

Testimony of Mrs. Nicole Craig

Senate Judiciary Committee

“National Adoption Month: Stories of Success and Meeting the Challenges of International Adoptions”

November 18, 2015

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am deeply honored to appear before you today to share the story of our family’s adoption of Elisabeth Grace from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). On behalf of the hundreds of American families whose children are waiting to come home, I am humbled to have this opportunity.

I would like to take the opportunity to recognize my mother, brother, and my husband Kevin, and the other waiting DRC families, who are here with me today, and also to thank our three boys, Jahvarn, Alex, and Kaden for their unwavering love and support throughout this process. It has not been what any of us expected when we began the adoption process three years ago.

It was three years ago this week when we accepted a referral of a five month old baby girl named Elisabeth Grace. We satisfied every legal requirement in both the United States and DRC. On April 8, 2013, we were legally declared her parents by a Congolese Court. We thought she would be home soon after. On September 25, 2013, during the time our case was being investigated by the United States, the Congolese government suspended the issuance of exit permits for adopted children. This meant that our daughter could not leave DRC and yet we had all the legal responsibility to provide for her.

Three years, and five US visa renewals later, we still eagerly wait for Grace to be united with us- her forever family. We have provided financial support for Grace but have yet to give her what every child deserves- a family. We exchange photos via email and Skype with her when she has electricity.

She asks for her brothers, sings songs to us, and cries for us when we disconnect. We watched and celebrated her first steps, three birthdays and holidays through photos- bittersweet to say the least. She likes to see pictures of her bedroom and our home.

She is too young to understand why she can't be united with her family, and as an adult, I don't fully understand it myself.

Still, she asks whenever we talk to her, when she is coming home? The lump in my throat swells as I have to say "soon". We send clothes, school supplies, vitamins, and everything else she may need upon request. Imagine, a phone call in the middle of the night and your child is having seizures. It's terrifying knowing she has very limited access to sub-par healthcare and is an exit permit and a plane ride away from the best healthcare access, diagnosis, and treatment. She knows she has a family that loves her. A piece of our heart remains separated for reasons we are unclear, and we as a family are broken. Grace is not an orphan. Grace is our daughter, a sister, a granddaughter, a niece, a cousin. Grace is our family. I am certain that this is not just our story, but the story of many waiting adoptive families from around the country and the globe.

We have waited for more than two years now, and there is no real end in sight. On November 4th, 2015, the DOS sent an update to waiting families that 14 US children were to be granted exit permits. Of the nearly 1300 cases, DOS told us that only 99 had been reviewed. We were told that the other children would need to wait for new adoption laws to be passed in DRC which may or may not be retroactive. It seems we are further away from bringing our daughter home now than we have ever been.

Our Congolese adoption decree states "That this adoption is requested in the greater interests of the child, who will thus regain a family who will take charge of her development and care by offering her an environment and life full of affection and love, which will contribute to her well-being according to the wishes of the law."

Our Dossier details were listed in the adoption decree to include: our homestudy, criminal records, health and mental status reports, income, USCIS conditional approvals, birth certificates, marriage certificates, all with dates, and verified, even with State of WI license #s.

It is clear that concerns of my daughter's well-being and our family was thoroughly reviewed and vetted by DCR courts. It is clear that the DRC wants the same for these children as the families that have adopted them.

The Congolese court found that our adoption was in the best interest of Grace, yet we are not able to fulfill our obligations to her. Grace is being denied access to educational opportunities and superior healthcare standards that people from other nations, including DRC, seek access. Grace is being denied the love of a family. A family that has been waiting for three years to provide her the love, affection, and care we promised.

I believe we have reached an impasse in this adoption crisis where an "Act of Congress" is necessary and respectfully requested. Congress must urgently engage with Congolese decision makers to find a solution, much more than what has been done in the past two years to resolve this crisis. I am very grateful for the efforts of Congress to compel DOS to find a solution, but

diplomatic engagement has so far been proven ineffective. The time is now for more active involvement of Congress. I would ask that a Congressional-Delegation be sent to DRC prior to the December 15th parliament recess. I would ask that Congress swiftly pass legislation for my child and the hundreds of other adopted children waiting in DRC to give to them the rights being denied by the exit suspension.

Imagine for one moment that this is your child. Imagine that for more than two years you are actively prevented from parenting your child, from holding her when she is scared, from filling her belly with healthy foods, from tucking her in each night and kissing her forehead each morning. Imagine. And then tell me what you would be willing to do? Every day matters for these children. Every day my daughter is kept from her loving family is an injustice. These children deserve a solution now. Please help us find a way to bring our children home.