

Testimony on Senate Bill 23

Senate Medicaid, Health and Human Services Committee

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Betsy Smalley, Adoption Training Manager

Institute for Human Services

1706 E. Broad St.

Columbus, Ohio 43203

(614) 233-2221

bsmalley@ihs-trainet.com

Chairman Jones and members of the Senate Medicaid, Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Betsy Smalley, and I am the Adoption and Foster Care Training Manager for the Institute for Human Services, the Contract Manager for the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program. I have been actively involved in the child welfare field for 42 years and have been the primary author of the Assessor training, legislatively mandated for Ohio's adoption and foster care social workers. I have trained widely on adoption practice throughout the US, Canada, and eastern Europe. I have published two books on adoption, *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past* (2000, Greenwood) and *Wounded Children, Healing Homes* (2010, Navpress). Both have been translated in Russian and Polish. For 8 years, I served as the Coordinator of the first post adoption program in the State of Ohio where I counseled adopted children and youth as well as their adoptive parents. I currently serve as the Co-Chair of the Ohio Adoption Planning Group, a statewide consortium of adoption professionals and families who advocates for legislation, policies, and practices that will promote permanence for Ohio's children.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you today regarding Senate Bill 23, which will provide equal access to birth certificates for all adult adoptees. For too long, Ohio has had a confusing, multi-tiered system causing inequitable access to birth information for adult adoptees.

From a historical perspective, adoption has been shrouded under a cloak of secrecy for decades. Many individuals who grew up as adopted children during those decades felt they were being reared under a shadow of silence and shame. It proved difficult for them to build their identity and feel secure when key aspects of their past were unknown and unimaginable. In my role as a counselor for adoptive families, it was painfully apparent to me that a youth's lack of information about his history was a key problem in his successful adjustment and attachment to his adoptive family. In the absence of any actual information, many young adoptees struggle to find their identity through self-destructive behaviors, and many base their identities on negative fantasies regarding their birth parents. Having access to accurate information helps young adults cope with the reality of their past rather than ruminating about imagined deficits in themselves or their birth families.

Let me share an actual situation that illustrates the need for change in Ohio's current law regarding access to records for adult adoptees. I counseled a young woman, recently graduated from college. She was interested in obtaining more information about her birth family and wanted very much to meet her birth mother to thank her for making a difficult adoption decision. Because this young woman was adopted shortly after her birth in the 1980's, she did not have access to her original birth certificate. She spent two and a half agonizing years attempting to connect with her birth family. She finally was able to locate, with the help of an organization supportive to adoption triad members, her birth family. However, she learned that her birth mother had died of breast cancer only six months before. How devastating that her only "communication" with her birth mother was in bringing flowers

to her grave. It was equally devastating that her birth mother died without knowing her birth daughter was a delightful young adult who had benefitted so greatly from her birth mother's adoption decision.

As the Co-Chair of the Ohio Adoption Planning Group, I can report that our members voted overwhelmingly to support open access to records for all adopted adults in Ohio, regardless of the year in which their adoptions took place. Ohio's adoption professionals recognize the need for connections that can provide information about health, ethnicity, birth family history, and the rationale surrounding the adoption decision. This is a right held by every Ohioan except those adopted between the years 1964 and 1996.

Adoptees lack small details about their histories that others take for granted, such as knowing the time of their birth, how much they weighed or the name of the hospital where they were born. For some adult adoptees, the birth certificate indicates the existence of siblings by noting past births. This is especially significant for youth who are separated from siblings while in foster care and for youth who enter foster care at different times.

We should also consider this bill in light of the emerging focus in child welfare on trauma and its long term effects. One aspect of the trauma experienced by children separated from their birth families has to do with the concept of "ambiguous loss." The loss experienced by adoptees is called "ambiguous loss: a physical loss of someone or something remaining as a psychological presence." According to Pauline Boss, author of *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, an individual experiencing ambiguous loss suffers anxiety and confusion due to the lack of closure in their loss. "With ambiguous loss, there is no closure; the challenge is to learn how to live with the ambiguity."

Adoptees who reach the age and maturity level when they feel a strong need to fill in the blanks about their initial entry into the world, it can be devastating to come up against the barrier of being

denied as fundamental a key to their history as a birth certificate. Barriers such as these can contribute to the lasting trauma experienced by many adopted adults.

As an adoption professional and trainer and as Co-Chair of the Ohio Adoption Planning Group, I strongly urge you to support passage of Senate Bill 23.