

Senate Bill 23 testimony / April 17, 2013
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Good afternoon members of Senate Medicaid and Health Committee,

My name is Paula Benoit and I live in Phippsburg, Maine. I am a former Maine State Senator and an adult adoptee.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. I'd like to thank Senators Beagle and Burke for leading the charge with this important legislation and all members of the Senate who signed on as sponsors.

While serving in the Maine Senate I co-sponsored legislation allowing Maine adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates. Having the bill signed into law in 2009 was one of my proudest moments. I knew as a law maker I was able to help move the legislation forward and give to Maine adoptees what non-adopted people have always had - original identity.

Birth mothers and fathers know their origins. Adoptive mothers and fathers know their origins; that is unless they were adopted and had their original identity sealed. Adoptees are the only group of people who have had their identity sealed and changed without their permission. New name, new parents, new siblings...it's as if they entered a witness protection program, with no say in the process, and never able to step out of it.

Maine OBC (original birth certificate) law is very similar to the bill you are being asked to pass here in Ohio. Eighteen year old adult adoptees will be able to request and receive a copy of their original birth certificate. Birth parents will have an opportunity to have their voices heard by filling out a contact preference form that informs the adoptee of their wishes for contact as well as sharing necessary medical information.

Since passage of Maine's OBC legislation, over 1,200 adult adoptees have received their original birth certificate. We have had success since the bill was signed into law and will no doubt continue to have success.

Only eight birth mothers requested no contact and the blessing in Maine's bill, as well as Ohio's, is that it allows the adoptees to know their birth parent's preference, but does not keep them from having access to their original identity. It simply tells the adoptee: Proceed with caution. This is a person who, for whatever his or her reasons, does not want to be contacted; while at the same time, the original birth certificate reveals to the adoptee the most basic information regarding his or her birth name, nationality, and heritage.

A couple years ago I was asked to participate in a National Genealogy Conference. They were sharing stories of traveling not only from town to town and state to state, but country to country just to take a paper scraping of a name from a gravestone they believed was a direct descendant of their family tree. It was surreal listening to these origin researchers, knowing that without our OBC statute in place, Maine adoptees, myself included, would never be able to participate in this organization.

In 2007, while writing my testimony for the Senate floor debate, I emailed a copy of it, and Maine's LD 1084, to my son at college in Florida.

He emailed a message back to me, saying, "Mom, I'm really happy for you and I hope the bill passes, but I'm more happy for me." I found this message curious so I called him immediately and asked him what he meant.

He said, "Mom, you are so crazy about Nana and Grampa that I never wanted to bring it up and I figured when they died you would be looking for your birth parents. You opened the door. You sent the testimony and bill to me." He added, "I love you. I love Nana and Grampa and they are always going to be my grandparents, but I've wondered who I am since the day you told me you were adopted when I was creating my family tree in second grade. Because you don't know who you are, I don't know who I am!"

I share this story with you because this is an example of another generation that will carry the burden of secrets created by sealed original identity.

Bottom line is this - our government should never be in the business of sealing or changing a person's identity without their permission under any circumstances. Every American citizen deserves the basic human right to know who they are and where they come from.

Senators, you can bring truth to thousands of Ohio adoptees who were lucky to have been adopted, but unlucky to have their original identity sealed by Ohio laws. You have the power to set them free.

Please support this legislation and be prepared to receive many letters of thanks and appreciation from your constituents. Four years later, I am still receiving these letters from very grateful adoptees.

Thank you.