

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

APSAC and the First Russian-American Child Welfare Forum

Ronald C. Hughes, President, APSAC

We not only need a “reset” button between the American and Russian governments, but we [also] need a fresh start between our societies—more dialogue, more listening, more cooperation in confronting common challenges.

Barack Obama, President of the United States of America,
the U.S.-Russia Civil Society Summit (Moscow, July 7, 2009)

One can judge a society's maturity and developmental level from the way it treats its children. We need a standardized system for the protection of children in all senses of the word.

Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation

Recognizing the need to make a fresh start in relations between the United States and Russia, President Dmitri Medvedev and President Barack Obama created the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission in July 2009 to address shared challenges, explore opportunities for partnership in areas of mutual interest, and coordinate activities to solve joint concerns.

Seventeen committees have been formed under the Bilateral Commission to address the highest priority needs. One of these is the Civil Society Committee and its four sub-working groups—migration, prison reform, anticorruption, and child protection. Dr. Ronald Hughes was appointed as a delegate to the Committee specifically to work within the Child Protection Sub-Working Group, which meets twice a year (once in Russia and once in the United States). Its members represent both governmental and nongovernmental organizations involved in protecting children's rights and interests.

An outgrowth of discussions among delegates of the Child Protection Sub-Working Group was the decision to organize the First Russian-American Child Welfare Forum. This Forum was held August 2–6, 2011, in Ulan Ude, capital of the Republic of Buryatia, and in Sukhaya, a small village on the shores of Lake

Baikal. More than 200 delegates from Russia and the United States spent 5 days together in dialogue and presenting plenary sessions, workshops, and discussion platforms. The format enabled child protection specialists from both countries to identify common concerns and showcase approaches to prevention and intervention in situations of child maltreatment. The Forum was a first step to address their mutual challenges, needs, capacities, and willingness to collaborate to improve children's safety and well-being. A primary conference goal was to strengthen relationships and communication among participants to facilitate ongoing collaboration in solving problems, such as child pornography, child sex trafficking, intrafamilial child abuse and neglect, and promoting early recognition of at-risk children and families to prevent child maltreatment.

The Forum was a joint effort at many levels. Russian contributors included the Government of the Republic of Buryatia, with special involvement of the President of the Republic, Mr. Vyacheslav Nagovitsyn, and his staff. Other contributors were the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation, the Gorbachev Foundation, the Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Siberian Federal District, and the National Foundation for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a nongovernmental organization located in Moscow.

Among the American contributors and coorganizers of the Forum were the United States Department of Justice, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), and the Institute for Human Services (IHS).

During the opening plenary, videotaped welcomes were shared from the cochairs of the Child Protection Sub-Working Group, Mr. Andrew Oosterbaan, Chief of the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the U.S. Department of Justice, and Mr. Pavel A. Astakhov, Children's Rights Ombudsman of the Russian Federation. A meeting of the Child Protection Sub-Working Group was subsequently held during the Forum, cochaired by Mr. Luke Dembosky, U.S. Department of Justice resident legal advisor at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, and Mr. Anton P. Astakhov, Assistant Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights for the Russian Federation. At this meeting, Dr. Vincent Palusci had the opportunity to present remarks regarding the involvement of physicians in child maltreatment practice.

More than 200 child welfare professionals from Russia and the United States participated in wide-ranging dialogue regarding identification and intervention in a host of child welfare topic areas, such as child pornography, child sex trafficking, alcohol abuse and fetal alcohol syndrome, chronic neglect and poverty, medical diagnosis of child maltreatment, child abuse prevention, risk assessment and safety planning, the civil society infrastructure necessary for child protection, child fatalities, working with families, and the role of training and education in building a competent child protection work force. The issues of child sex trafficking and child pornography were a follow-up to initiatives begun in a previous meeting in Moscow of the Civil Society Committee.

In addition, delegates covered much new ground at the Forum. One area emphasized in presentations and discussions was prevention in all areas of child maltreatment, including physical abuse and neglect as well as sexual abuse. Another emphasis was the introduction of treatment intervention models that have substantial empirical support. Delegates spent considerable time on issues related to alcohol abuse and its effects on neonates, which cause serious problems in both Russia and the United States.

Several APSAC members were among the American attendees. Board President Ronald C. Hughes led a team with Dr. Vincent Palusci, Dr. Lori Frasier, Dr. Viola Vaughan-Eden, Dr.

Michael Haney, Ms. Tricia Gardner, Dr. Raelene Freitag, and Dr. Tatiana Balachova, all of whom conducted workshops, led plenary sessions, and moderated discussion platforms on a wide range of topics. The APSAC team was joined by three participants representing the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). They were Ms. Lou Ann Holland, Ms. Sandra Marchenko, and Mr. Luke Dembosky, who all spoke on issues related to child sex trafficking and child pornography. APSAC members Dr. Judith Rycus and Ms. Ruby Johnston from the Institute for Human Services conducted sessions on the technology of competency-based training and its role in promoting large-scale system change.

Another APSAC member, Mr. Chris Newlin, a delegate to both the Civil Society Committee and the Child Protection Sub-Working Group, was a leader in previous meetings that forged new ground in U.S.-Russian collaboration to combat child pornography and child sex trafficking, including coordination of plans for identification, intervention, and interdiction. Although Mr. Newlin did not attend the Forum, he has been an essential contributor to the planning process and will provide continued leadership in future meetings.

Planning, presenting, and participating in the First Russian-American Child Welfare Forum was an interesting and productive experience for the U.S. participants. All of us were overwhelmed by the generosity and hospitality of our Russian hosts and by the personal and professional respect that was shown in response to our time and effort. Clearly, there are substantial needs related to improving the safety and well-being of children in Russia, and there is much we can offer. Even small and measured investment has the potential to produce significant gains for children and families, and Russian child welfare professionals can learn not only from our successes but also from our mistakes. We have much to gain by participating in Russian child welfare reform efforts, particularly in assessing the utility and transferability of American standards and practices to very different political and cultural contexts.

Because the Forum was intended to be the first of an ongoing Russian-American collaboration, the conference organizers are already planning next year's meeting, which will likely be held in the United States. APSAC members interested in participating should contact members of the APSAC Board.

APSAC representatives Dr. Ronald Hughes, Dr. Judith Rycus, and Dr. Vincent Palusci gave presentations at the opening plenary sessions or during the on-site meeting of the recent Child Protection Sub-Working Group. Transcriptions of their presentations are included in this issue.