

OUR HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS

Step Ahead was founded in 2002 as a microfinance organization that served to increase the stability of families in Bangkok's largest slum community, Klong Toey. Step Ahead provided small loans to over 1200 families supporting them to better manage their household finances and take advantage of economic opportunities, while also improving their family's overall wellbeing.

Following the devastating Asian Tsunami in 2004, Step Ahead recognized that a lack of safe, quality daycare prevented families from taking newly-created jobs. In response, Step Ahead opened four Child Development Centers (CDC) across the Andaman Coastline. These CDCs operated for 15 years and served over 1000 vulnerable families by providing a safe and nurturing daycare program focused on the development of early childhood skills and critical family strengthening training to parents.

In 2005, Step Ahead opened a Training Center in Khao Lak sourcing development and skills training in English and German languages and hospitality for the hotel industry. Over 3000 tsunami survivors participated in training during the 5 years post-tsunami. Community economic development initiatives were also created across Khao Lak: purse making, eco-tourism, mushroom and orchid farming.

At the same time, Step Ahead staff became alarmed when they saw many families placing their children in the newly built orphanages that opened following the tsunami. Orphanage recruitment was strong and families struggling to put their life back together after the devastating disaster thought it was the best option for their children. Even though Step Ahead provided safe, quality childcare services, there were still families falling in the gap and sending children away to grow up separated from their relatives and communities. Partnering with Orphan's Promise in 2008, Step Ahead developed a comprehensive family strengthening program called, "Keeping Families Together" (KFT) for those families at high-risk of separation. In this program, families not only learn about health and hygiene, child protection, positive parenting, etc.; but also, gain financial literacy skills and receive a micro-grant, which increases their income making it possible to raise their own children.

Step Ahead Bangkok was developing too. A Saturday Kids Club was started and the microfinance program grew to 1200 families. However, as Step Ahead staff began researching promising practices to care for families living in poverty--- it became clear that Step Ahead needed to focus on a more holistic family-based model to strengthen families. Much learning and growth happened during this time and collaboration with like-minded organizations began in earnest.

In 2009, Step Ahead was given the opportunity to move its Southern Thai purse production to Pattaya hoping to provide income generation for women at risk of entering prostitution. A new brand was created called ITSERA and beautiful purses were designed, produced and sold. This small factory hired 12 women, but struggled to become sustainable.

A few years later in 2012, Step Ahead was invited to visit Isaan (Northeast Thailand) to gain knowledge and understanding about the internal migration problem creating family separation for 3 million children. Isaan children are being raised by grandparents because mothers need to find work in Bangkok or Pattaya. Step Ahead saw the great need not only for family strengthening; but also, to develop small economic development initiatives. We designed a Safe and Informed Migration (SIM) program that focused on trafficking prevention trainings in schools, villages and churches. Our ITSERA Purse Project moved to Isaan in 2013 to help mothers stay at home with their children instead of migrating to Bangkok and Pattaya, which put them at risk of entering the sex-trade. Step Ahead's Keeping Families Together program was also started in several locations in Isaan. These projects were turned over to local leadership in three years.

Over the next few years, Step Ahead began delivering training to build the capacity NGOs, mission agencies, and Thai government leaders on the legal framework, as well as the scale, scope and impact of alternative care and why family is best for vulnerable children.

In 2015, Step Ahead began its government advocacy work. Step Ahead joined the Convention on the Rights of the Child Coalition (CRCCT) and is a founding, active member of the sub-group ACT (Alternative Care Thailand). Step Ahead also started its Keeping Families Together program in Bangkok that year.

Continuous learning is a Step Ahead core value and 2016 proved that more than ever. Step Ahead staff attended World Without Orphans Global Forum learning from over 60 other nations on best practices for caring for orphans and vulnerable children. As a result of that first global forum, Step Ahead cofounded Strong Families Alliance Thailand (SFAT), a Christian group helping faith-based organizations understand God's call to care for orphans and vulnerable children and their families.

That same year Step Ahead staff attended LUMOS Deinstitutionalization Training with Senior Thai government officials in London and joined colleagues from ACT in Geneva for the International Alternative Care Conference.

In 2017, Step Ahead began having information meetings with Thai churches to help them understand that while family strengthening is critical to prevent family separation, there are times when children need temporary foster care in cases of child exploitation, trafficking, and when children experience violence and abuse. Since then, Step Ahead has trained over 300 church leaders on caring for orphans and vulnerable children in their communities.

Also, in that year, Step Ahead partnered with ChildLine Thailand to create an innovative foster care program for refugee and asylum seeker children living in Bangkok's Immigration Detention Center. As a result of Step Ahead's work serving asylum seekers and refugees, Step Ahead was invited to serve on the committee drafting the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to implement the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to end the detention of children. This was signed by seven government ministries and went into effect in 2019. Presently, Step Ahead serves as an advisor to the committee drafting the new National Screening Mechanism SOPs for people in need of protection.

During 2018 Step Ahead supported 3 more senior Thai government officials to attend LUMOS Deinstitutionalization Training in London. This learning has resulted in greater understanding of the orphanage crisis in Thailand and how to transition from a heavy reliance residential care to family-based care.

Step Ahead also serves on the Government Foster Care Task Force drafting foster care policy and standards of care, as well as the government's Alternative Care Systems Development Working Group. Alternative Care is any child living without biological parents: kinship care, foster care, residential care (orphanages, children's homes, boarding houses and school dormitories).

Also, in 2018, Step Ahead joined the Coalition for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CRSP) to collaborate on advocacy and projects.

2019 was a year of giant steps! Step Ahead in coordination with ACT organized the first Alternative Care Conference in Thailand at Thammasat University with over 100 government, academic and NGO participants.

That same year, Step Ahead attends Trust Based Relationship Intervention (TBRI) training in Dallas and supported 5 senior officials to also join the training. This has led to delivering trauma informed care training across Thailand.

Also, in 2019, Step Ahead was honored to be chosen as the speaker to showcase not only Step Ahead's foster care work but also CRSP's amazing advocacy

work to the Vice Prime Minister at the MOU signing ceremony to end the detention of children.

Step Ahead also began its partnership with LifeRaft International to start Freedom for Families Program to reunite refugee children with their mothers in immigration detention that year. As of date, Step Ahead has reunited over 50 mothers and 4 fathers with their children.

Covid-19 hit in 2020, but that didn't stop Step Ahead staff from continuing its services and programs to families living in under-resourced communities. The workload was actually increased.

Behind the scenes, the leadership team was developing a new Step Ahead Theory of Change envisioning a Thailand where all children grow up in safe and nurturing families. Also, in 2020, an updated KFT Toolkit, which includes 5 manuals to support NGOs, churches and government social workers to implement their own family strengthening programs was created and training rolled out to make it accessible to many NGOs, faith-based organizations and government partners across Thailand.

Step Ahead was also invited to serve on the task force with UNICEF to draft a National Road Map for Alternative Care.