

Op Ed Piece: The Bergen Record

Measure would aid those seeking biological parents

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More than 100,000 individuals who were born and adopted in New Jersey do not have access to their medical histories because they don't know who their birth parents are.

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The New Jersey Senate passed a bill recently that would give adopted adults the right to access their own birth records; the bill now heads to the Assembly for a vote.

Without access to birth records, adoptees have no knowledge of their heredity or medical histories. This lack of knowledge has a lasting physical and emotional impact. Adoptees are denied the right to full knowledge of their cultural and genetic identity, as well as the potential health risks against which they otherwise could take preventative medical or lifestyle choice measures.

If you knew that your mother had a chronic heart condition, wouldn't that influence your decision not to smoke? If you were considering having a baby, wouldn't you want to know if one of your parents carried the gene for sickle cell anemia or Tay-Sachs disease?

More than 100,000 individuals who were born and adopted in New Jersey do not have access to their medical histories when making these crucial decisions. These people are being denied the basic right to make educated decisions about their personal health, and their children's health needs.

Kansas and Alaska give adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates. Alabama, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon and Tennessee have also granted some access. Some opponents of open access to birth records indicate a fear of increased abortions and decreased adoptions if this bill is enacted.

Actually, the opposite has occurred in most places where there has been a change to open records.

The trend in our country has been to involve the birth parents much more in selecting the adoptive family for their child, a process that promotes openness from the beginning of the placement.

Children's Aid and Family Services helps adult adoptees who wish to contact their birth families. We have found that when contacted, the overwhelming majority of birth families are thrilled to learn that their children have had a good life and are safe.

We have found that rather than the fear of discovery by birth mothers that is cited by some opponents, the most common responses are expressions of relief and gratitude birth mothers have in knowing their children are OK.

Positives

Will this bill do more good than harm?

Research and experience in all jurisdictions that allow for open access have shown that it has. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published a policy paper last November that supports this.

"As states have amended their laws to provide adult adopted persons with access to their own adoption information, there has been no evidence of the negative consequences predicted by opponents," the report concludes. "Similarly, there has been no evidence that the lives of birth mothers have been damaged as a result of the release of the information to the children (now adults) whom they relinquished for adoption."

The experience of Children's Aid and Family Services echoes these findings. Since 1991, when we began maintaining statistics, we have conducted 715 searches on behalf of adult adoptees for birth parents. Approximately 10 percent of birth mothers decided against meeting with their children, but were happy to provide background and medical information to share with their child.

Is it fair to deny the 90 percent of families who wish open access to protect the 10 percent who wish privacy, especially when that 10 percent have the opportunity to ensure that their privacy will be maintained?

And, like any other mother, those in that 10 percent still want what is best for their children and most will take the opportunity to share the critical medical information if given the chance.

The proposed bill offers birth parents the right to deny access to the birth records and gives them a full year to notify authorities of their wishes.

Another point to keep in mind as we debate this issue is that of the environment of secrecy and the confidential nature of adoptions that was prevalent in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties, when infant adoptions were the norm. That secrecy arose from a desire to protect adoptive families and the children from any possibility of the birth parents changing their minds.

Today, the majority of adoptions that occur in this country are relative and stepparent adoptions, as well as adoptions of older children from the foster care system. In both categories, there is no confidentiality, as older children know their birth history, as do the adopting families.

Emotional costs

So, who are we protecting? And at what emotional and physical costs to the thousands of adult adoptees who are asking for the same rights as others in our society?

We all know change is hard, but this change will enhance the adoption experience by leaving the secrecy, shame and fear in the past.

As Sen. Bill Baroni, R-Mercer, himself an adoptee, put it: "This legislation will continue to promote an amazing gift: the gift of adoption."

I urge people to write to their representatives to encourage them to support this important bill.

Give adoptees the same rights so many of us take for granted: access to information about our origins that allows us to make informed decisions about our health and complete the picture of who we really are.

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