

Testimony Presented Before the
Public Health Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly
Wednesday, February 27, 2013.

HB 6157, An Act Concerning Personally Identifying Information on Certifications of Marriage and Death; To protect against identity theft and to provide confidentiality while ensuring appropriate public access to vital records.

Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson, distinguished members of the Public Health Committee of the Connecticut Legislature:

I am Dr. Robert L. Rafford, a professional genealogist, retired minister and former mental health practitioner. I thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony opposing the passage of HB 6157 (and its companions, HB 5421 and HB 5733).

One problem with the proposal is its vagueness;

- The “personally identifying information” alluded to is not defined.
- There is no plan of strategy for removing personally identifying material from some but not all documents.
- There is no strategy for how registrars of vital records would identify family members.
- There is no strategy detailing the separate storage facilities in town and state offices that would be needed to house separate documents.
- There is no evidence presented to show all the expense that would be entailed in trying to accomplish such measures.

Another problem with the proposal is its reference to identity theft.

- There is no evidence presented showing a connection between identity theft and vital records.
- No evidence has been presented to demonstrate that “personally identifying information” is a major factor in identity theft.
- There is no evidence presented showing how removing some information currently available would address identity theft locally or nationally.

My own research has shown that there is very little connection between issuing vital records or the information on them and identity theft. Indeed, in states such as Massachusetts, for example, where all records are wide open and available (except out-of-wedlock births and births of those subsequently adopted), the incidence of identity theft per 100,000 population is much lower than say, New York, where there are restrictions on these records.

Most of us know by now that the greatest threat is from the Internet, where millions of names and personal information continue to be stolen electronically from banking, industrial, retailing or governmental computer storage facilities. The problem of identity theft is simply not with obtaining death or marriage records or the information contained thereon from town hall. In fact, most newspaper obituaries and marriage notices contain far more “personally identifying information” than either death or marriage certificates.

Genealogists have been vitally concerned with security for a long time, and we think greater security would be served if registrars of vital records issued non-certified “informational” copies

of vital records, clearly stamped “For Informational Purposes Only.” That way, they may not be used for any official purpose. These would serve for most genealogical purposes, and many states do this. Ironically, the Connecticut Town Clerks Association (CTCA) successfully lobbied the legislature 12 years ago to forbid issuing anything but certified copies.

We have profound gratitude for all who worked firsthand at the heart of the event, not least of whom was Newtown Town Clerk Debbie Aurelia and her staff. We are also grateful to our governor, legislators, town leaders, police and other professionals who have risen to the unprecedented challenge imposed on our state and elsewhere. This event will have far reaching consequences for many years to come.

On December 14 I was grateful to all the newspaper, magazine, television and Internet reporters, not to mention police and other responders who dropped everything and rushed to the site to provide help and assistance, but also to help tease out those important facts that helped me and all Americans to try and grapple with what was happening to our world.

Out of the swirl of reportage, one man, Mr. Robbie Parker, father of Emilie, a victim of the shooting violence, stood before cameras and reporters and through teary eyes but a hopeful countenance reached through the television screen and touched our hearts with solace and hopefulness. His humanity at that moment personally gave me great comfort and assurance, as much as any therapist or other healer could accomplish, and I shall ever be grateful to him and to the news media who respectfully trained their cameras and microphones on him so that his message of comfort could reach out to millions of us in despair.

The press may at times be overwhelming, but our constitutionally mandated freedom of the press is still the best policy in the world, and I see no reason to curtail or dilute that freedom now. I urge this committee to turn away from this well-meaning but ultimately harmful proposal.

The Rev. Robert L. Rafford, B.A., M.Div., D.Min.

Professional Genealogist

Governor Appointed Member, Connecticut State Historical Records Advisory Board

Former president, Connecticut Professional Genealogists Council, Inc.

Diplomate, American Association of Pastoral Counselors, Inc. (ret)

Connecticut State certified, Marriage and Family and Therapist (ret)

Board Certified, Association of Professional Chaplains, Inc. (ret)

Life Member, Connecticut Society of Genealogists, Inc.

Member, Association of Professional Genealogists, Inc.