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N.J. Senate panel approves bill unsealing adoptee birth records

By Statehouse Bureau Staff

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Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-LedgerView from above the New Jersey Senate Chamber at the Statehouse in Trenton in January.

TRENTON -- Adopted adults would gain access to their original birth certificates and family medical history under a bill a Senate panel approved today.

The bill in one form or another has been before the Legislature since the 1980-81 session. Religious leaders, anti-abortion activists and the New Jersey chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union have successfully lobbied against it, asking lawmakers to protect birth mothers, who believed they had anonymity when they gave up their children.

But open-records advocates continue to argue that knowing their family history is a civil right.

"We heard heart-wrenching stories of adoptees asking, most times in vain, the relatively simple question of where they came from," said Committee Chairwoman and bill sponsor Sen. Loretta Weinberg, (D-Bergen). "While I appreciate the concerns of biological parents who wish to remain anonymous, I believe this bill balances the needs of anonymity for birth parents wishing to remain so, and the rights of adoptees hoping to find out something about their family history."

The bill would give birth parents who surrendered children for adoption in New Jersey one year from the law's passage to submit a request to the State registrar that their identity be protected. During the initial year, adoptees would be able to contact the adoption agency they came from to get non-identifying medical information.

After birth parents have had an opportunity to "opt out" of disclosure, an adopted adult, a direct descendant of an adopted person if that person is deceased, or the adoptive parent on a child's behalf would be able to request a copy of the adoptee's birth certificate from the state health department.

The Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee approved the bill, a substitute for (S799) and (S1399), 8-1. It now heads to the full Senate.

Previous coverage:

- **N.J. adoption groups push for Assembly to consider bill unsealing adoptee birth records**
- **March 3, 2008: Open records bill for NJ adoptees advances in Legislature**
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