-reliance.

# Uniting families — The journey begins.

Imagine the heartbreak of a child, maybe even your child, being taken away from everything they know in life and being entrusted to strangers who likely have financial gain and child exploitation as their primary reasons for operating an orphanage. Even if there are well-intended reasons, separating a child from their family and community shatters the bonds that provide them security, protection and compassion.

**In the vast majority of cases, a child's family environment is the safest place for them to grow and prosper.** No matter how well an orphanage cares for a child's basic needs, they can never replace the bond between a child and their parents. This separation is deeply traumatic, with lasting negative consequences for the child, their family — and future generations if professional services are not provided for healing.

Unfortunately, this is the reality for many children in developing countries like Haiti. Through this booklet, we **highlight the power of reuniting children with their biological families or placing them with loving foster families. Ending the orphanage system begins with unraveling the reasons behind the initial separation that led to a child being handed over to the orphanage.** Understanding these reasons is crucial to successfully create permanent placement in a family for a child. A comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of separation, trauma, individual and family needs is required.

Even under ideal circumstances, the social services needed for the pre and post-stages of reunification are extensive and require professionals for counseling, education, healthcare, economic empowerment and government support. The process poses an even greater challenge in Haiti, where social service systems are weak and underfunded. However, these services are vital for healing and ensuring a brighter future for children and must be present for a successful reunification or union with a foster family. Thankfully, nonprofit organizations like Overture are able to fill this gap in services.

Now, let's delve into the complexities of reunification as we share our experience of reuniting over 250 children with their families and transforming an orphanage into a community center that provides programs for child development and family strengthening. We will explore our discoveries of why children were separated and the resulting traumas they endured from their orphanage experience — **as well as our strategies that have proven to be successful in improving the self-sufficiency of families.**

Our goal is to empower you with the information and insights needed to help end the orphanage system in Haiti and empower families on their journey to independence and self-sufficiency — **thus, providing the best care for children.**



# The ESPWA story

## An orphanage *Transformed*

In Part 1 of this series, we introduced the inspiring case study of the reformation of the ESPWA orphanage in Southern Haiti. Originally operated as an orphanage for twenty years, ESPWA has undergone a remarkable transformation and is now thriving as a community center for child development and family-strengthening. We are so grateful to share that all 252 children from the orphanage who were reunited with their families in 2020 by Overture have remained with their families and are making significant progress towards self-sufficiency. **However, this journey was far from an easy one for the children, their families or our Overture team.**

Beginning in 2018, our team undertook an extensive assessment of the ESPWA orphanage, focusing on the 200 youths who had aged out between 2015 and 2018. Our findings were alarming, revealing that these young adults faced numerous challenges and obstacles due to the lack of social support when exiting the orphanage and their lack of essential life skills for living independently that they would have learned had they lived with their families during their formative years. Of the youth we were able to locate and assess, we found that:

- ▶ On average, **youth spent 10-12 years in the orphanage** without any attempts to be reunited with their families.
- ▶ These youth **struggled to adapt to daily life outside the orphanage**, lacking essential life skills, motivation, self-determination and the ability to envision their future goals.
- ▶ Most of the youth were **unable to develop healthy attachments** and their state of dependency perpetuated their anxiety, depression and led them to other detrimental actions.

The orphanage's unhealthy approach to caring for the children only aggravated the situation by neglecting the emotional and social needs of the children and their families. Moreover, our investigation also exposed deep-rooted corruption within the orphanage operations, abuse and other serious violations of the children's rights.

Overture's commitment to the children went beyond uncovering the truth. **We recognized the harm and hardships caused by the orphanage and the separation of the families — walking away was NOT an option!** Therefore, in 2019 we developed a comprehensive strategy for the reunification of the 252 children living at ESPWA at that time. This strategy involved extensive assessments, social services and support plans to ensure a different and more positive outcome. Our ultimate goal was to provide permanency and a brighter future for every single one of these children.



# The difference — Life after the orphanage.

In case you're still doubting the detrimental impact of orphanages on the lives of children, even as they enter adulthood, we'd like to introduce you to "Pierre" and "Eric" (pseudonyms used to protect identities) by sharing a bit of their stories below. Both of these young men spent a significant amount of time in the ESPWA orphanage and shared similar experiences there. **But the similarities between their experiences diverged once they left the orphanage.** Pierre left the orphanage with no plan for his future, no psychosocial support and very few opportunities. On the other hand, Eric's transition plan was led by Overture's social workers who undertook the process detailed in this booklet. And while he still faced many challenges, with the help of his family, the community and Overture, Eric has worked to achieve a degree of independence and self-reliance that was unimaginable for him just a few years before.

## PIERRE'S STORY: A failure to prepare.

Pierre is a 29-year-old young man who lives with his mother in southern Haiti. When he was three, Pierre was separated from his mom and placed at the Espwa orphanage by his father. He spent his childhood, adolescence, and young adult years at the orphanage, leaving when he was 21. Unfortunately, prior to leaving the orphanage, Pierre's needs were not assessed to integrate into his home community nor was a plan put in place to help him become independent. When Pierre exited the orphanage, he went to live with an aunt in Les Cayes because, sadly, he had no real connection with his mom. Indeed, like many youth raised in orphanages, he was not equipped for independence and success through a reintegration plan. **The lack of assessment and plan left Pierre unprepared and has caused a great deal of instability in his life.** In fact, since he left the orphanage eight years ago he has never been able to find a permanent residence and he is totally financially dependent on begging for support from relatives, friends, and former foreign visitors of the orphanage for his survival. That means, at the age of 29, Pierre is dependent on others, has no vision of goals and no motivation for an independent and self-sufficient life.



