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State lawmakers hold hearing on adoption reform

House committee focuses on problem of 're-homing'

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Child welfare attorney Bruce Boyer and adoptive parent Barbara Sereda testify before state Rep. Sarah Feigenholtz and the Illinois House Adoption Reform Committee in Chicago on Tuesday. Lawmakers mulled what combination of legislation, enforcement and support might remedy the practice of re-homing adopted children. (Nancy Stone, Tribune photo)

One thing became apparent at a state House committee hearing Tuesday in Chicago: Ethical adoptions are more difficult to ensure in the Internet age.

Testimony from child welfare experts, attorneys, lawmakers and parents made it clear that even though Illinois has some of the strongest adoption laws in the country, there are still many unscrupulous, unlicensed operators whose primary concern is profit, not the well-being of children.

The hearing before the Adoption Reform Committee focused on the troubling practice of "re-homing" — the relocation of adopted children, usually via Internet chat rooms — that takes place below the radar, without any oversight by the state. The issue attracted widespread attention after Reuters ran a series last month featuring some Illinois families.

"I adopted a cat in January, and I am prohibited from re-homing," said state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who convened the forum at Chicago's Bilandic Building. "My cat had many more protections than the children we're talking about."

Many of the youths who are moved around are adopted from foreign countries or come from the state's foster care system and have profound emotional and behavioral problems, due to mental illness, attachment disorders or prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol. Overwhelmed adoptive parents seek to re-home them when they feel they can no longer provide care.

Families in crisis either do not seek support or have been turned away from established social service agencies, whose budgets have been slashed in recent years, according to Richard Calica, director of the state's Department of Children and Family Services.

The purpose of the hearing was to explore if the remedy is more laws, better enforcement of existing laws, more access to post-adoption supports or a combination of the three, Feigenholtz said.

Although the specific circumstances documented by Reuters differed, a dangerous pattern emerged of parents placing children on their own, sidestepping proper legal channels.

On Monday, Attorney General Lisa Madigan filed a lawsuit seeking to halt the for-profit Adoption Network Law Center, based in California, from operating in Illinois. She also sent letters to Yahoo and Facebook requesting that they not host groups facilitating such activity.

"We will continue to pursue out-of-state agencies that violate Illinois law," Assistant Attorney General Erik Jones told lawmakers. "This case is by no means a last step. It is only the next step."

Others weighed in on unlicensed brokers who advertise online, serving as matchmakers between vulnerable birth mothers and desperate adoptive parents, ready to drain themselves financially to have a baby.

Bruce Boyer, head of Loyola University's Civitas ChildLaw Clinic, told legislators about an agency that 10 years ago charged adopting parents \$55,000 for about two hours of work.

"An Illinois child born to an Illinois mother and sold to an Illinois family by intermediaries ... who I'm quite confident cared for nothing beyond their own profit," Boyer said.

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