

**REP BENNINGHOFF TESTIMONY ON HB162  
SENATE AGING AND YOUTH COMMITTEE  
PUBLIC HEARING  
MARCH 18, 2014**

Good morning, Chairman Mensch, and members of the Committee. I'm Kerry Benninghoff, state representative of the 171<sup>st</sup> legislative district in Centre County.

I appreciate you convening this hearing on House Bill 162, which I am the prime sponsor, and it is my pleasure to be here this morning to discuss this legislation and its potential impact on the lives of adoptees from across this Commonwealth. Many adoptees in Pennsylvania and across the country are watching today, praying that they may get one more step closer to what, for many, is a lifelong dream: Knowing where they come from!

My legislation, HB 162, would allow adoptees who reach the age of 19 to be able to apply for and receive a copy of their birth records, learn where they were born, identify their ethnic background and the names of their parents.

As you know, my legislation was unanimously passed by the House Children and Youth Committee and the entire House Chamber last October.

It now awaits action by the Senate. I am hopeful that it receives similar favorable consideration by this entire

committee and your Senate chamber to be enacted before the end of this legislative session.

With its enactment, Pennsylvania would join 7 other states that do not seal adoption records and provide access to birth record information by adult adoptees. (Alabama, Alaska, Kansas, New Hampshire, Oregon, Rhode Island and Tennessee).

New Jersey is poised to become the eighth such state if Governor Christie signs similar legislation to my bill that was approved by their Senate and Assembly in February of this year.

Five other states already provide access to birth record information depending on what years the adoptions in question were finalized: Colorado, Massachusetts, Montana, Ohio and Vermont.

In several other states, there are legislative efforts ongoing that would give this basic right to adoptees.

This legislation is not only personal to me but thousands of Pennsylvanians here and across the US. I am an adoptee.

At this moment, Rep. Ann Williams of Illinois is watching this hearing. She voted to give her constituents this right, but yet, as a Pennsylvania born adoptee she cannot see her original birth certificate.

The search for birth information is a deeply personal issue for many adoptees, and my legislation will allow adult adoptees to access personal information about themselves as well as assist mothers who put their child up for adoption but now search for that adult child.

This is more about adoptees' need to know than their desire to know. The prime example of this is the need to access one's medical history.

With diseases that are greatly affected by genetics like diabetes, knowing your ancestry can be a way to gather information about your own health.

The need to know also arises on occasion whenever an adoptee wants to apply for a passport or other form of identification.

It's also an issue of fairness. Foster children have the right to access their original birth records. Adoptees should not be treated any differently.

Adoptees serve our nation in the military. Adoptees hold leadership positions in public service. Adoptees contribute to society in all walks of life. It's time adoptees be afforded this basic right. Adoptees need access to this information and we deserve it.

Pennsylvania sealed birth records for adoptees in 1925. Over the last 89 years, our society has become far more transparent with regard to the right to know certain information, and technology has transformed the ability to access a range of personal information.

Through web sites like Ancestry.com and many other sites, people are increasingly able to trace their roots and access extremely pertinent information about themselves.

My point is that we as a society are not as secretive about adoption as we were in the past. We, as adoptees, should not have to have our past shrouded in secrecy any longer.

For many adoptees, knowing who our birth parents are is a big part of knowing who we are. Knowing from where we came is a fundamental, deeply rooted need and should be a right for all Pennsylvanians, even adoptees.

In closing, I'd like to thank the members of this committee and you, Chairman Mensch, for holding this hearing and giving serious consideration to House Bill 162.

Thank you.