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Media Contact:

Chuck Johnson

(703) 299-6633

cjohnson@adoptioncouncil.org

National Council For Adoption Responds to Allegations of Fraud in the Adoption of Children of Marshallese Descent

October 11, 2019 – Alexandria, VA – National news outlets have reported on the arrest this week of Arizona attorney Paul Petersen, who has been indicted on numerous charges related to the alleged trafficking of pregnant women and children from the Marshall Islands for the purpose of completing an illegal adoption. To the advocates and practitioners of legal and ethical adoption, the charges against Mr. Petersen and their implications to the women, children, and families caught up in this scheme are profoundly disturbing. Despite the many thousands of legal and ethical adoptions taking place across the United States every year, any instance of corruption in adoption is troubling and motivates advocates and policymakers to consider ways to further reduce fraud taking place in adoption.

Although the exception, fraud in adoption can and does occur. Fraud involving pregnant expectant parents who are considering adoption for their child or involving hopeful prospective adoptive parents has life changing implications for everyone involved, especially for the child whose life has been forever altered by illegal activity. Those of us who passionately champion adoption as an option that is often in the best interests of children, birth parents, families, and society must condemn any aspect of adoption that diminishes the well-being of *any* of the vested parties to adoption.

National Council For Adoption (NCFA) has educated extensively on the mutual obligations and responsibilities that all parties to adoption have towards one another, including adoption professionals. Adoption works best when the parent considering adoption for her/his child is counseled and supported in a way that allows for a fully informed decision to place a child for adoption. Prospective adoptive parents should be thoroughly evaluated and prepared to become adoptive parents. And, the adults who are making important decisions about a child's future should always consider what is best for the child. Failure to achieve this goal devalues the integrity of the adoption process and dehumanizes the individuals involved in the adoption process, both before and after the adoption takes place.

Additionally, there are ways expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents can protect themselves from fraud in adoption:

1. Do your homework in selecting an adoption professional and work only with those who are licensed. Although in this particular case the adoptions were handled by an attorney, licensed adoption professionals offer greater expertise and have far more accountability than will be found using unregulated providers of adoption services.

2. Commit yourself to being ethical, transparent, and understanding to all the parties in adoption, whether you are the parent placing a child for adoption, the family adopting, or the agency or attorney assisting in the placement of the child. It is in everyone's best interest to hold each other accountable; if something about your adoption journey doesn't feel right, be your own advocate and speak up.
3. Be wary of large, undocumented sums of cash being exchanged. Many states require prior court approval to provide financial aid to expectant parents, and it is NCFA's position that money, other than for qualified adoption-related expenses, should never be provided to an expectant parent in exchange for placing her child for adoption.
4. Moving children around the country to give one party an advantage over the other should be an immediate sign of concern. Related to this, most private placements involve some element of open communication between the birth family and the prospective adoptive parents prior to placement. Although a small percentage of birth parents opt for a completely confidential adoption, most expectant parents will be engaged at some level in selecting and meeting the adoptive family. Specific to the case involving women from the Marshall Islands, it has been reported that most, if not all, were not engaged with the prospective adoptive families. Given how exceptional a choice this is for women making an adoption plan, this could have served as immediate warning that something may be amiss in the adoption.
5. Be very cautious of promises of fast adoptions. Many prospective families wait years to adopt, and adoptive placements that take weeks or only a few months are possible, but require the prospective adoptive parent to become very acquainted with the circumstances that allow for a faster than normal placement for adoption.

NCFA offers a variety of free, downloadable resources that expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents may find helpful:

1. **Avoiding Adoption Scams:**
https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/NCFA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO36.pdf
2. **Choosing an Adoption Agency:**
https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/NCFA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO74.pdf
3. **Best practices in adoption resources:**
<http://www.adoptioncouncil.org/publications/category/best-practices>

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ABOUT NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ADOPTION

Founded in 1980, National Council For Adoption (NCFA) is a global adoption advocacy nonprofit that promotes a culture of adoption through education, research, legislative action, and collaboration. As the authoritative voice for adoption, NCFA's areas of focus include domestic infant adoption, adoption and permanency outcomes for youth in foster care, and intercountry adoption. Passionately committed to the belief that every child deserves to thrive in a nurturing, permanent family, NCFA serves children, birth parents, adopted individuals, adoptive families, and adoption professionals. In addition, we work tirelessly to educate U.S. and foreign government officials and policymakers, members of the media, and all those in the general public with an interest in adoption.

For more information, visit www.AdoptionCouncil.org.