“The most challenging aspect of raising a child in an orphanage is realizing that there is no definitive answer to what it takes for successful upbringing. Despite our efforts over five years at the former ESPWA orphanage, we came to understand that raising a child well in an orphanage is virtually impossible.

*Families who entrust their children to orphanages have high expectations, hoping to receive responsible, independent adults when their children turn eighteen. Unfortunately, approximately 90 percent of the 200 families in the South Department were disappointed to find their children displaying rebellious and irresponsible behavior upon returning home. They admitted that, despite their impoverished circumstances, keeping their children at home would have been a better alternative.*

*The psychosocial assessments of the majority of the children at the center revealed common symptoms, such as lack of autonomy, laziness, short temper, lack of motivation and dependency — all consequences of the orphanage environment. It is clearly evident that the greatest challenge for children is not poverty but being raised in an orphanage.” – PIERRE-RICHARD PERRONEAU, Overture social worker, speaking about the pervasive harm caused by life in an orphanage*

## ERIC'S STORY: A plan for success.

Eric is a 21-year-old young man who spent most of his childhood in the ESPWA orphanage after losing his dad at four years-old. His mom was unable to care for him by herself, and she decided to place Eric in the orphanage at the age of five. After 13 years at ESPWA, Eric was reunited with his family in 2020. It was not easy for Eric to reintegrate with his family and community after 13 years of separation. To ensure the best outcome possible, the Overture team **undertook an assessment of Eric and his family's needs and developed a comprehensive family support plan.**

This plan included full scholarships for Eric and another sibling to attend school, nutrition support, training on child protection, counseling with Eric and other family members and enrollment of Eric in the Overture Young Adult Empowerment Program (YAEP). The YAEP program provided Eric and other youth from the ESPWA orphanage the support and tools they need for successful social reintegration. After two years in this program, Eric graduated with marketable trade skills and a firm foundation for his future.

Eric had this to say about the results of his YAEP experience:

*“Now I can stand and speak in front of a group of people, I know how to prepare my resume and stand out in a job interview. I have a plan to launch my own business very soon. None of this would have been possible without the YAEP!”*

In fact, Eric has gone on to start his own food business that provides a steady income for him and his family.

While Eric and his family still face challenges that come with living in a developing country like Haiti, they now have hope for their future. They can see a path toward independence and self-reliance.

## Conclusion.

It's clear from these two very different stories that **access to a strategic plan is critical for the children and young adults being reunited with their families** after spending most of their lives in an orphanage. It's also clear just how harmful that time in the orphanage can be for those children. That's why Overture is committed to investing their time and resources for equipping and empowering children and their families for long-term success.



# Steps for uniting families.

## STEP 1: Discovering the reasons for separation.

**The first step towards reunification involves unraveling the reasons behind separation.** Family separation is a complex yet devastating problem that affects thousands of children in Haiti. Most research points to poverty as the root cause of family separation. As a result, efforts to address family separation focus solely on reducing poverty using interventions like orphanages and aid relief, which can provide temporary solutions but do not address the root cause. **While poverty is certainly a driver of family separation, it is often not the only factor at play.**

Our assessments of families with children living in an orphanage revealed:

- ▶ The families we encountered faced significant challenges, such as limited education and an inability to meet their children's basic needs, including education, nutrition, healthcare and safe shelter.
- ▶ Vulnerable and easily swayed by the educated orphanage staff, many parents (because of their low level of education) were convinced that their child would have a better life at the orphanage.

Our experience with family reunification has shown us that education is a powerful tool to provide parents with the skills and resources they need to care for their children and provide them with a safe and stable environment. While providing access to basic support systems so that families can meet the needs of their children is essential, **social services that include training and education provide families with the means to overcome poverty and other obstacles, and create a stronger, more resilient family.**

**Step 1 of the reunification process involves intense social services for family tracing, home visits, counseling and individual and community assessments.** Understanding the reason for separation is crucial to make sure that reunification leads to a permanent placement for the child.





## The ESPWA story (cont).

# An orphanage Transformed

Overture's reunification strategy goes above and beyond, incorporating comprehensive **social services throughout the entire process**. We conducted thorough assessments of the children, their families (including extended relatives) and their communities in order to identify the necessary support. This enabled us to determine the assistance required for families to rebuild bonds with their long-separated children and to secure the support necessary for them to transition toward independence and self-sufficiency.

Our extensive findings for reunification from 252 children revealed:

- ▶ An astounding **98%** of the children had at least one living parent or close relative eager to care for them.
- ▶ **60%** of the children were under the age of six when they entered the orphanage and, on average, spent seven years in the orphanage — as with the prior aged-out groups, most of these children had little to no contact with their families after their arrival.
- ▶ Many of the children exhibited inappropriate behaviors and performed poorly in school.

