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*Equal Parents Week Highlights Need for
Family Court Reform*

By Dianna Thompson and Glenn Sacks

Men and women will be rallying at the state capitol in observance of Equal Parents Week this Thursday. The rally, sponsored by Dads of Michigan, Moms for Dads, and the Children's Rights Council, will highlight the national tragedy of fatherlessness and call for family law reforms which will allow parents to share both parental rights and responsibilities equitably.

US Census Bureau data show that 84% of all custodial parents are mothers. Noncustodial parents, usually fathers, often struggle to remain a part of their children's lives. Fathers have little chance of getting joint physical custody of their children, and standard visitation is only a few days a month.

Research shows that access and visitation interference is a major problem for divorced dads. Many dads have been locked out of their children's lives because their ex-wives have moved their children hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

Yet the presence of a father in a child's life is the largest single predictor of whether a child will graduate high school, attend college, become involved in crime or drugs, or get pregnant.

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, they are five times more likely to commit suicide, nine times more likely to drop out of high school, and 32 times more likely to run away from home.

A solution to the problem of fatherlessness now lies before the Michigan legislature. Michigan House Bill 4664, also known as the "Parental Parity Bill," would create equality between divorcing couples by replacing the sole physical custody norm with the presumption of joint legal and physical custody. Judges would be able to deviate from this shared parenting arrangement only if there is clear and convincing evidence that one of the parents has committed acts which render that parent unfit, such as child abuse or domestic violence.

If divorcing parents are unable to agree on a shared parenting plan, the courts would be required to develop a plan which would afford both parents equitable custody and parenting time. Parents who refuse to comply with the parenting plan risk losing their share of parenting time. The bill, which was drafted by Dads of Michigan and Moms for Dads, was sponsored by Representative Andrew Raczkowski (R-Farmington Hills) and currently resides with the Michigan House of Representatives' Committee on Civil Law and the Judiciary.

Destructive and costly custody battles are endemic to the current adversarial custody system. By replacing winners and losers with equals, shared parenting removes much of the anger and conflict from divorce, and encourages cooperation and even reconciliation between troubled couples.

Under this bill children would gain from the ongoing emotional, physical, and financial support of both parents. Shared parenting says to parents "you are still mom and dad." Most important of all, it tells children, "you haven't lost a parent."

Dianna Thompson is a founder and Executive Director of the American Coalition for Fathers and

Children. Dads of Michigan is an ACFC affiliate. She can be contacted by e-mail at
DThompson2232@aol.com