

Proponent Testimony for Senate Bill 23

My name is Jeff Costello. I was born and raised in Lorain County, Ohio. Shortly after birth, I was surrendered for adoption by my first parents, who were very young and unable to care for me without the support of their families. For the first weeks of my life, my records remained open to me. I was adopted seven weeks later. At that point, my original identity was sealed, and a new one was created.

For me, the hardest part about being an adoptee has been the secrecy. Even as a child, I knew that good things were not kept secret. The secrecy surrounding my adoption... not knowing who my first family was, or who I was, had a very negative effect on me. I grew up very conflicted. I wondered, what was so bad about me that my identity needed to be kept secret, even from me? Who was I being protected from? Who was being protected from me?

Last December, with the support of my adoptive parents, I found and reunited with my first family. I was saddened to find that my first father had died just eight months before. Upon speaking with my first mother, I found that I had never been a secret in their world. My parents married once they were of age and went on to have a second son, my brother. We grew up only nine miles apart, and he was raised knowing about me. My first mother has been very gracious, expressing many times how happy she is that I found her. Knowing each other has been a positive experience for us. For the first time in my life, I feel comfortable in my own skin. I know who I am.

Despite the closed records, I was able to find and reunite with my first family. I did this on my own, using only public information. I did not need the contents of my adoption file or my original birth certificate. Nor did I need to hire a private investigator. All I needed was a computer and my own intuition.

I have been told before that my documents, and those of other adoptees, must remain sealed to protect the identities of our first families, and to protect them from contact. I reject that proposition. Under the current system, the only way for adoptees to access our records is to find our first families and ask them to sign a release form. The very act of sealing our records necessitates search, and necessitates contact.

I believe the current three tiered system of record access to be unjust. The information contained in my original birth certificate is mine. The information contained in my adoption file is mine. Sealing my records and hiding them behind the courts does not change the essential truth that these things belong to me. All non-adopted people (and the vast majority of those adopted before 1964 or after 1996) may obtain a copy of their original birth certificate by simply asking and paying a fee. As an Ohio born citizen, I deserve equal treatment under the law. Anything less is unacceptable.

I support Senate Bill 23 because it provides an equitable system of record access for all Ohio adoptees and our descendants. It respects the privacy of our first families by allowing them to make their wishes known regarding contact. It gives first families the option to submit updated family medical histories. This is a good bill. It is an equitable bill. I urge you to pass Senate Bill 23 as it was originally written.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey J. Costello