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Adoptee Rights Bill (HB 162)

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Amanda H.L. Transue-Woolston

Testimony in support of House Bill 162: the Adoptee Rights Bill

Dear Chairman Mensch, Chairwoman Washington, and esteemed members of the Aging and Youth Committee,

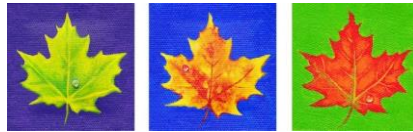
I am an adult adoptee, author, public speaker, and social worker. I have a Bachelor's degree in social work and will graduate with my Master's degree in social work this May. I have edited and contributed to numerous books and other publications on adoption, and I author an internationally recognized adoption blog. I am also the founder of the Pennsylvania Adoptee Rights group. My first book carried a strong theme about how positive and empowering it is to have access to my original birth certificate as an adult, and it explored how we can greater understand and de-stigmatize being adopted. I offer this testimony today in support of HB162.

I was ten years old when I saw my amended birth certificate for the first time. My parents had left it out on the kitchen counter. I let my eyes fall across that page and my gaze stopped suddenly on two very familiar names: my adoptive parents' names. This was surprising to me because, at ten years old, I knew I had birth parents and adoptive parents. No one needed to change my birth certificate for me to understand what adoption meant. I *did not* understand why my birth certificate did not have birth information on it as it should be a historical document that describes the day that I entered this world.

As a social worker, it is imperative to me that policies be informed with the best possible data. Additionally, I believe that policies should be based on the positive qualities of communities that are affected. After exploring the available research and literature, and understanding the positive qualities of the adoption community, I cast my support for HB162. Retrospectively, I am amazed that at ten years old I had such a healthy image of being adopted despite the negative message having a sealed birth record sent to me.

I testify today from a deep place of knowing what being affected by sealed birth records is like. When adoptees seek access to their original birth certificates and we do not regard them the same as we would any other person who is not adopted, we send a message that there is something wrong with being adopted. HB162 seeks to correct this. As Representative Benninghoff has so beautifully stated, HB162 celebrates the birth of every person.

This discussion must encompass an accurate image of who "adoptees" are. The majority of adoptees in the U.S. are step-parent adoptees who are raised by at least one biological parent. The next largest portion of adoptees are foster care adoptees. In Pennsylvania the majority of



people adopted from foster care are adopted by relatives or foster parents may already know the pre-adoption history. These adoptees may already have copies of their original birth certificates because original birth certificates are not sealed at birth or when parental rights are terminated. Birth records are sealed at the time of adoption which could be months or years after the adoptee's birth. It is important that we not frame this issue around the private domestic adoption of infants because this small portion of adoption does not represent adoption as a whole.

Historically speaking, prior to 1985, adult adoptees born in Pennsylvania had the same access to their original birth certificates that everyone else enjoyed. This law existed this way for 60 years and was only challenged because of Roe v. Wade. Under the assumption that adoptees accessing their birth records would influence abortion rates an inquiry was made to the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office claiming that adoptee access to original birth certificates was a "loophole" that violated birth parent privacy. In 1978, the Pennsylvania Attorney General issued an official opinion stating that the law was being interpreted correctly by releasing original birth certificates to adoptees and that this was not a loophole. Years later, a bill that severely restricted adult adoptee access to original birth certificates was passed.

We know that is no statistical significance between abortion rates and original birth certificate access. Therefore, the original purpose of the law is no longer socially relevant. HB162 will restore the law to the pre-1985 condition, and demonstrate Pennsylvania's vested interest in sending positive messages about being adopted. HB162 affirms the dignity and worth of adoptees born within this great state.

It has been almost thirty years since Pennsylvania went backwards on this issue. Today, we have the chance to be leaders in best practice regarding this issue. It is time for Pennsylvania to move forward and to lead.

I urge you to support HB 162 and recommend it to the Senate for a vote today.

Warm Regards,

Amanda H.L. Transue-Woolston, BSW, MSS candidate