

Chairperson Mensch and Members of the Senate Aging and Youth Committee:

My name is Mary O’Leary Wiley and I am from Altoona, where I practice full time as a Licensed Psychologist.

I attended Villanova University, graduated from Penn State, and did my masters and doctoral work in Counseling Psychology at the University of Maryland. I am Co-Chair of the Special Interest Group on Adoption Research and Practice within the American Psychological Association, a group I co-founded in 2005. This group offers continuing education about adoption to psychologists at the National APA Convention. These workshops have focused on the provision of best clinical practices with birth parents, adoptees and adoptive families throughout the lifespan. I also serve as a reviewer for several APA journals when research manuscripts are submitted for publication. I co-founded the Center for Adoption Education of Central Pennsylvania, a group that serves as a resource to Central Pennsylvanians whose lives are touched by adoption. In my practice in Pennsylvania, Maryland and New York, I have provided psychological services over the last 30 years to hundreds of clients whose lives are touched by adoption.

I was adopted by my parents, James and Patricia O’Leary at six months of age in Minnesota, where my Dad was a Surgical Resident at the Mayo Clinic. We moved home to Altoona when I was a year old so he could practice surgery in his hometown, which he did until his death in 1982. My Mom died only four years ago and I am blessed to have been able to spend time with her daily since I lived only a few blocks away from her. My parents were both early advocates of what I would call no-shame adoption. We were all on local TV, the Big John Riley Show to be exact, on WFBG-TV to show others that adoptive families are wonderful families and that no one affiliated with adoption should ever feel ashamed. I know that both of my parents would be proud that I have the opportunity to be here today to support HB 162, which moves the State of Pennsylvania one step closer to no-shame adoption once again. Until 1984, adoptees were able to access their Original Birth Certificates. It is my desire with HB 162 to RESTORE the right that existed until that time.

I am the oldest of the three adopted O’Leary children. My brother Denis, who is two years younger than I am, was adopted at ten days of age and came to us straight from the hospital through Catholic Charities. My brother John, who is three years younger than I am, was adopted at two years of age, and I clearly remember picking him up from the Catholic Charities orphanage in Cresson, Pennsylvania. After he had walked across a big room in a blazer and tie to where my Mom, Dad, brother and I were sitting on a sofa, the Sister said to him, “Anthony, your name will now be John, and this is your new family.” He started to cry and I started to cry and even then I knew something was very wrong in erasing a child’s identity. John always asked me to tell that story over and over, as I realize now that it was his only tie to the first two years of his life.

It is well known in adoption circles that it seems that adopted children somehow never grow up. We are treated as children for the rest of our lives. Our adoption as children defines us. The law treats us as children. I am 59 years old and I am testifying today in an attempt to modify a law that results in adopted adult citizen being treated as children for their entire lives. In psychodynamic jargon, this is referred to as infantilization: The treating of adults like infants.

Knowing the truth about oneself is part of healthy emotional development for all people. Recently, I had a client who was seeking information about herself from Catholic Charities, the agency she had been adopted through. Now I have been on the Board of Catholic Charities of Altoona-Johnstown for the last 12 years, six as Chair, and their Executive Director is a close colleague of mine. She came to my office and was nervous

about telling my client the circumstances of her birth. I understand this. But I assured her that no matter what the truth is, it is far better than the millions of other scenarios that run through adoptees minds. My client was so very grateful for this information... and so appreciative for information, ANY information, about herself.

Current Pennsylvania law seals every adoptee's original birth certificate at the time of adoption and requires the permission of any birthparent listed on the original birth certificate before it can be released to the adopted person once they reach majority age. It is a state secret.

This sealing of the original birth certificate includes three groups:

First, it includes the vast majority of adoptions where the identity of the birth parent or parents' identity is already known. As you probably know, a high percentage of adoptions are step-family adoptions and foster care adoptions, where the identity of birth parents is very clear. These original birth certificates are now sealed.

Second, birth certificates are sealed in the growing number of adoptions in which openness is incorporated into the adoption, agreed upon by both the adoptive family and the original family. Personally, nearly all the Pennsylvania adoptions with which I am familiar over the last 15 years include communication between the birth family and the adoptive family.

Finally, birth certificates are sealed in the ever shrinking number of adoptions that were shrouded in secrecy and shame. I have to tell you as a clinician and a researcher, this population is shrinking as quickly as the World War II veterans group. It is a relic of a bygone era. The women who relinquished children in this era of secrecy and shame report post traumatic symptoms related to relinquishment up to sixty years later. It is tragic and sad and I have worked with many of them as their psychologist.

Even among this shrinking group of birth mothers, research very consistently shows that over 95 % of them are not opposed to contact with their children relinquished to adoption. In fact, many of them, like Carolyn and Philomena (if you have seen the recent Academy Award nominated film about this era of secrecy and shame) have spent their lives looking for their children.

HOWEVER, even for the tiny percentage of birth parents who are left when we back out these groups....HB 162 is not about search. It is about the Original Birth Certificate ONLY. It is about adopted persons' birth information being put into the category of a state secret. No other records about birth are sealed for life. This is a legal anomaly that personally affects every adoptee in this state and it is time to change it.

Please note, that no one has more compassion for birth mothers than I do. I have worked as the psychologist for far too many women who lived through the heartbreak of relinquishing their babies in the era of secrecy and shame. I have worked with several agencies to improve their adoption procedures for the well being of birth mothers. Research very consistently shows that birth mothers are MORE likely to make an adoption plan for their child when they know that there will be some level of openness. For the tiny, and I do mean tiny, percentage of birth mothers referred to by earlier testimony, HB 162 will not bring them humiliation and shame. My brother's birth mother is one of those who did not want contact. Let me tell you the story.

The day we picked up John at the orphanage in 1959, his birth parents had already married each other. But the era of secrecy and shame was so bad that they felt it would damage their professional and personal lives by bringing their child into their home. John knows their names, and I know their names. We know where they have lived over the past 20 years. When I spoke with her briefly in 1993 she asked that John not contact her, and he has not. We have not. We respect her and would never do anything to harm her. Every adoptee I know who has been in this position has complied with their birthmother's request. But John can still not get his Original Birth Certificate. His birth is still a state secret. It is the current legal structure that is actually impeding the progress out of the secrecy and shame era.

Adoption is a lifelong process. Lack of knowledge about oneself affects people differently at different stages of their lives. At this stage of my life, I am most concerned about the principles upon which adoption is based. I believe that adoption, and all structures in our society, should be based on principles and virtues of which we can be proud. Principles such as honesty and integrity. Principles such as the celebration of every birth and of every child. Principles such as positive attitudes toward adoption and all those whose lives are touched by adoption. And most of all, I would like our principles about adoption to never EVER be based on shame.

I'm afraid that our current legal structure about adoption is not fully based on these principles. Adoptees are the only class of people to be denied information about themselves by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They are denied their Original Birth Certificate.

HB 162 would change this. It would allow adult adoptees to have the only legal document that accurately registered their birth. And it would allow positive principles and values to serve as the foundation of our adoption laws.

I am asking each of you to recommend HB 162 to the Senate for a vote. Every person born in Pennsylvania should have the right of access to information about themselves without government intrusion.

Even adoptees.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.