Online adoption: Avoiding a web of lies

By Bonnie Miller Rubin
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Jeanne Enright suffered multiple miscarriages and, at age 40, the window on having a second child was rapidly closing.

So, the Glen Ellyn woman and her husband, Bill, turned to an online adoption agency that promised her a baby quickly, bypassing the long waiting lists of traditional agencies — but also the legal and ethical safeguards.

"What happened turned my stomach," Enright said. "Within no time, they had a referral for us — a mother who was having twins. ... She was a heavy smoker, had no prenatal care."

But the real clincher was when Enright was told that the birth mother would receive appliances in exchange for her cooperation.

"This stops just short of baby-selling," said Julie Tye, executive director of The Cradle in Evanston.

While the Internet has opened the adoption process, helping birth relatives contact each other and expediting the adoption of children with special needs, it has also ushered in an era of fraud and exploitation, according to a report released this month by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a nonprofit organization that studies adoption policy.

"There is a growing 'commodification' of adoption on the Web, replete with dubious practices and a shift away from the perspective that its primary purpose is to find families for children," according to the report, a three-year project. "This is particularly the case in domestic infant adoption, where a scarcity of babies available to be adopted heightens competition."

Illinois law prohibits nonlicensed providers from conducting adoption services. But some of these for-profit brokers advertise aggressively online and are available to anyone who types in the words "Illinois" and "adoption" and has sufficient funds, experts say.

The Illinois attorney general's office said this month that it plans to send cease-and-desist letters to the most egregious operators.

Some of these unregulated websites take a transactional approach, promising quick placements and incentives to pregnant women, such as free cellphones. One site boasts that most parents were selected by the birth mother "within four months of being marketed."
According to Tye, there are at least a dozen of these online brokers operating in Illinois. "They are like mushrooms," said Tye, who praised the Donaldson report, which calls on states to do a better job of enforcing laws.

There are plenty of reputable adoption agencies that offer their services online, child welfare professionals said. Knowing the right questions to ask — such as staff credentials and whether the organization is accredited — can help protect users.

The Illinois Adoption Reform Act, which took effect in 2005, was designed to weed out unscrupulous operators and take the money out of adoption, experts said.

"We have had a wonderful set of consumer-oriented laws on the books for more than seven years, and what we need now is to see those laws enforced," said Bruce Boyer, director of the Civitas ChildLaw Clinic at Loyola University Chicago.

In a country where abortions are accessible and single motherhood is accepted, fewer women place their babies for adoption. While youths are available in the U.S. foster care system, those children are usually older, part of sibling groups or suffer from physical and emotional impairments.

So, childless couples hoping to get a healthy newborn often seek unregulated avenues to fulfill their dream. On one site, there were 80 profiles of Midwestern parents hoping to be selected by a pregnant woman.

Support is an issue for birth parents too, said Ruth Jajko of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois.

"In many cases, couples do not know the right question to ask to navigate such an emotionally charged situation: Do I want to see the baby? Hold the baby? Want the adoptive parents in the delivery room? We can provide those services."

The Enrights adopted their son from The Cradle in 2004. But it was only after a couple of false starts and a lot of pain.

"We wanted a family so badly," said Jeanne Enright, a marketing manager who also has a 12-year-old biological daughter.

After the miscarriages, the couple turned to Guatemala and had completed background checks, references and reams of other documents.

Then, in 2003, the country shut down all adoptions after mounting evidence of corruption. The Enrights found themselves back at square one, and the Internet beckoned.

They were presented with a two-tier system, which offered a faster track and a broader pool of prospective birth mothers if the couple were willing to pay more. There was no vetting of their qualifications, unlike the rigorous scrutiny of international adoption.

"All kinds of bells and whistles should have gone off ... but they didn't," Enright said.
It was only after she started asking questions that she could no longer ignore the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach: Where does she live? What about the birth father? What counseling would be available to the birth mother?

"That's when I was told not to worry about her ... that she'd get a washer and dryer out of the deal. I said that I didn't think this was the right match for us and was told, 'This is your match ... take it or leave it.'"

The couple walked away from the $10,000 fee they had paid, a small price for peace of mind, she said. "We considered ourselves lucky."