

Measure advances to let adoptees get a key to their past

The bill would give adults access to their original birth certificates

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A Senate panel yesterday voted to remove the blanket confidentiality surrounding an adopted person's past, approving a bill that would allow adults to obtain their original birth certificates.

The Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee cleared the bill 9-0, with one abstention, over objections from groups including the New Jersey Catholic Conference, New Jersey Right to Life and the state chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union and the Bar Association.

The groups urged lawmakers to respect birth parents who "relied on assurances of privacy" when they surrendered their babies years ago, but the committee disagreed.

"An adult child's right to know from whence they came really trumps privacy rights," said Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen). "For the state to stand between adult children finding their birth parents doesn't seem right."

The bill still needs to pass the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, the full Senate, and clear the Assembly before it reaches the governor's desk.

Supporters of the bill, some of whom have been pushing to change the law since 1980, say they have a new weapon in their arsenal: The New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education commissioned the Monmouth University Polling Institute to gauge public support for the issue.

The survey of 803 adults in April found three-quarters of New Jerseyans believe adopted people should be allowed to obtain their birth certificates listing their parents' names, and 79 percent support the law if it allows birth parents to choose whether they want to be contacted.

"After 25 years of working to pass this legislation, we are elated because this unprecedented study proves we represent the majority opinion on this issue, that it's important to know from where and whom you came," said adoptee and activist Pam Hasegawa of Morristown.

A spokesman for Gov. Jon Corzine said the bill has the governor's attention.

"The governor is sympathetic with the goal of the bill, which is to ensure that folks have access to important information about their heritage and medical history," spokesman Anthony Coley said.

The bill (S1087) allows an adult adoptee, the adoptee's adult child or the adoptive parent to request an original birth certificate from the state registrar.

Birth parents who surrendered a child prior to the law's enactment could maintain their confidentiality if they request to do so within 12 months of the law taking effect. Within 60 days of this request, birth parents also must complete a form outlining family medical and cultural history or the request will not be honored.

The bill doesn't give privacy assurances to future birth parents, a provision that concerned objectors. The law would allow them to inform the state of their wish not to be contacted, but adoptees are still entitled to their original birth certificates containing the names and addresses of their parents.

"The contact preference provision is meaningless because it in no way honors a birth parent's right for no contact," Marie Tasy, executive director of New Jersey Right to Life, told the committee. "Public policy should encourage adoptions, not place more obstacles in the way to discourage them."

Judy Foster of Randolph, who was 18 when she surrendered her daughter in 1960, said most birth parents she's met in support groups want to be found.

"It's a human rights issue," said Foster, a coalition member who said she hired a private investigator to help find her daughter eight years ago. "Why are they trying to protect us from our children?"

Adoption records in New Jersey have been sealed since 1940.