

OPINION

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Editorial: Shut down Internet adoptions

'Re-homing' is for pets, not children

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State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, chairs a hearing on Internet adoptions Tuesday. Feigenholtz, who adopted a cat earlier this year, pointed out that she had to sign a contract promising not to re-home the animal. "My cat has many more protections than the children we're talking about," she said. (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

If you're desperate for a child or desperate to be rid of one, the Internet is here to help. You can save time, avoid bureaucratic interference and escape the prying eyes of child welfare busybodies. Yes, it's every bit as awful as it sounds. But it's true.

Illinois, we are told, has some of the strongest adoption laws in the nation. But those laws "are not enough to stem the horrible practice of 're-homing' adopted children who are in perilous circumstances," according to state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D- Chicago, who chaired a hearing on Internet adoptions this week.

"Re-homing" is a term that describes transactions — typically arranged through online contacts — between frazzled parents who want to unload kids they regret adopting and strangers who can't or won't adopt through legal channels.

The practice was illuminated in September by Reuters reporter [Megan Twohey](#), who spent 18 months investigating this thriving underground market. Most often, these are the children of failed international adoptions. Adoptive parents who can't deal with their kids' emotional, behavioral or health problems place them with new families found on Internet

message boards. The adults at either end of the equation get what they're looking for, but the child in the middle has no advocate.

At their most benign, the child swaps remind us of the adoptions brokered by animal rescue organizations. A rambunctious spaniel who turns out to be too much for one family might live happily ever after with another. That is, in fact, the context in which the word "re-homing" is most often used.

As Twohey's reporting showed, though, the process for "re-homing" is far less rigorous for children than for pets. Rescue groups typically require an application, a home inspection and a background check. Feigenholtz, who adopted a cat earlier this year, pointed out at Tuesday's hearing that she had to sign a contract promising *not to re-home the animal*. "My cat has many more protections than the children we're talking about," she said.

Here's what happened to some of those unprotected kids, according to the Reuters report:

A 10-year-old boy was given to a pedophile who'd spotted him online. A troubled teenage girl was "re-homed" three times in six months. Several children reported that they were physically or sexually abused. One child was handed over in a motel parking lot, the same day his adoptive mother "met" his new parents online.

At least six children were taken in by a former Illinois woman whose biological children had been removed from her care by child welfare workers. The woman and her husband both had been previously accused of sexually molesting children they were baby-sitting. They are now living in Arizona.

The Illinois attorney general's office alerted authorities in Arizona, and two children were removed from that home, according to testimony at Tuesday's hearing. The AG's office also wrote to Facebook and Yahoo, both of which hosted online re-homing forums examined by Reuters. (Yahoo has removed them; Facebook has not.) The letters urge the companies to police their sites to make sure they do not facilitate re-homing.

Exchanges that cross state lines are illegal in all 50 states, under the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children. But violations are typically misdemeanors. State child endangerment laws also would apply to many such cases. But re-homing networks have been operating largely under the radar.

How many kids have been surrendered to strangers by adoptive parents who have simply given up? We don't know. But Reuters analyzed five years' worth of posts to one message board and found a child was offered roughly once a week. Cops and child welfare advocates were largely unaware.

China, Russia, Guatemala and other countries that have served as pipelines for orphans adopted by Americans have demanded the U.S. government take steps to better monitor those children.

Tuesday's hearing in Chicago touched on the need for stronger laws, better enforcement of the ones we have, and the scarcity of resources to help struggling adoptive parents before they resort to such measures.

The same day, 18 U.S. lawmakers called for similar hearings in Congress. They also asked the Government Accountability Office to identify gaps in state and federal laws that have allowed the re-homing networks to flourish.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, echoed that call in a letter to the heads of the U.S. departments of Justice, State, Health and Human Services and Homeland Security.

"Finding families for vulnerable children should never be a do-it-yourself process that involves nothing more than placing or responding to an advertisement online," Wyden wrote.

Awful as it sounds, that's exactly what is going on. It must be stopped.