

Senate panel approves giving adoptees access to records

Rapper's testimony moves some to advance bill on birth certificate release

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TRENTON -- The decades-old push to open up birth records for adoptees renewed Thursday as a Senate panel, compelled by the personal story of an iconic rapper, released a measure that would allow people to access their original birth certificates.

Various measures have been pushed since the 1980s without full legislative endorsement. In recent sessions, the full Senate has endorsed proposals that have languished in Assembly committees.

Bill sponsors Sens. Joseph Vitale, D-Middlesex, and Diane Allen, R-Burlington, said they think Assembly members will vote for the measure this time.

"I believe it will happen," Vitale said. "This is certainly a difficult issue for a lot of people, but given the right amount of time to think through the issues and contemplate the data and the personal stories, then I am hopeful that the majority of my colleagues will understand it."

Allen said the measure restores civil rights and corrects an egregious wrong for adoptees. "Most people in the Assembly understand that," she said.

Advocates said the bill is important to allow adoptees access to information about their health history as well as providing information about their identity.

Critics argued that requiring disclosure would push women toward abortion and that not exempting past adoptions removes the anonymity birth mothers thought they had. One also argued it's unfair to women because birth mothers, but not fathers, would be tracked down.

The Senate health committee released the proposal 10-0 after removing a \$90,000 appropriation to pay to advertise that birth parents can opt out of being disclosed. Republicans entered the hearing pledging to abstain from voting for any measure that spent money until Gov. Jon S. Corzine presents a budget.

Those details remained in the background behind the hearing's star witness rapper Darryl McDaniels of Run DMC, who while writing his autobiography at 35 years old found out he was adopted.

Now 43, McDaniels has met his birth mother and is trying to bring awareness to adoption in an attempt to get rid of the shame and secrets of adoption.

"What I'm trying to do is remove the lies and the secrets from the adoption triad -- the adoptee, the adopted parents and the birth parents," McDaniels said.

"If I can remove the secrets and the lies and promote the real problem which is guilt and shame, and if I can do that I can bring understanding to what this is really about -- this is about identity and truth for human beings."

His passionate speech, more like rap than the usual drone of a lobbyist, drew a rare round of applause from senators and the gallery.

In contrast, Philip Foley, a New Jersey resident, read a sobering statement for his wife, who was raped as a 15-year-old. Her child later tracked her down, and Foley said victims of incest or rape should have the right to remain unknown.

"There are no winners on either side of this issues," Foley's wife wrote. "There are only personal strategies for managing its grief. I implore the committee to not sacrifice an innocent person to satisfy the wants of another individual."

Sen. Bill Baroni Jr., R-Mercer, who was adopted, said he was torn especially since he never had an interest in finding his birth parents, but his sister had great joy in meeting hers. Ultimately, he backed the measure.

"I don't want to be a legislator who looks at Darryl and other kids and say, 'I know better than you,'" Baroni said.