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DENVER AND THE WEST

Crusader for orphans fights for aid

Denver activist Vic Dukay fights to get foreign aid to those who really need it

By Bruce Finley

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"I'm shocked. I didn't believe a small group of people, who have very little power, could actually help move the system." Vic Dukay, Denver activist who pushed for government tracking of aid expenditures. Photo by Brian Brainerd, The Denver Post

Denver orphan devoted to helping orphans in Africa has won a battle in his crusade to ensure that taxpayer-financed foreign aid reaches its intended recipients.

Starting this fall, the government will be required to verify that \$48 billion approved for orphans and other vulnerable children actually reaches and helps them.

Denver activist Vic Dukay, 52, who ran a private project to help AIDS orphans in rural Tanzania, grew troubled when he couldn't find any U.S.-financed nurses, medicines or facilities in a hard-hit region that needed help.

He is one of a growing number of Americans getting involved in private grassroots aid projects abroad — increasingly feasible as e-mail, cellphones and migration connect scattered communities. Work abroad leads some to challenge how government and big aid contractors operate.

"I'm shocked," said Dukay, a former aviation company manager who lost his parents as a child in a murder-suicide. "I didn't believe a small group of people, who have very little power, could actually help move the system."

But he and his supporters did.

After President Bush launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, Dukay began quizzing government aid officials. He found that those charged with delivering taxpayer-financed foreign aid followed rigid "country plans" produced by the U.S. Agency for International Development and diplomats at fortified embassies "inside cubicles with no windows," Dukay said.

Instead of developing projects in consultation with needy people in villages, officials followed the plans to the point that "they had no clue" whether money reached children or helped them, he said.

When he pressed U.S. officials at the embassy in Tanzania and told them how he was interviewing children systematically about their needs as the basis for his own small project, officials dismissed him.

"They said: 'Victor, that's very nice. We'll see you later,'" Dukay said.

"Ask-the-kids" approach

Starting in 2003, Dukay had pursued an "ask-the-kids" approach in Tanzania that led to construction of a dormitory-school-garden compound staffed with cooks, a nurse and teachers. About 60 orphans lived there.

This clashed with a consensus among government officials that needy children ought to live with families, not at institutions, in line with local tradition. Yet in AIDS-ravaged parts of Africa, families often were overwhelmed, too poor to take in orphans.

Dukay made a dozen trips to Tanzania monitoring the project before a squabble among backers, and conflict with Tanzanian health ministry officials, shut down the compound.

He simultaneously campaigned for accountability in Washington — eventually receiving pro bono support from the powerful law firm Patton Boggs.

The firm found “a growing number of people who want to make sure the money is going where it is supposed to go,” said attorney Robert Kapla, who praised Dukay as “a guy who all on his own had the drive and wanted to learn and did learn.”

Congressional help sought

Legal researchers went to work, and attorneys sought support from members of Congress. They drafted legislation that included the requirement that the government must “ensure that spending is directly linked to and commensurate with necessary efforts” to help orphans and vulnerable children.

Government officials this month said they’ll embrace the new rules for monitoring and evaluation.

Those who deliver aid “were always vigilant” and “we have collected data” on how money is spent, said Ken Yamashita, a U.S. AID official who previously served as special adviser to Bush on orphans and volunteer children. Now, accountability will increase.

Yamashita said: “There’s no doubt we want to be absolutely sure the right kinds of intervention and service get to the right groups.”

Bruce Finley: 303-954-1700 or bfinley@denverpost.com