While the children in the orphanage had access to shelter, clothing, food, medical care and education, more critically, **they lacked the love and compassion that only a parent can provide**. This emotional void inflicted great trauma and hindered the development of healthy attachments and relationships with family and others. Moreover, many of these children spent so many years apart from their parents that they no longer knew them, or even recognized them.

Overture's hiring of compassionate Haitian social workers proved to be the most crucial step in ensuring a successful reunification process. These empathetic professionals possessed a deep understanding of the culture and were capable of connecting with families at a very deep level. They worked closely with families, ensuring that they had the training, information and resources they needed to provide proper care for their children. **It was imperative for this initiative to be led with a 100% Haitian mindset**, as nobody understands the culture and needs of the people better than those who live there. **We intentionally did not turn to foreign organizations for this very reason.**

By prioritizing empathy, support, and a deep understanding of Haitian culture, our reunification strategy (with extensive service in both the pre and post-stages) aimed at fostering love, healing and independence for these children and their families who had been through so much pain and trauma.



# Steps for uniting families.

## STEP 2: Preparing for the family placement.

**The second step towards reunification is the preparation for the child's family placement.** Children living in orphanages, especially during their formative years, experience severe trauma because of the separation from their families and communities. Even worse, some children may have experienced traumatic events such as physical or sexual abuse while living in the orphanage.

In this critical second step, social workers must:

- ▶ Determine the most appropriate placement for the child.
- ▶ Understand the psychosocial support needed for the child and family to make a successful transition.
- ▶ Engage the community in the process to ensure the family has access to the basic needs of the child and has a network around them for support.

**In Step 2, communication and coordination with social workers, family members, community leaders and government agencies helps to ensure a smooth transition and prevent future separation.**

“By involving parents in planning for their children, and by empowering them during all parts of the placement process, we achieve several objectives: we can maintain and strengthen the relationship between the parents and the child; we can develop and strengthen the parents' parenting skills; we can help the parents work to create a safe home environment for their children; and, in doing, we can reduce the traumatic effects of placement for families and children.”

– FROM RYCUS, J.S. & HUGHES, R.C. (1998); *Field Guide to Child Welfare*



### The following pages will highlight:

- ▶ the impact of separation
- ▶ the importance of psychosocial support
- ▶ the difficulty of transitions
- ▶ the challenges to facilitating change

Overture's reunification process and work has been greatly informed by the work of Dr. Judith Rycus, PhD., MSW and her Institute for Human Services. You can read more about this work by visiting [www.ihs-trainet.com](http://www.ihs-trainet.com) and in their book, *Field Guide to Child Welfare*.

# Separation: Counting the costs.

The emotional and mental impact of being placed in an orphanage has a powerful and lasting effect on children's development and relationships. Children separated from their parents and placed in an orphanage are typically in the following age groups:

## 2-5 years old.

This impact is particularly severe for children between the ages of two and five years old, as they are so dependent upon their caregivers for survival and struggle greatly to cope with prolonged separation from their parents.

- ▶ They can't fully grasp the concept of time and may believe their parents are gone forever, causing significant trauma and anxiety.
- ▶ A dramatic change in their environment is confusing and threatening for them, and because of their age, they don't have the words or processes to express their feelings and fears.
- ▶ Reuniting with their parents after years apart can actually be retraumatizing, as they may perceive their family's decision to hand them over to the orphanage as a punishment or judgment on their worth.

In summary, **the separation experience of children placed in an orphanage causes significant trauma and harm to children, no matter their age.** This underscores the importance of approaching the placement process with sensitivity, understanding and appropriate support. That's why we prioritize including trained social workers, medical professionals, community leaders and educators in the reunification process.

## 6-9 years old.

Just as younger children experience significant trauma, children between the ages of six and nine years old face their own unique challenges. In addition to the trauma of being separated from their family, the loss of their stable peer group, trusted friends and siblings makes it difficult for them to form new, healthy relationships.

- ▶ They likely have formed distorted perceptions of why they were separated, and reuniting with their biological family can be painful as they navigate changes in family dynamics and living situations.
- ▶ They may feel embarrassed or self-conscious about being in an orphanage or being a foster child, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation.
- ▶ The children often struggle with adapting to new rules and expectations, and as a result, the child may rebel and act out.



## Let's hear from W. Sainval (Overture Social Worker)...

After interviewing more than 20 children who were separated from their families at an early age, my assessments revealed that:

1. Many of the children don't understand the concept of biological family, or that they have biological parents or a close relative.
  - ▶ These children never met their parents. Sadly the parents were not encouraged to visit their children, so the majority of these children never met their family before the reunification process was initiated.
2. The children have virtually no parental or familial reference points other than those of the orphanage caregivers who have been with them since they were toddlers.
  - ▶ The orphanage caregivers have become the "parents" for these children. In fact, when the child talks about their "mom," they likely mean the caregiver, not their biological mother. Unfortunately, because there can be a high turnover in the orphanage staff, children experience separation trauma over and over as their caregivers leave.

As W. Sainval reported, these interviews reinforce the critical need for undertaking the reunification process with the appropriate team, resources and strategy. That's why Overture has invested in building out a process, based on our experiences, for successful reunification and post-reunification support.

