

# Birth certificate bill on fast track

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Negotiators who have been at loggerheads for decades over the emotional issue of sealed adoption records hammered out a preliminary agreement Monday that would open those records to adoptees.

The accord would overturn a 1940 law that has sealed the birth certificates of 150,000 adopted children -- and would make New Jersey only the eighth state in the nation to make such records available.

"After 26, 27 years, this bill is finally going to happen, it's going to pass," said Assemblyman Louis Manzo, the bill's sponsor. "The leadership told both sides, if you don't compromise, it's not going to get posted, so both sides were willing to make this work. Once it gets posted, we have the votes on both sides of the aisle. Once again, New Jersey will be in the forefront on a civil rights issue."

Governor Corzine has said he supports "the aim of the bill."

After languishing for decades, the legislation recently lurched onto the fast track, the result of aggressive lobbying, a change in political leadership, and a growing national uneasiness over the secrecy long surrounding adoption. Last month, the bill passed the Senate 26-12. It moved to the Assembly with 18 bipartisan sponsors and the promise of nine more.

But when the bill went before the Assembly Human Services Committee, it hit a speed bump: Speaker Joseph Roberts Jr. said that although he believes adoptees should have greater access to health records, "he also wants to preserve the privacy of birth parents who may not want their identities revealed," said his spokesman Joe Donnelly. It's Roberts who decides whether to post a bill for a full Assembly vote.

In response, committee Chairman Joseph Cryan told both sides to meet Monday to hammer out a compromise. For three hours, 17 advocates and four legislators reworked the bill, which had given birth parents a year to ask the state to withhold their identity, and only if they provided the family's medical history. After that one-year reprieve, the "non-disclosure" window would close -- and therein lay the rub.

Opponents argued the bill violated birth parents' expectations of confidentiality. They said those who gave up children decades ago might not learn the law had changed, and as a result, wouldn't know to opt out if they wanted to maintain their confidentiality.

Monday's compromise extends to two years the time during which birth parents could request confidentiality. More significantly, it also creates a program in

which state-authorized intermediaries would approach birth parents to discreetly broach the subject if the parents hadn't previously indicated whether or how they wanted to be contacted.

The details -- whether two years is enough, who the intermediaries would be and the scope of their task -- are to be hammered out in a draft in two weeks, said a legislator who attended the meeting. The committee could vote as soon as next month.

"We realized that if we refused to compromise, we'd be fighting over this bill forever and that doesn't benefit anybody," said Thomas Snyder, legislative coordinator for the Bar Association, which is part of an unlikely coalition of opponents that includes abortion foes, who worried the bill would prompt women to choose abortion over adoption. "It's been a long, long, long battle for everybody, and everybody is just looking forward to getting this resolved."

For their part, adoptees have long argued that denying them access to their birth records perpetuates emotionally damaging secrecy and makes it impossible to learn their evolving family medical history.

"This bill has been my life for nearly 26 years," said Pam Hasegawa, spokeswoman for the New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education. "I eat it, I sleep it, my family and friends are tired of hearing about it. I think everyone agrees it's been a very, very long road, and this is the closest we've ever come. It's very satisfying to see the secrecy of adoption finally erode."

Alabama, Delaware, New Hampshire, Oregon and Tennessee have all unsealed their birth records over the last dozen years. Alaska and Kansas are the only other states with open records; they never withheld birth records from adopted adult in the first place.

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