

Proponent Testimony for Connecticut Senate Bill 972

March 12, 2019

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Dear Distinguished Members of the Connecticut Planning and Development Committee,

I am writing to ask you to support SB 972. My name is Betsie Norris and I am founding Executive Director of Adoption Network Cleveland: The Ohio Family Connection which is a non-profit educational, support, and advocacy organization for all those touched by adoption – adoptees, birthparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, foster children and former foster children, and the professionals who serve them. Founded in 1988, Adoption Network Cleveland has a support base of approximately 700 individuals, families, and organizations and serves thousands annually. For the past 31 years our membership has grown to include individuals and organizations from all over Ohio, and we are proud to serve constituents of many of the members of this committee. I am also co-author of the book *Journeys After Adoption: Understanding Lifelong Issues* (Bergin & Garvey, 2002), and an Ohio adoptee.

I have worked on this exact legislative issue in Ohio for many years beginning in the 1980s. In 2013 we had success leading to 400,000 previously closed original birth certificates being made accessible to Ohio adoptees in 2015. In the past three years Ohio has released over 12,500 birth certificates under this law. The law has been implemented smoothly and without any of the drama that some might fear.

I am happy to speak to the provisions in Senate Bill 972 which are important issues to the State of Connecticut. The decision making criteria in adoption, as we know it, is designed to promote the “best interests of the child.” The proposals in this bill are completely consistent with that principle, and support the “best interests of the child” as they grow up into an adult adoptee.

Common Concerns

I would like to address a few of the misunderstandings I commonly run into on this issue. You will likely hear about these in other testimony as well as they have also come up in other states’ legislative attempts. They are:

CONCERN: Birthparents were promised anonymity at the time of adoption.

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FACTS: There were no legal written promises of anonymity made. Connecticut government should not be involved in maintaining a “promise” that it never made. This can be shown through:

- Connecticut has never sealed records upon birthparent relinquishment, only upon adoption – a child can be relinquished but not adopted, in which case the original birth certificate would stand as public record.
- A review of relinquishment forms birthparents signed in Connecticut and across the country has not yielded even one form that addresses the privacy of the birthparent.
- Under Connecticut law, adoptive parents can choose not to have their child’s birth certificate amended, which would result in the birthparent’s name staying on the birth certificate.

CONCERN: Adoptees need their original birth certificate to conduct a search for their birthparent(s).

FACT: Access to records for adoptees is not about search. Adoptees can and often do search with or without access to their birth certificate. Access to these documents is about the fundamental right to know core facts about oneself, and enjoy the same rights and privileges as other citizens.

CONCERN: If the records are “opened” who knows who might see them.

FACT: What is proposed is that the adult adoptee, and only the adult adoptee and their adult children or grandchildren, would be able to confidentially access their own original birth certificate upon request. No records would be open to the public in any way.

CONCERN: The records are closed because birthparents don’t want to be found.

FACT: Birthparents from the era in question were not offered openness at the time of the adoption. Adoptions were set up as “closed” because that was the only option offered, not because birthparents requested it. Studies and experience show that 95% or more of birthparents accept contact by their adult child. Birthparents who do not wish to meet their children can indicate that on the proposed Contact Preference Form. In states that have implemented the Contact Preference Form, many more birthparents use it to express desire for contact, than for no contact. In fact in these states, only about 1 in 2,000 eligible birthparents request not to be contacted.

CONCERN: Women facing an untimely pregnancy might not consider adoption if they think they might be found by their child when the child reaches adulthood.

FACTS: Statistics do not support this, neither does anecdotal evidence.

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- The vast majority of women choosing adoption today are choosing openness in their adoption – 95% according to the Evan B. Donaldson Report entitled *Openness in Adoption: From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections* (2012).
- States that have legislated access to records have seen adoption rates stay strong or even go up, and abortion rates stay steady or decrease.
- Crisis pregnancy center counselors tell us that women are not asking about this or concerned about this as they consider their options.
- Sealed records do not keep birthparents from being found – successful searches take place despite sealed records. With the internet and DNA testing, searches are getting easier and easier.
- And, this legislation does not affect current adoption practice – all affected by this legislation were born 35+ years ago.

The legislation at hand, Senate Bill 972, seeks to treat adoptees just like everyone else in the State of Connecticut. Please pass this bill as written. It is the right thing to do.

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the committee might have, I can be contacted at the address/phone above.

Sincerely,

Betsie Norris
Executive Director
Adoption Network Cleveland: The Ohio Family Connection