# The importance of psychosocial support.

As we have stated many times throughout this booklet, children, their families and communities suffer from many detrimental effects when separated by the orphanage system — **exemplifying the need for psychosocial support.**

Children may have:

- ▶ Development deficiencies, behavioral issues, or suffer from abandonment issues.
- ▶ Emotional scars from separation and other traumatic events.

Families experience:

- ▶ Difficulty forming relationships with the child because of the extended time apart.
- ▶ Frustration and stress from inappropriate behaviors expressed by the child.

“Children who have spent several years in orphanages often carry a profound sense of rejection, leading to the development of disruptive behaviors and a belief that they cannot achieve greatness in their lives. Orphanages, in my professional perspective, can hinder the mental and emotional growth of these children, impeding the development of crucial thought patterns. For some, the effects of living in an orphanage linger indefinitely. Sadly, this significantly hampers their ability to become self-sufficient and independent individuals.” – **KENDY FORVIL; Social Worker**

“And even when they recognize that the child placed in an orphanage can benefit from basic necessities such as food and education which, as parents, they had great difficulty in meeting, they don't fail to regret or complain almost unanimously about the bad behavior (laziness, lack of understanding, lack of participation in domestic life, non-obedience to parents, discipline problems at school, lack of autonomy in accomplishing their schoolwork ...) which the children develop and which they claim to have inherited from life in an orphanage. Worse still, they complain that they find it hard to correct certain bad behaviors even after three to four years since these children left the orphanage to return to live with them.” – **WIJEMS SAINVAL; Social Worker**

Psychosocial activities play a crucial role in nurturing children's development and fostering meaningful connections with others. These activities help children **regain a sense of routine, boost their self-confidence, and empower them to take control of their lives.** Through these engaging experiences, children can freely express their emotions, listen to their peers, share their unique stories, and acquire valuable coping skills. For example, children participate in creative activities, sports and games, awareness education, counseling, support groups, and skill training.

While these activities are crucial for children, **psychosocial support is equally important for parents** — especially those who are already struggling to cope with the pressures of meeting the basic needs of their families. Through the support from social workers and psychologists, parents learn parenting skills to manage behaviors, receive counseling, and participate in group training that also provides a supportive network from other families in their communities facing the same or similar challenges.



# The difficulty of transition.

Early adolescence is a difficult time of life and transition for any child, regardless of their circumstance. Now, imagine the additional challenges an adolescent would face amidst a transition from living in an orphanage to living with their family again. Our findings showed that most children in orphanages will transition out between the ages of 13-18. The overwhelming majority of these adolescents, many of whom are already displaying bad behaviors, **will continue to display these bad behaviors at home after reunification.** Parents report that they are lazy and do not participate in daily chores like their other children who had not been relinquished to an orphanage. This should come as no surprise.

## 13+ years old.

For children over the age of 13, early adolescence presents its own unique set of challenges to reunification for the children and the family.

- ▶ The young person may harbor anger and resentment towards their parents for the perceived abandonment.
- ▶ They may also lack essential life skills for selfcare and struggle to adjust to new communities with different cultural norms than the orphanage.
- ▶ As they re-enter their family, they may test limits and boundaries to see how their family will respond and if they will “reject” them again.
- ▶ These young people need professional support to gain the social-emotional skills they need to overcome their anger and resentment and help the family address any rebellious behaviors in positive, productive ways.



## Jean's Story

Jean is now a 20-year-old young adult who was reunified from the orphanage at the age of 17. Jean's parents came to the orphanage seeking education support because they could not afford the tuitions requested by the schools in their area. They stressed that they were able to meet all the other needs — they just needed help so their child could attend school. The Orphanage staff told them they could only help if the child lived at the orphanage and convinced the parents to leave the child there. At the age of nine, Jean was left at the orphanage where he remained for eight years before reunification.

*“It was difficult for me to leave the orphanage to come and live with my family. I didn't know my father and I hadn't lived long enough with my mother to remember her. I'm not very connected [attached] to anyone. I grew up that way. I like to keep to myself. I realize now how much it was necessary to have left the orphanage. Because in the orphanage it's like a kind of cave that locked the children in. The orphanage wasted the children's talents. For example, I make soap and sell it in my community now, but if I'd stayed in the orphanage, I don't think I'd have developed that talent.”* – **QUOTE FROM POST-REUNIFICATION INTERVIEW WITH JEAN**

# Barriers to reunification and closing orphanages.

Reunifying children from orphanages and closing down these institutions has been a hot topic of discussion among child welfare experts for a long time now. While it is widely acknowledged that institutionalization of children in orphanages can cause long-term harm, the process of deinstitutionalization is far from simple. Those leading the efforts, specifically social workers, are at the forefront of this process and face a **host of adversities that make their task especially challenging**.

In the previous pages, we wrote about the trauma experienced by the children who have lived in orphanages. These children have been institutionalized for extended periods, and as a result, **are likely to experience difficulties adjusting to life outside of the orphanage**. The social workers must provide critical care to these children and ensure they receive the support and resources they need to successfully transition to a family.

Other barriers to successful reunification can come from various sources, including **orphanage staff, corrupt stakeholders (those profiting from the orphanage system) and donors**.

