

Testimony on Senate Bill 23

Senate Medicaid, Health and Human Services Committee

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Senator Shannon Jones and the Senate Medicaid, Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Pat Rideout, and I am the Administrator (director) of Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services, the largest public child welfare agency in Ohio. I have been actively involved in the child welfare field for over 30 years and have served as a lawyer, juvenile court magistrate, social work administrator, and Senior Consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its multi-state Family to Family initiative. I have had the pleasure to assist over 30 child protection agencies throughout the U.S. implement system reform efforts. Holding the variety of child welfare-related positions that I have has given me a unique perspective on the needs of children and families involved in the public child welfare system.

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 multi-tiered system causing inequitable access to birth information for adult adoptees. While the proposed law will not change the role or responsibility of public child welfare agencies like mine with regard to

sharing of information, we see it as a major positive step for families touched by adoption. In my county, 137 children were adopted through my agency in 2012; in the past ten (10) years we have finalized 3,369 adoptions.

Adoptions occurring through the public child welfare system are typically the result of necessary but unwelcome intervention into the lives of families, culminating in the legal termination of parental rights by court order, and rarely by agreement. Hence, there is a particular pain for the birth parents and the adopted children we serve. Their family bonds having been forcibly severed, often the children, now adult adoptees, cannot fill in the gaps in their life history, and their birth parents are unable to facilitate access to them when it is sought by their adult birth children.

The often negative impact of growing up in the child welfare system has been very well documented; we have the opportunity with Senate Bill 23 to remove at least one source of pain, one factor that can contribute to unhappiness and long term psychic difficulties for former foster children adopted through the public system, and their birth parents.

As previous witnesses have already noted, the desire to know the facts of one's entry into the world is fairly universal, and those who were adopted from the public child welfare system are no different from people whose birth parents arranged for their adoption privately and voluntarily. For the person adopted from the public child welfare system, gaining access to birth records may not even be specifically for purposes of search and reunion, since many public system children are adopted at older ages and know or remember their birth parents. In some cases, their birth parents may still struggle from the serious mental health or substance abuse issues that led to the termination of parental rights, and those issues sometimes make reconciliation challenging. Often public system adoptees simply desire validation of their birth and their birth family connections; an almost primal need.

To amplify that point, consider these statistics: In 2012, 63% of adoptions through my agency were foster parent adoptions and another 22% of the children were adopted by a relative. This is no accident; for the past 20 years Cuyahoga County has followed a practice known as Family to Family, an element of which promotes the building of relationships between birth and foster families, who are encouraged to know one another so that they may develop a relationship that will support the child while he or she is in care, and facilitate a smooth transition back home, if and when the child is reunified.

So the majority of families who have adopted through Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services have had contact with or are known to the birth family. Therefore, in the world of public system adoption, Senate Bill 23 is often less about search and more about the need for validation of the past and of one's beginnings. The tangible object representing that past, the birth certificate, can be powerful. While the adoptee may in fact know who their parents are, they are often missing the small details 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. We are learning more and more about the impact of traumatic events experienced during childhood, and we are being asked to build systems that respond effectively to this reality. "Trauma informed" interventions are our goal, and we are working hard to improve our understanding and ensure that our staff as well as foster and adoptive parents are sensitive to these issues. One aspect of the trauma experienced by children in the public child welfare system is particularly relevant to today's discussion: it has to do with the particular costs of "ambiguous loss," an all too common

experience of children who spend time in foster care, and therefore of children adopted from the public child welfare system.

The foster care experience, which starts with the child's loss of physical contact with parents and often siblings, too often includes multiple changes in placement, and therefore relationship disruptions. When this happens, many children are confused about what has happened to them, they don't know who can be counted on for support, they are unsure where they belong. Even when adopted, the boundaries around their newly constructed families may remain unclear to them. This nagging ambiguity is itself considered a significant trauma, and it poses lifelong challenges to healthy relationships and identity formation.

For those who are adopted from the public child welfare system and 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 former foster children.

The federal government, which provides direction and a large percent of the funds which support public child welfare (in Cuyahoga County it is 38.2%), has in recent years directed us to focus not only on safety, our most primary duty, and permanency, safety's critical partner, but also on child well being. It is no longer enough for public child welfare systems to ensure that children are not in harm's way, or even that they are safe in a "forever family" setting. We must also look ahead and factor in what is known about the long term impact of childhood abuse and neglect, and shape our interventions with these risks in mind, so that children's future well being is assured, along with immediate safety and eventual permanency in a family. Providing access to the information that

completes (or even contributes significantly to) an adoptee's life story can go a long way towards ensuring well being in adulthood.

In child welfare law and practice, we are asked always to focus on the "best interests of the child." As we sift through the complex facts of troubled families' lives, as we weigh the impact of various interventions on the physical and mental health and long term well being of the children we serve, our bottom line is forever "what action would be in the best interests of this child," now and beyond childhood? Children who find a second family after the one they were born into is unable to keep them safe are fortunate, but their journey to normalcy and mental health is rarely complete without the ability to put the pieces of their personal puzzle into place, to know the circumstances of their birth and earliest childhood. Senate Bill 23 will ensure that they have that opportunity. Its passage will truly serve the best interests of the thousands of Ohio children adopted from the public child welfare system.