



Gov. Christie conditionally vetoes adoptee birth certificate bill, insisting anonymity for mothers

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John O'Boyle/The Star-LedgerN.J. Gov. Chris

Christie at a Town Hall meeting in Fair Lawn earlier this week. Christie has conditionally vetoed a bill which would have allowed adoptees to see their original birth certificates. Christie said he wanted to give birth mothers the option for privacy if they so desired.

TRENTON — Attempting to end a 30-year battle over whether adopted people can get their birth certificates, Gov. Chris Christie agreed Thursday the records should be released but insisted that women who gave their kids up to adoption should have their anonymity preserved.

Christie's proposed changes to a bill that passed in May came as a blow to open record advocates who fought for decades to convince lawmakers that denying adoptees information about their identity violated their civil rights. The changes were cheered by opponents of the bill, including Catholic bishops.

In a conditional veto, Christie said adopted adults should be allowed to seek a "confidential intermediary" from an adoption agency to search for their natural parents. The birth certificate would be released if a year-long "diligent" search fails to locate them. But parents who are found and want no contact with a child surrendered long ago would be asked — but not required — to provide a complete medical history to share with the adopted person.

Christie praised the bill's sponsors for their "courageous leadership on this important landmark proposal" but said changes were needed "to avoid any unwanted breaches of privacy, and the potential chilling effect on adoptions."

"I believe that additional safeguards are needed to best balance the needs of adoptees seeking the identity of their biological parents with the expectations of birth parents who may wish for their identities to remain private," he said.

Pam Hasegawa of Morristown, an adopted person who has helped lead the fight to open birth records, said was "stunned" by the governor's veto and wants the Legislature to reject it.

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"I am really mentally exhausted to see this term 'the balancing of rights' when one party has been at the bottom of the pile for 70 years," Hasegawa said. Adopted people's birth certificates have been under court seal since 1940.

"This says no matter how old the relinquished son or daughter, the mother has the power over the child to say your family medical history, or your name at birth is not something I wish to divulge," she said.

Christie's veto appears to support the arguments made by opponents — including New Jersey Rights to Life, New Jersey Catholic Conference and the New Jersey chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union — that women who placed children for adoption long ago were promised anonymity by Catholic adoption agencies.

On June 15, Newark Archbishop John J. Meyers, who is president of the Catholic Conference of bishops, wrote Christie asking he conditionally veto the bill. "A mother's expressed request for privacy should be honored," according to Myers' letter. "Reunions between adoptees and birth parents should only be after mutual consent."

Marie Tasy of New Jersey Right to Life said the governor's compromise strikes the right balance. "It provides the ability to obtain an original birth certificate when all parties mutually consent. It also allows the means to obtain medical history information while also respecting the privacy of birth parents who need and desire it," Tasy said. "We hope the Legislature will adopt the Governor's recommendations."

Democratic lawmakers who championed the bill expressed disappointment and said they were unsure whether they would accept Christie's changes and make them law. Lawmakers don't have enough votes to override Christie. The current law would remain if lawmakers took no action.

"I believe the governor took a very thoughtful approach. We just disagree on what he thinks is balanced," said Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex), a sponsor.

Under Christie's version, people adopted after the law's enactment fare the worst, Vitale said. The birth parent at the time of adoption would be required to fill out a form to say whether they want future contact with their child, and under what circumstances. But there is no requirement they provide medical information, Vitale said, and there is no way for adopted people to seek recourse if the birth parent does not cooperate. "It takes away their civil right and treats them as second-class citizens," Vitale said.

A vocal group of women who gave birth before abortion was legal also fought to pass the bill, insisting adoption agencies never promised them confidentiality. They said the vast majority of birth mothers want to meet their children.

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