## ORPHANAGE STAFF

Social workers face resistance from the orphanage staff and administration who often fight against change. The orphanage system allows them to profit financially and maintain a certain level of control over the children in their care. Therefore, the thought of **reunification and deinstitutionalization threatens their interests, leading them to oppose the change**. This opposition can manifest in various forms, such as verbal threats, sabotaging efforts, or even physical attacks.

**SOLUTIONS** To minimize this threat, **effective communication channels and education for awareness-raising are vital**. Social workers must engage the staff and administration of the orphanage in dialogue to understand their perspectives, concerns, and fears. This will help the social workers address these issues and dispel any misunderstandings about the intention of their efforts. Additionally, social workers should provide support and guidance to the staff and administration as they transition from the orphanage system to new jobs or alternative career paths.

## CORRUPT STAKEHOLDERS

The most significant barrier faced by social workers stems from those who are profiting from the orphanage system. These individuals or groups, which may include government officials, private investors, or even criminal syndicates, are often **deeply entrenched in the system and benefit immensely from its perpetuation**. They resist reunification and deinstitutionalization efforts using any means possible, including intimidation, bribery, and even violence.

**SOLUTIONS** To mitigate this threat, social workers **must adopt a collaborative approach with the government agencies responsible for child welfare and protection**. They must work within the framework of the law and involve relevant stakeholders at every stage of the reunification and deinstitutionalization process. This will create a buffer and minimize the impact of any efforts by those profiting from the orphanage system. Additionally, social workers must prioritize the safety of the children, staff, and other stakeholders to prevent any harm or adverse consequences from these adversaries.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” – **JAMES 1:2-4**

## DONORS

Those leading the efforts to change and end the orphanage system often face intense resistance from donors.

### The Well-Meaning Donor

Many donors are often unaware of the harmful effects of their continued giving to orphanages. These donors are well-meaning, but their contributions sustain a system that perpetuates the harmful institutionalization of children. As such, they **oppose reunification and deinstitutionalization efforts due to a lack of understanding**, which can create a financial barrier for social workers.

### The Rescue Donor

Some donors emotionally respond to the extreme poverty in Haiti by imposing their own ideology for caring for Haiti's children. They are often naive to local systems in place for child protection or they intentionally disregard their value because of the system's weakness and underfunding. The rescue donor believes they are better equipped to make decisions for child care and take actions, overriding the goals and desires of the local government agencies. As such, they **oppose reunification and deinstitutionalization efforts due to their desire to impose their own goals, intentionally withholding or diverting financial resources** from social workers to carry out reunification initiatives.

**SOLUTION** Overcoming this adversity requires proper education and awareness-raising, with the focus on child protection being the priority. Organization leaders must ensure donors receive the message that orphanages are not the solution because of the significant harm and trauma they perpetuate, and the best solution is reunification. **They must enlighten donors and the general public about the negative effects of institutionalization on children's development and advocate for alternative approaches, especially family preservation.** Resistance from donors can prove to be an obstacle to reunification efforts and may initially lead to reduced funding for initiatives to transform orphanages. Organizations must seek alternative funding sources to ensure their efforts' effectiveness and continuity.

To conclude, the orphanage system, imposed by foreign interventions, has created a problem that now plagues the children of Haiti. By prioritizing foreign ideologies over the welfare of Haitian children, foreign individuals and organizations have devalued the authority of local child welfare agencies and perpetuated a cycle of disempowerment. It is time for us to acknowledge the harm caused by these actions and work towards building a **more equitable and culturally sensitive system for the protection of Haitian children.**

*"The culture and care practices in orphanages are an aberration because children are unconsciously and innocently raised in an environment that falsely represents Haitian society and is contrary to the desires of the Haitian child protection agencies.*

*I have been deeply moved by the damage caused by the placement of these children in the orphanage which disconnected them from their biological families – the ones who should have played the primary role in the development of their children. In most cases, the biological families love and can raise their children if they have access to support that enables them to overcome their challenges." – WIJEMS SAINVAL, Overture Social Worker*

While it is true that social workers face significant challenges when deinstitutionalizing children, they are also well-equipped and the best ones to navigate these adversities. By remaining steadfast in their commitment to the welfare of children, and utilizing effective communication and collaboration strategies, they can overcome the obstacles in their path. Ultimately, the result of their work will be the transformed lives of the countless children who deserve nothing less than a loving and supportive family environment.

# The steps for uniting families.

## STEP 3: Family placement.

**The third step towards reunification is the actual return of the child to the family.** This third step, the actual placement of the child and the launch of the post-reunification support plan, can be one of the most challenging steps in the reunification process. In a developing country like Haiti, where the majority of families live on less than two dollars a day and are faced with a variety of serious psychosocial problems, the risk of family breakdown after reunification is very high. The child and the family are under significant stress during this time and can only successfully reunify with the help of professionals and the community.



## SOCIAL WORKERS

Separation and traumas cause a great deal of anxiety and confusion for the child. The transition from the orphanage to their family can be equally daunting. It is an overwhelming experience for the child, so it is critical for them to have **access to trained social workers who can provide specialized counseling and social support services to help the child and family.**

Social support services also assist with a range of practical issues the child and family face in the reunification process. This includes helping with school re-enrollment, providing access to medical care and helping with identifying financial assistance resources.

**Social workers and social support services are critical contributors to the reunification process.** That's why Overture is committed to investing in these resources as part of our work to end the orphanage system in Haiti.

## COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The community plays a vital role in the transition period of the reunification process and beyond. **When community leaders work with social workers and family members to create a safe and supportive environment for the child's readjustment, the odds of the reunification being successful for the long term is increased exponentially.**

Haitian government officials have a duty to provide adequate support during reunification to ensure the child's seamless and sustainable transition. They monitor the reunification process, ensuring that the child is cared for appropriately and returned to a safe and stable home environment. And while the government is often unable (because of the lack of funding and capacity) or unwilling to get involved in every case, when they do, they are able to make a real difference in the lives of the children and their families being reunified.

**The ultimate goal of Step 3 in the reunification process is to ensure that the child and the family are provided with the resources that keep them together and prevent future separation.** This requires ongoing support from social workers, family members and community leaders to ensure that the child's needs are met. Providing support in the early stages of reunification is crucial for preventing future separation and ensuring that the child can thrive in their family environment.



## The ESPWA story (cont).

### *An orphanage Transformed*

When Overture began reuniting children with their families, as ESPWA was transforming from an orphanage into a child development center, we developed three-year support plans for each family based on their individual assessments and goals. These **support plans equipped families with the knowledge, skills and resources they needed to make major strides toward independence and self-sufficiency.** The annual plans took the following approach to each year:

- ▶ **Year 1** focuses on stabilizing the family, enrolling children in local schools and providing access to nutrition, counseling, training and employment opportunities for adults.
- ▶ **Year 2** involves continued education, training, and the opportunity for some families to participate in building an Overture home. We equip families with skills to withstand natural disasters and provide child protection training for adults. Children participate in psychosocial activities and receive scholarships for further education.
- ▶ **Year 3** provides families with access to healthcare and continued education for their children, through donor-funded scholarships. We also assist families in starting their own businesses for critical income and independence.

Long-term success for reunifying families involves overcoming major obstacles, which requires a **significant investment in resources and a long-term commitment of our time and talent to youth and their families.** And sustainability can only be achieved when communities are equipped to foster local economic trade, create job opportunities and enable families to access basic services. These needs inspired Overture to look beyond the individual support plans for the families and establish our Overture Social Support Model that is centered around community partnerships and locally-driven services. The Model is built on five essential pillars (Empowerment, Education, Nutrition, Healthcare and Housing), with each pillar equipping community members with the education, skills and resources they need to overcome daily obstacles and work to become independent and self-reliant as individuals, families and communities.

Our Overture social workers and resource teams remain by the sides of the reunified families throughout their journey, ensuring they can access essential services and make progress on their three-year plan through the implementation of the Overture Social Support Model. **We firmly believe families can develop the capacity to meet the basic needs of their children and serve as role models in their communities,** demonstrating that independence and self-sufficiency are achievable goals.





## The importance of a foster care system.

Foster families are the most valuable alternative to orphanages for Haiti's children. Since 2014, IBESR and its partners working in child protection have created a framework for a foster care system and have been promoting this as the first option for children without the option to live with their biological family.

Unfortunately, the emergence of a robust foster system is in the infancy stage because of the failure to **prioritize and allocate** the necessary funding and resources. Therefore, fully committed partners like Overture International are supporting IBESR in their efforts to develop this system because **we strongly believe that every child, no matter the situation, deserves to live with a loving family.**

Our support with IBESR for building out the foster care system in Haiti consists of:

- ▶ Educating communities about the harm that children experience when separated from their families and the importance of the foster care system.
- ▶ Recruiting families and educating them on the principles and values of accepting a vulnerable child into their homes.
- ▶ Conducting family and community assessments so that IBESR can make informed decisions in their selection of families.
- ▶ Individual and group training sessions for selected families.
- ▶ Involving selected families in the pre-placement activities.
- ▶ Implementing support plans and protocols for the placement of a child.
- ▶ Ongoing monitoring, counseling, training and assessments after placement.

### Fostering success.

Foster care is proving to be a reliable and successful path for many children being transitioned back to the community from the orphanage or some other potentially harmful situation. **Sara and Patricio are just two of the children who have found a new family and new hope through foster placement in an Overture community in southern Haiti.**

*"The inability of child welfare agencies to recruit and develop qualified foster care homes for challenging children is not, as is often believed, due to a lack of resources, but rather to a lack of vision, or a lack of technology and/or agency and community commitment. In many agencies, the annual budget to maintain children in residential treatment could easily finance family-based care in the community for most of these same children."*  
– FROM RYCUS, J.S. & HUGHES, R.C. (1998); *Field Guide to Child Welfare*

## SARAH'S STORY: A journey of love.

Sarah is one of the 252 children who left ESPWA with a three-year transition plan. She was not able to be reunified with her immediate family but was able to be placed in a foster home with Ms. Marie who has seen Sarah make significant progress in all areas of her life in the year they have been together. Sarah was placed in the ESPWA orphanage by her father when she was four years old. Her father also grew up in the orphanage, which resulted in him struggling to integrate into society and therefore perpetuated the orphanage cycle with his own child. When she arrived at Ms. Marie's, Sarah was timid and small for her age and was emotionally fragile. Today, Sarah is in the 5th grade and doing well at school. She has friends there and has gained weight and is physically healthy. Many in their neighborhood don't even know Sarah is a foster child because she has become an integral part of the family. Ms. Marie says, *"Sarah truly is part of our family. She is showing improvement each day. We're so grateful for her and for Overture walking with us on this journey."*



## PATRICIO'S STORY: The heart of a community.

Patricio is a young boy born with physical and developmental disabilities. Out of desperation, Patricio's mom brought him to a local center known for caring for special needs children in hopes that they would be able to provide for him in a way she was unequipped to do. Unfortunately, the center would not take him in, so his mother placed him on the ground outside of the center in the public market where he sat outside alone with no food, water or sleep for two days.

