

Erin Hopkins McHugh

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Good afternoon Chair woman Jones, Vice chair Burke and members of the Medicaid, Health and Human Services Committee.

My name is Erin Hopkins McHugh. I was born on August 30, 1981 in Lake Co., Ohio. I am an adoptee. I had no control over these events, yet my rights have been affected by them. As you know, the current system in Ohio is tiered. The result of this tiered system is that not all adopted adults are treated the same. I am stripped of the right to my original birth certificate, a right that all other adult Ohioans have, because I am an adopted adult that was born during the, so called "closed era", ranging from 1964 to 1996. I am here today to provide you with my personal experience with adoption and support for the proposed bill that would permit adoptees born during the closed era to be treated the same as all other Ohioans by allowing them access to their original birth certificate once they are adults.

For me, personally, having my original birth certificate is not about searching. I know the identities of my biological parents. It took me a decade and a lot of resources, but I am finally in contact with my biological father and have reached out to my biological mother. I have been able to establish a good relationship with my biological father have received extremely important medical history from him. My biological father was from a family of 8, 2 parents and 6 children. Of those 8 people, 5 have had cancer, including my father at age 28. He is now 53. This is vital information for me and for my doctors in making decisions about my health care and when I should start cancer screenings.

I am sure that throughout the testimony provided on this subject you have heard the myriad reasons why allowing adoptees access to their birth certificates is beneficial for adoptees, adoptive parents and biological parents who want to be reunited with their adult children. I am certain you have heard all the arguments involving medical history, healing and understanding. I am sure you also have heard that the research shows that only a very small percentage of birth parents do not want to be contacted, only 2 to 5 percent. While my intent is not to diminish the importance or validity of this information in any way, I also don't see the need to restate it all either. In part, because, I know that you, as legislators, are concerned with, and rightly so, the effect this bill will have on that small population of birth parents who don't want to be contacted. Otherwise, passing this bill would be easy. Therefore, I would like use the remaining time I have here with you today to address why I believe this bill will also benefit those birth parents.

Under the current system, birth parents have no way to state their wishes about being contacted and adoptees have no way of knowing these wishes or obtaining their medical history without directly contacting the birth parent. In my own experience, once I found the identities of my biological parents and their contact information, I wrestled with the decision to contact them or not. I believe I should have the right to have my medical history, but I also empathized with my biological parents. I did not want to bother anyone who did not want to be bothered. Under the current system, adoptees are left to speculate as to their biological parents' wants regarding contact, and birth parents not wanting to be contacted can end up facing a painful choice: rejecting their child or the equally painful prospect of ignoring their child. I also had to attempt to mentally and emotionally prepare myself for one of these two painful possibilities.

However, the proposed bill cures this situation. As you also know, birth parents were never promised anonymity. However, the proposed bill does indeed provide birth parents with a protection that they do not have currently. If a birth parent does not want to be contacted, under the proposed legislation, they are permitted to fill out a form stating this preference and provide an updated medical history. The birth parent is not disturbed, the adoptee receives their medical history without contacting the birth parent and no longer has to speculate about the parent's wishes. Under the proposed bill, the birth parent need not go through the two painful prospects of having to reject or ignore their own child.

I mentioned earlier that I have reached out to my biological mother. I can testify here today that as an adoptee, I would much rather receive the information that she filled out a no contact form with my updated medical history than the situation I am facing now: the possibility of rejection or continued silence with no way to know my medical history on her side of the family. I could only imagine that birth parents would want to be spared this as well and would prefer filling out a form to have their wishes known up front than to get that unwanted letter in the mail.

This system, as proposed, is in place in several states in the country and has worked very well. I ask you to please pass the bill as proposed. Please allow equal access for all Ohio born adult adoptees to their original birth certificate if they so choose. This bill corrects the injustices of the current system and truly provides benefits for all affected parties by providing adoptees their medical history, equality for all Ohioans, and, furthermore, protection for birth parents who do not want to be contacted. Thank you for your time and for allowing me to testify today. I will be happy to answer any questions.