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Saturday, October 22, 2005

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Group protests handling of custody battles in court

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By ROB PHILLIPS
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WOODSTOCK – About a dozen people gathered outside the McHenry County Government Center on Friday morning to raise awareness of what they call "the best-kept, dirty little secret of the family courts."

Most of the protesters had lost custody of one or more of their children during divorce proceedings.

Some of their children, the protesters said, were ordered by the court to return to abusive parents.

The mothers and fathers, most of whom are members of the Illinois Coalition for Family Court Reform, dispersed fliers and told their stories to whoever was willing to listen.

"It's all about raising awareness," said Annette Zender, who has started a regional campaign to change the system that she said incorrectly took her daughter away from her. "If we don't come together and start telling people about this process, then they will never know that it doesn't work."

Group members already protested in Chicago and at the Lake County Courthouse in Waukegan. They are expected to travel to DuPage County soon, Zender said.

The protesters handed out fliers that detailed stories of about eight people who say they lost their children in custody cases to parents who previously had physically or sexually abused their children.

"Once the system, the courthouse, and the legislators realize that this is a problem, then we can start the process of making some changes," said Hildi Smith, of St. Charles, who helped hand out fliers Friday.

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