

Adoptees seek birth certificates

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TRENTON — It's a routine question at the doctor's office these days: "Is there a history of that in your family?"

Kara Goldberg has been searching for the answer for years, especially since being diagnosed with advanced breast cancer three years ago. But like many people who were adopted in New Jersey, Goldberg isn't sure she knows her birth mother's name, let alone her family's medical, social or cultural background.

A state law barring access to adoptees' original birth certificates may be all that stands in her way. So Goldberg hopes a bill being considered in the Legislature today will finally change that by opening adoption birth records for the first time since 1940.

"I don't have any biological health information at all," Goldberg said. "Being educated, every little bit helps."

If the bill becomes law, New Jersey will join Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Oregon, Tennessee and New Hampshire in opening access to birth records. Kansas has always allowed full access to the records.

While New Jersey-born residents are allowed access to their original birth certificates, which include information such as biological parents' names, ages, birth places, birth dates and occupations, adoptees can only see an altered birth certificate that bears their adoptive parents' names, their new name and a new date and place of birth.

When Goldberg tried to get her original birth certificate from the state, all the pertinent names were whited out, she said.

Martin I. Weber, who was adopted in Irvington in 1944, understands her plight. He's been trying to see his original birth certificate for 17 years.

Weber and Goldberg aren't alone in wanting to get access to the birth records.

For the past 26 years there's been a push for legislation to allow all people adopted in New Jersey to see their original birth certificates. Now, with changing attitudes about family reunions and increasing evidence that a person's medical history can help prevent and better manage some medical conditions, adoptees think they may finally have a shot at changing the law.

"It's a human rights issue," said Sen. Joseph Vitale, D-Middlesex, one of the bill's sponsors.

Specifically, the measure would allow future adoptees to get a copy of their so-called "long form" original birth certificates with the names, ages, birthplaces, birth dates and occupations of biological parents.

It would also allow those already adopted in New Jersey to obtain their birth certificate unless their birth parents contact the state within two years to ask that their names be scratched out.

However, if birth parents do that, the state would require that they provide a medical history.

Originally, birth and adoption records were open to the public. New Jersey sealed the records to the public in 1938 and then in 1940 sealed the records to everyone, primarily as a way to protect adoptive children from being contacted by their birth parents.

According to the 1940 legislation that sealed the records, it was done "to assure people adopting children that ... the parent of the child may not turn up at some future date to embarrass both them and the child and possibly even do harm."

Advocates of the proposed legislation say that in addition to learning about their genetic family history, there's also the fear that adopted children could accidentally commit incest.

In one highly publicized case, a Connecticut man found out that he had dated his sister and that his best friend of 25 years was actually his blood brother.

A varied group of opponents has fought the change in the law, fearing the proposed changes could discourage adoptions.

The state Bar Association, American Civil Liberties Union, Catholic Conference and an anti-abortion group says the proposed law would break long-standing promises of confidentiality made to birth parents by some adoption agencies.

While the bill allows birth parents to contact the state and stop the release of information, the groups object to that burden being placed on the biological parent.

"To change the rules of the game so far down the road is fundamentally unfair," said Marlene Lao-Collins with the Catholic Conference.

Lao-Collins said the Conference also objects to the fact that going forward, birth parents wouldn't be allowed to remain anonymous to their children.

No matter what happens with the bill, Goldberg will always wonder whether there was a history of breast cancer in her family and whether knowing that could have helped her detect the disease earlier.

Lawmakers Want To Make Adoption Answers Easier



[Cydney Long](#)

Reporting

(CBS 3) TRENTON Those who are adopted often have questions about their personal backgrounds and now, New Jersey lawmakers are considering a bill that would make it easier for those adoptees to get their answers.

Larry Newman was adopted, and he hopes to help thousands of other adoptees in New Jersey find out their medical and ethnic backgrounds.

"There are an infinity of questions that simply evaporate once you get the answers. There is always an underlying doubt was this meant to be? Am I who I really think I am," said Newman.

Newman is in favor of an adoption bill that would allow adoptees access to the so called "long version" of their birth records, which reveal biological parents' names.

"Diabetes runs in my birth mother's side of the family, glaucoma and melanoma run in my birth father's family and you wouldn't have known otherwise," said Newman.

The delicate and complex issue was heard Monday in a Senate Health committee hearing in Trenton.

The New Jersey Catholic Conference, ACLU, National Council for Adoption and New Jersey Right to Life all oppose the legislation in regard that it needs to balance the privacy rights of a birth parent, along with an adoptee's "right to know."

With adoption rates already low, those opposed fear the law could discourage confidential adoption and perhaps encourage abortion.

"Birth mothers past, present and future must maintain control over their confidential information," said Lee Allen with the National Council for Adoption.

Thomas Snyder, attorney with N.J. State Bar Association, says because the bill would work retroactively it may do more harm than good.

"Certain people may've remarried and never disclosed to their spouse or children this

private personal decision they had in their life," said Snyder.

If the legislation passes it would allow birth parents to opt out and maintain their privacy.

They would have anywhere from 12 months to two years to contact the N.J. State registrar and protest the release of their names, but in doing so they would have to provide their medical, social and cultural history.

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