

# Adopters Shun Area Wards

By Ron Shaffer

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Against the backdrop of Vietnamese orphans joining their new families here, 75 American youngsters — most of them healthy and between 4 and 12 years of age — are living as wards of Washington area governments, waiting to be adopted.

Some of these publicly supported children are sibling combinations that no one will take together. Some have serious emotional or medical problems. Some are rejected because potential adoptive parents fear they have inherited their natural parents' drug problems.

Mostly, public adoption workers say, they are unwanted because they are too old.

"Everyone dreams about the perfect baby, the little cuddly baby that they can nurture and see grow," said Sadie Wheeler, chief of adoption services for the District.

"They think of an older child as already molded and developed into a person they have had no control over. They don't seem to realize that these children, too, can be a loving endearing part of their family."

Many of the available children have been government wards for years, sometimes moved from foster home to foster home.

They could be adopted free of charge, usually within three months, according to Washington area adoption supervisors interviewed yesterday. In the cases of handicapped children, local governments will pay to an adoptive family monthly subsidies plus med-



By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post

Chuck is one of several children awaiting adoption.

ical treatment for the ward.

Meanwhile, thousands of Americans are on waiting lists for Vietnamese orphans, according to the State Department. These families apparently are willing to pay up to \$2,000 for the processing and paperwork involved, and endure the 18-month average wait before the child can be placed in their home.

Adoption supervisors in the District, Alexandria and in Montgomery, Prince

George's, Arlington and Fairfax counties interviewed yesterday said they had been swamped with hundreds of inquiries about Vietnamese adoptions, but few expressions of interest in the agency's own adoptable children.

"We feel comfortable with their decision (to adopt a Vietnamese orphan)," said Preston Hendrick, supervisor of adoptions for Fairfax County, reflecting the mood of the other supervisors in-

terviewed yesterday. "They want to help these Vietnamese children and they want a child."

Officials here note that there are virtually no American infants available for adoption now, and there are waiting lists of several hundred in each local jurisdiction.

The number of American infants available for adoption has been declining steadily since about 1970, the result of the increased number of abortions and use of contraceptives, a general decline in the birth rate, and changing social values that now make it more acceptable for an unwed mother to keep her child.

Hundreds of callers a day continue to express interest in adopting a Vietnamese orphan, the State Department reported yesterday. Most of the Vietnamese coming into the country are healthy infants, but some are handicapped, some are as old as 7, and some are biracial.

Of the 75 children available for adoption here most are from unwed mothers or the product of broken homes. Two-thirds of them are black, and most are in the District. The 75 wards, about the normal number of adoptable children available according to local officials, cost taxpayers \$150,000 a year to support.

Prince George's County was the only jurisdiction yesterday that had adoptable infants available. Some were healthy and would be claimed soon, a Prince George's official said. Others had medical problems or had not been adopted because they are biracial.

Betty Thornton, of New Carrollton, Md., a temporary foster parent caring for a bi-racial baby, said she thought the 8-month-old boy was "adorable," and would "make a wonderful son for some family."

Prince George's officials reported about a dozen families waiting for black babies, 100 waiting for Caucasians, and none waiting for biracial babies.

Prince George's reported eight other children available for adoption yesterday; Montgomery County had four; Alexandria, nine; Fairfax County, two and Arlington, none.

District officials said they had 51 children available for adoption, including 31 healthy, normal children, and 20 with some special difficulty, such as retardation, emotional problems or physical disability.

Meanwhile, officials here reported a continuing need for temporary foster parents to take in children—mostly teenagers—who are not free for adoption.