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Open records bill for NJ adoptees advances in Legislature

By Claire Heininger/Statehouse Bureau

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The state Senate today approved a bill that would allow adults adopted as children to obtain their original birth records, now sealed under New Jersey law.

For nearly three decades, adoption rights advocates have tried to get this bill passed, arguing they have a right to know their biological and cultural identities. Yet religious leaders, anti-abortion activists and, more recently, the New Jersey chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union have persuaded lawmakers to reject the bill to protect the identity of birth mothers, who believed they had anonymity when they gave up their children.

Despite the bill's long and tortured history, the Senate voted 30-7 to approve **S611**, without any discussion. The measure moves to the Assembly.

The bill would allow adult adoptees or the adoptive parent of a child to petition the state registrar for an original birth certificate with the names of the biological parents.

The measure gives parents a year from the bill's enactment to file a notarized "no contact" letter with the state if they wish to remain anonymous. They would have to complete a medical and cultural history form every 10 years until the parent is 40, and every five years thereafter, or forfeit their anonymity.

"Through this legislation, we've taken pains to balance the needs of adopted individuals to know with the needs of certain birth parents to maintain anonymity," Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex), the bill's sponsor, said in a statement after the vote. "For New Jersey's adopted residents, this bill is about fairness, giving them the same opportunity to know where they come from as non-adopted people."

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