

Testimony before the Joint Committee on Government Administration and Elections  
Proposed House Bill 5421  
22 February 2013

Nora Galvin  
36 Livingston Street  
Bridgeport, Connecticut (Sen. Musto's district)

My name is Nora Galvin. I am a professional genealogist and president of the Connecticut Professional Genealogists Council, Inc. I make my living by researching the history of Connecticut families in the state's rich record collections.

Three organizations have asked me to represent them here today: the Connecticut Professional Genealogists Council, Connecticut Ancestry Society and the Connecticut Society of Genealogists. I unofficially represent the other 13 genealogy societies that are also incorporated or authorized to do business in Connecticut. Members of these sixteen organizations have special rights regarding access to Connecticut vital records as granted in Chapter 93, Section 7-51 of the General Statutes. We have legal standing in discussions of access to vital records in the state. In addition, I represent a fourth group, the Connecticut Association of Licensed Private Investigators. Overall, I am speaking on behalf of more than 5,000 card-carrying genealogists and private investigators, people who every day make peaceful and honest use of Connecticut's records.

The main purpose of my testimony is to assure continuation our rights of access to vital records in Connecticut as laid out in the statutes. However, I would also like to address the issue of open vital records, which has been Connecticut's legal tradition for nearly 400 years.

This bill was introduced in response to the massacre in Newtown and the resulting requests from the public and news organizations to obtain the death records of the victims. I express my sympathy to Newtown's Town Clerk and her staff for the extremely difficult experience they and the rest of Newtown have gone through due to that event.

We have great respect for the state's town clerks and the significant contributions they make to the historical and legal landscape of the state. Perhaps because they live in the towns where they work, many town clerks feel the need to protect the privacy of townspeople. However natural this instinct may be, it is not one of their mandates nor is it their responsibility.

I would like us to look at this issue from a greater distance, one which people who are immersed in the day-to-day effects of this tragedy understandably cannot achieve. This event, though horrible, was a single event that occurred in but one of our 169 Connecticut towns.

The proposed law, "that section 1-210 of the general statutes be amended to exempt death certificates of minors from public disclosure for a period of ten years after the death of such minor," would overturn nearly 4 centuries of legal precedent in Connecticut and chip away at our proud tradition of open records. It seems to us that this is an extreme response to a single event. Since the circumstance is not general, but rather is isolated, the need for such a broadly applied law is obviated.

A law closing the death records of minors would prevent newspaper reporters and social scientists from assessing and reporting on issues such as epidemics of gang violence or the

suicides of Connecticut's gay teenagers. Our state's inability to assess such tragedies would result in our inability to address their root causes. Researchers need facts, not conjecture.

Genealogical research reveals the history of families, thereby revealing the history of our state and our nation. Vital records are an important tool in this type of research, helping to ensure the story is told correctly. In addition, research by genealogists assists in identifying and repatriating remains of missing military personnel from World War II and Vietnam, and helps people to learn about their health risks based on causes of death reported in death records.

The genealogy community is opposed to this bill. We are in favor of open vital records. We do not see any reason to close to the public vital records that are currently available.

Bill supporters suggest that all death records, not just those of minors, be closed to the public. We reject this idea. There is no reason to close these records to the public because of a single event.

Bill supporters suggest that marriage records should also be exempted from public disclosure. We apply the same arguments in opposition to this idea. There is no reason to close these records to the public because of a single event.

Bill supporters suggest that open death records introduce the risk of identity theft. I submit that there is no basis for this claim whatsoever. Identify theft perpetrated through the use of death records is an extremely rare event and there are statistics to prove this.

Bill supporters suggest that the families of deceased minors are at risk of endangerment, threats or intimidation. If this is the case, surely it is a job for the police, not a reason for the General Assembly to change access to vital records. Our State Police stood to protect the families of Newtown. This is their responsibility.

In closing, marriage and death records have been public since the founding of the Colony. It would be a mistake to exempt these records from public disclosure because of a single event. The organizations that I represent oppose this bill. We do not see the necessity for it, and we do not like the precedent that it sets. We are in favor of keeping Connecticut's marriage and death records open to the public. Above all, we assert our rights to maintain access to records.

Nora Galvin  
President and Government Relations Liaison  
Connecticut Professional Genealogists Council, Inc. and  
Connecticut Ancestry Society, Inc.