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Adoptees look for their identity

Illinois bill would give better records access

By Kristen Kridel
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Former [Denver Broncos](#) fullback and adoptee [Howard Griffith](#) has spent many holidays surrounded by his wife, children, parents and other family. But he's never been able to shake the feeling that something was missing.

"There's always still a sense of loneliness because you truly don't know who you are, even though you have this support system," Griffith said.

On Monday morning, he stood in support of Democratic state Rep. [Sara Feigenholtz](#) of Chicago, who is sponsoring a bill that would give many adoptees at least 21 years old access to their original birth certificates for the first time since Illinois sealed the records in the 1940s.

The bill, which has been assigned to the House Adoption Reform Committee, will be voted on Thursday, said Feigenholtz, herself an adoptee.

"We've been deprived of our history and our identity," she said. "Chapter 1 of everyone else's lives begins with a birth certificate, a document I and everyone behind me are prohibited from having."

The law would allow adoptees born before Jan. 1, 1946, to immediately get copies of their birth certificates. Those adoptees had access to their records until the state sealed them retroactively.

Anyone born after Jan. 1, 1946, will have to wait to retrieve the document until April 1, 2009, giving birth parents the opportunity to request anonymity through the state registry, Feigenholtz said. To have their names removed from the certificate, parents have to pay a \$40 fee or fill out a medical questionnaire, said Melisha Mitchell, executive director of an organization called White Oak Foundation that provides post-adoption services.

Advocates of the bill are hoping the birth parents will opt to fill out their medical history, so their children can receive vital information, Mitchell said. If the parents do ask for anonymity, the adoptee can go to the courts five years from that date and initiate a search for updated medical information free of charge.

Of the about 2,000 birth parents registered in the state, only 17 have asked to remain confidential, Feigenholtz said.

Mitchell, a birth mother who chose adoption for her child, said many parents long to know that their child turned out all right.

"By the time our surrendered son and daughter reached adulthood, we just wanted peace of mind," she said.

Feigenholtz has spent a decade championing bills aimed at making it easier for birth parents to reconnect with the adult children for whom they chose adoption. In 1997, she proposed legislation that would have opened all Illinois adoption records if it had passed.

In 1999, she got a bill passed that expanded the state's adoption registry, which allows adoptees and birth parents to document their desire to reunite and helps them find one another.

More recently, Feigenholtz succeeded in revising a law that used to require adoptees have a medical reason to petition courts for information about their parents. Now they can seek the help of a confidential intermediary for any reason.

WGN Radio personality Steve Cochran said supplying birth certificates for adoptees like himself is an issue of fairness.

"It's something you ought to have because everyone else gets it," he said.

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