He’s an evangelist on subject of adoption

By GUY COATES
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HOUMA (AP) — Rep. Hunt Downer learned the hard way that red tape can be more than a bureaucratic headache. It can also wrap the heart in a tight knot.

Now, he’s an evangelist on the subject of adoption, trying to see to it that couples don’t have to go through as much as the Downers went through in adopting a child.

He’s getting help from the Department of Health and Human Resources and from his colleagues in the Legislature to modernize the process.

After 12 years without a child, the Houma couple decided to adopt one in state custody. They’ve had her since birth, but she’s only been theirs officially for less than two of her three years.

“The emotion, the strain was so much, but I never got involved politically trying to use my influence,” the lawmaker since 1972 said in an interview. “I went through what every citizen goes through. I had it maybe a little better because I’m an attorney.”

Downer said his mother-in-law had to keep the baby as a foster parent because a couple wanting to adopt a child can’t be approved for both temporary custody as foster parents and apply as proposed adoptive parents. “I don’t know to this day why,” he said.

It took five months for the Downers to be approved as proposed adoptive parents. Then the social worker came into the picture, grilling the couple.

“When a child’s life is involved, I can understand a thorough investigation, but they go too far and it’s held over your head throughout the process that all they have to do is lift a hand and you can never have the child,” he said. “Can you imagine what that’s like when you have had the baby for maybe a year or maybe several years. You want to get angry at some of the questions but you are afraid to. You’re scared to death.

“I got so angry during the process I wanted to say something but my wife pleaded with me not to say anything about some of those trivial questions because we could lose the child. It would have killed us.”

Noting that he has a comfortable income and lived in a more than middle class home, once he told the social worker that he planned to build a new home, he was required to show the worker the plans for construction.

“Did they think I was moving into a shack and the baby would be living outside?”

“Some of the questions they ask have nothing to do with whether you will be a good parent,” he said. “And some of the printed questionnaires are worded in such a negative way. For example, they start out assuming you are an alcoholic, wanting to know how many drinks you have a day and how much you consume. What if you don’t consume any? They don’t ask that.”

Aside from what Downer feels are too many irrelevant questions, the killer is the long process which can take years, he said. There is just too much red tape and not enough state personnel, said Downer.

Since his own experience, Downer has helped others and now is trying to help a woman at no charge. “She’s had the child as a foster parent since birth,” he said.

“Then she wanted to adopt the child and after almost two years of the red tape, she’s still not been approved,” he said.

“You can’t imagine the emotional attachment with a child almost two.”

The state has almost 3,000 children in custody who could be adopted and few people to administer the bureaucracy, Downer said.

He said he was surprised to find out that of all of the investigations into proposed adopted parents, nearly 1,500 were unnecessary.

“The House just passed a bill to end that,” he said. “They were investigating 1,500 stepparents who were trying to give the children their legal name just to benefit the child for inheritance. Whether the state approves or not, nothing will change. The stepparent is still going to be in the house with the child and raise the child regardless of what the state does. Such investigations are useless. If the natural parent wants the process, why all of the red tape and investigations?”

At least the Downer story had a double happy ending.

Mrs. Downer became pregnant during the adoption process. They got a boy as a bonus.