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Bill would give adult adoptees access to records

TRENTON — Adults who were adopted, as well as their adoptive parents and adult descendants, would gain access to their original birth certificates, if a bill given final legislative approval Monday by the Assembly is signed into law.

The idea has been pending in the Legislature for more than 30 years, gaining approval in one half of the Legislature in 1992, 1994, 2004, 2006 and 2008, only to die when the other house didn't take up the bill. The proposal, which the Senate approved last March, was passed by the Assembly after almost no debate Monday by a vote of 44-26, with two voting to abstain.

"I just can't believe it. I'm so happy and so shocked, because we've been so worried. This is an amazing, amazing day for us," said Carol Barbieri of Atlantic Highlands, an adoptee who struggled 20 years ago to find her birth family when her son, then 14, was diagnosed with a hereditary heart condition. "How much easier it would have been for our family if I had access to my original birth certificate. This is such a huge blessing for us."

"This is something that's long overdue," said Assemblyman Vincent Prieto, D-Hudson, the bill's sponsor. "We need to come to the 21st century and to other states who have done this."

Birth parents who don't want to be contacted by the children they surrendered for adoption would have one year from the time the state adopts regulations -- a monthslong process that would not begin until the bill is signed into law -- to tell the state registrar that their name and address must be redacted from any copies made of a birth certificate. Those parents would be required to provide a family medical, cultural and social history form to maintain their anonymity.

It's unclear whether Gov. Chris Christie will sign or veto the bill. His press secretary, Michael Drewniak, said Christie's chief counsel's office will review it.

Social conservatives generally oppose the proposal, saying it violates the privacy of women who made what's often a painful personal decision. New Jersey Right to Life -- with the American Civil Liberties Union and New Jersey Bar Association -- backed an alternative that creates a "confidential intermediary" as a new way for adoptees to contact birth parents.

"I didn't think the bill contains enough protections for women who in good faith had put a child up for adoption believing that their identities would remain confidential. Changing that promise to them now seems inappropriate," said Assemblyman Jay Webber, R-Morris.

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