

Moscow orphanages 25 years out of date, local social worker says

In Russia, they know changes are needed to their orphanages. But Cobourg social worker Sandra Webb believes change will have to come slowly.

"There are still so many people invested in things not changing," says Mrs. Webb, who attended a conference on international adoption in Moscow earlier this month.

Most of the Russian people at the conference believe international adoption is a good thing, she says, because of the opportunities it offers their children. But the innovations in orphanages that she has seen are the kinds of things that were new in North America a quarter-century ago — the idea that cuddling and stimulation are vital and the concept of family reunification, for example.

Mrs. Webb found the statistics fascinating. For example, of the estimated one million homeless children in Russia:

- 50,000 are children who

have escaped from their homes to save themselves (their wording).

- 50,000 are teenage-prisoners (their term — offenders aged 11 to 18 in detention or pre-trial custody).

- 150,000 are orphans in state children's homes.

- 70,000 are in special homes for the mentally handicapped.

"The administration of the orphanages is up to the health, education and social development agencies," points out Mrs. Webb.

"They are concerned that

they are practically closed to external observers. There is no real control over administration. There is no mechanism in place for accountability. Everything depends on the personality of the director.

"Orphanages are given money by the government per child, so there's a lot of people within Russia who have something invested in the orphanages not being disbanded.

"The important thing is, at the same time, I think there are probably lots of good

orphanages and good directors."

There are more than 100 orphanages in Moscow alone, she says, "and apparently almost every city has its own."

Some specialize in certain age groups, but children can stay under the care of orphan-

ages up to the age of 18.

"Boris Altshuler who is head of the program Right of Child, a program of the Moscow Centre for Human Rights, was very concerned about that, talking about the children who are totally unprepared for the real world," she says.

Statistics show about 15,000 18-year-olds leave orphanages per year. Of these:

- 5,000 commit a crime.

- 3,000 become tramps (their term).

- 1,500 commit suicide in the first year.

— CECILIA NASMITH