The governmental authorities were notified, who in turn contacted our Overture team. We immediately took Patricio to our ESPWA clinic, where he was immediately seen by a doctor and a medical plan was put into place for him. As Patricio's health was being stabilized, our team was at work identifying the next step in his journey. We determined that foster care was the best option and began contacting people in the community who might be willing and able to take in Patricio. And, as most often occurs, we experienced a miracle, and her name is Maculé.

Maculé is a 41 year-old mother of four children and wife of a man who is disabled due to a vehicle accident. And despite her limited income from her small business, Maculé didn't hesitate to say "YES" when asked if she would consider taking in Patricio. The road ahead for Patricio, Maculé and the family is a long one. Taking care of Patricio will require Maculé's full-time presence at home because he needs around-the-clock care including feeding, bathing, dressing and administering medicines. Overture social workers and medical professionals are working with the family to ensure they have access to the resources they need to care for Patricio and the rest of the family.



# The steps for uniting families.

## STEP 4: Post reunification — family strengthening.

**The fourth and final step is the post-reunification phase.** Reunification is not the end of the journey; in fact, it is just the beginning. The family and child need ongoing intensive social support to ensure successful and sustainable reunification throughout their journey. Social workers conduct regular check-ups and continuously assess the family's needs to support the family while other agencies and nonprofit partners provide training and resources to expand the strengthening services for the families. This stage is crucial in preventing future separation and promoting the family's economic and social well-being.

After the child has been reunited with their family or foster family, this monitoring and evaluation become crucial to ensure a smooth transition and to meet the child's and family's needs.

The monitoring process requires the involvement of the child, the family (or foster family), the social worker and the community to ensure everyone is working together and that the child continues receiving the necessary support. Regular evaluations ensure adequate resources and support are in place for the family and that the child is thriving.

**To prevent family separation in the long term, ongoing investment is needed in long-term resources like education, job training, mental health services and community development.** These resources can provide a safety net for families, help them overcome obstacles and create opportunities to build stronger, more sustainable futures.

“By helping families overcome their vulnerabilities and empowering them to protect their children, we can break the cycle of institutional care. Instead of taking direct charge of children in institutions, the focus shifts to enabling families to emancipate themselves from situations that put their children at risk. It's time to make a bold change for the well-being of future generations.”  
– CLIFFORD CHARLES, *Overture Social Worker*

Continue to learn more about this stage in the third booklet of this series:

*From Reunification to Resilience.*

# The ESPWA story (concl).

## An orphanage Transformed

Breaking down corruption, strategizing reunification steps and transforming ESPWA from an orphanage into a family and community strengthening center was a momentous undertaking. But the effort was necessary to bring lasting change to Haiti's most vulnerable. **The impact on the lives of the reunified children and their families made it all worthwhile.**

After just one year of reunifying the children, ESPWA officially transitioned from an orphanage to a child development center in Southern Haiti, providing vital programs and support to both children and their families with the ultimate goal of keeping the family unit together. The seven-acre campus and 120 acres of farmland, once reserved strictly for housing and schooling of ESPWA's "orphans," now has been repurposed to serve those children, within their families and community.

Through this process, we learned the crucial role of skilled social workers in the reunification process. These professionals need a deep understanding of family dynamics, child behavior and cultural nuances. **That's why it's vital to prioritize the use of Haitian social workers who are experienced and connected to the communities they serve.**

Our approach to creating solutions focusing on reunification and self-sufficiency, derived from our ESPWA experience, has proven to be successful in Haiti and has created a model of service that we hope will be a tool for future development in other areas of Haiti. We are proud of the work we've done and are excited about the possibilities ahead. Everyone deserves the chance to thrive, and with hope and resilience, we can make it happen.

Despite all of this amazing progress with ESPWA, **our work is far from complete. It takes years to equip community members to fully realize and buy into the power of this transformation shift.** One critical piece we've yet to mention is the generous donors who invested in our work and made this reunification and orphanage transformation a success. Without their financial support, it would not have been possible.

## Many wonder what becomes of an orphanage when it no longer provides residence for children.

The main reason families in Haiti separate is because they struggle to meet the basic needs of their children. Community-based centers act as a resource to address these issues through targeted programs focused on livelihoods, education and health. By strengthening families and communities, these centers can reduce the number of children separated from their families.

Orphanages transformed into community-based centers also create a strong infrastructure for long-term sustainability. They can provide social services focused on family and community strengthening and other essential services. They have the power to improve the well-being of Haitian children and families.

Transitioning an orphanage into a community-based center is a complex process that requires collaboration between nonprofits, the Haitian government and community members. It involves identifying primary community needs and designing effective programs to address them. Adequate resources and funding are crucial for sustaining the centers and their impact. The long-term benefits are significant, offering hope for the future of Haiti's child welfare system.



