

NATION

Scientologists sue anti-cult group

Church alleges discrimination after it is barred from joining

Associated Press

BOSTON — Scientologists, long a target of deprogrammers, have gone to court to try to turn the tables, claiming that they were illegally barred from joining an anti-cult group.

In a flurry of lawsuits filed around the nation, dozens of members of the Church of Scientology said they tried to join the Cult Awareness Network but were rejected because of their church affiliation.

Many of the lawsuits were filed last week after a federal grand ju-

ry indicted three alleged members of the Cult Awareness Network on charges that they conspired to abduct and deprogram an heir to the Du Pont chemical fortune.

The Chicago-based network, which has drawn fire from Scientologists, the Unification Church and other groups with its anti-cult efforts, denies any link to the case and said Scientologists are trying to destroy their organization.

"We seem to be the target of a campaign of harassment," Cynthia Kisser, the network's executive director said Friday. "In the past two days we've had 19 (Scientology) lawsuits dumped on us."

She said 30 lawsuits brought by the Scientologists are pending, most of them alleging religious discrimination.

Kisser and other critics said the Church of Scientology, founded by the late science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, targets emotionally vulnerable people with high-pressure recruiting and self-improvement programs.

The church claims several million members.

Scientologists said the lawsuits reflect a growing backlash against

cult deprogrammers, who have been accused of kidnapping devotees of unusual religious groups and pushing them to renounce their beliefs.

"There's only so many people you can kidnap, and people are starting to get upset about it," said David Aden, a Scientology spokesman in Boston.

Chris Garrison sued the network in federal court last week, saying he tried to join the group's Boston affiliate to talk to its members and reform its methods. But he said he never heard back after mailing an application form.

"We only want to talk to them," he said. "We want to get this organization back to its stated, educational purposes and away from discrimination."

Kisser said the network's aim is to educate people about cults and provide voluntary counseling to victims of groups like the Scientologists.

She dismisses accusations that network members have abducted cult members: "We are not a criminal group. We don't engage in kidnapping."