Bethsaida is a 12-year-old girl living with her family of seven in a community near Les Cayes. When Bethsaida was a small child, her mother relinquished her to the ESPWA orphanage because she could not provide for Bethsaida's educational or daily needs. After many years of separation, Bethsaida was reunited with her family when Overture undertook the reunification process of 252 ESPWA orphanage children in 2019. After her reunification, and with the support of Overture donors, Bethsaida started school and her mother began participating in child protection training and vocational skills training. The family also worked alongside their community to build a brand new house that they now share with another family. And they are currently partnering with Overture to improve their financial situation. This family is well on its way to self-reliance and, most importantly, they are together and moving toward a more independent life.

“The fact that we are together makes us stronger. I'm able to support Bethsaida and my other children in their education, and I have hope that I will be able to fully provide for them very soon. Without Overture, none of this would be possible.”  
– BETHSAIDA'S MOTHER



# For the love of children.

## The need for uniting children with their families extends far beyond the orphanage.

It is important to recognize that it is not only children living in orphanages that are in need of family reunification support. Many other channels separate children from their families:

### 1. Street Children (children living on the streets):

Because parents and primary caregivers are unable to meet the basic needs of the children, many are left to their own means of survival. These children take to the streets to beg for food or seek means of earning money for their family. Youth are often the most neglected and vulnerable in the community, at risk of being drawn into violent gangs, trafficked for sex and slavery, falling into a life of substance abuse and other behaviors that put their lives at risk, and even dying from disease or violence.

### 2. Incarcerated Youth (youth in prisons):

Youth who are deprived of education often end up incarcerated after being accused of a crime, but due to the weak legal systems in Haiti, they may sit in jail for years without ever seeing a judge, much less being offered a trial. We've found that even though most of these children do not enter the prisons as hardened criminals, because they are housed with adult prisoners and left to fend for themselves without intervention, they are likely to leave more inclined toward criminal behavior.

### 3. Restaveks (children who have been placed in domesticity):

It is estimated that 150,000 to 300,000 children are trapped in the dire circumstances of domestic servitude (2022 *Trafficking in Persons Report: Haiti*). Some families mistakenly believe that by entrusting their child to wealthier households, they are giving them an opportunity for better living conditions and an education. Unfortunately, the stark reality reveals that these children are often trapped in a world of modern slavery. Disturbingly, many of these innocent victims are denied the chance to pursue an education and are subjected to horrific acts of domestic and sexual violence.

The steps described in this booklet apply to all efforts to unite children and youth with families and help them to heal from traumatizing experiences, so they have the best opportunity for a healthy and fulfilled life. **Most importantly, these steps should be applied for the prevention of separation.**

# You can help end the orphanage system in Haiti.

At Overture, we understand that this process of mending broken families is neither quick nor easy, but it is necessary and life-changing for the children and families we serve. Our extensive experience and proven techniques ensure that we approach each case with sensitivity and empathy, taking into account the unique needs and circumstances of every child and family.

Through our work, we have witnessed first-hand the **incredible transformation that occurs when children are reunited with their families**. Children who were once traumatized, separated and vulnerable are given a new chance to thrive and succeed in life. Families who were once broken are given a new opportunity to heal and be reunited.

We know that the need for our work is great, but our resources are limited. That's why we are **calling on donors like you to support our work and help us end the orphanage system in Haiti**. By donating, you are helping us to continue providing vital services to families and children in need, including counseling, education, healthcare and government support.

Your support ensures that we can provide a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of separation and trauma, and helps families and children achieve long-term success.

- ▶ **Join us in our commitment** to reunite Haitian children with their families and end the orphanage system. The success of the reunification process relies heavily on the support of donors and readers like you.
- ▶ You can empower and advocate for this work. **Educate yourself and others** about the importance of family reunification and the traumas experienced in orphanages. **Share our message** on social media and encourage others to get involved.
- ▶ We call out to those still supporting orphanages. The truth is orphanages are not a solution. They perpetuate trauma, harm and separation for children, even under the best of circumstances. It is time to recognize that family reunification and strengthening is the only long-term solution to create sustainable change. Our work, and the work of all organizations striving towards family reunification, is critical in ending the orphanage system. We urge you to **join us in this fight** to create a brighter future for Haiti's children.

Together, we can empower families and create an environment where children can thrive. **Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, loving family, and it is our duty to make that a reality**. Join us in our mission to reunite families today.





“After conducting interviews with several children from two different orphanages who had already been reunited with their parents, we gained valuable insights into how life in an institution can profoundly impact a child’s life. The children were unanimous in acknowledging the challenges they faced from the first day entering the orphanage. The separation from their parents and community left lasting wounds that were difficult to heal, and the treatments received in the centers only added to their pain.

It is disheartening to hear them express regret over their parents’ decision and their hope to never go through such an experience again. As we spoke to the parents, it became apparent that the decision to place their children in care was not made lightly. Their decision was driven by their belief that it was the best choice for their children’s well-being considering their poverty. Yet, the separation has had severe consequences for their family, which will never be the same again.” – ENEL ANDRE, MSW

ORP  ANAGES



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