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In My View: Adoptees gain a basic human right

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The desire to know the facts of one's history is an attempt to understand the age-old questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I come from?

For an estimated 200,000 Illinois adult adoptees, they are unable to fully answer these questions.

Under previous Illinois law, most of these adults in their 40s, 50s, 60s and older were unable to obtain a copy of their original birth certificate. They were denied this basic human right.

But that changed on May 21.

On that day, Gov. Pat Quinn signed House Bill 5428, which I sponsored, into law. The new law will allow an adult adoptee the ability to obtain his or her original birth certificate, a right that non-adopted persons already possess.

For adult-adopted individuals, gaining information about their origins is more than a matter of curiosity, but a need for the raw materials to fill in the missing pieces in their lives. Both adoption professionals and the larger society need to recognize this basic human need and right and to facilitate access to information — an original birth certificate — for adopted adults.

That's why I have worked for more than 14 years in the Illinois General Assembly to advance this legislation. Now, I, too, will finally be able to obtain my birth certificate.

Moreover, the overwhelming majority of birth parents support the release of their identifying information to the children they relinquished for adoption. They also desire to receive information about their surrendered children and/or initiate contact with them.

A 1991 study published in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry found that a substantial majority of birth mothers (88.5 percent) supported adult adoptees' access to identifying information regarding their birth parents.

Additionally, a voluntary study conducted in 1989, the Maine Department of Human Resources Task Force on Adoption found that out of 130 birth parents surveyed, all 130 wished to be located by the child they had relinquished for adoption once he or she became an adult.

Birth information and contact with the birth family does not replace an adoptee's relationship with his or her adoptive parents, but rather leads to a more complete identity. Adopted adults who choose to search invariably make clear that their decision was not prompted by a rejection of their adoptive parents, but by a desire to learn more about themselves. Unsurprisingly, adoptive parents are supporting and assisting their adult children with their searches in growing numbers, according to an Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute Report published in November 2007.

For the handful of the birth parents who may want to avoid contact or disclosure of his or her identifying information to the adult adoptee, the legislation protects their civil rights, too. A birth parent preference form will exist that would prevent the disclosure of their identifying information or contact with their surrendered child. This preference can also be rescinded or amended at any time by filing a new form.

There will be a yearlong, robust public information campaign to alert birth parents and adult adoptees alike. The campaign will include:

- Announcements in the license renewal forms sent to the owners of 12 million Illinois vehicles.
- Notices enclosed with driver's license renewal applications through Nov. 30, 2014.
- Public service announcements by the Illinois Department of Public Health.
- An informational website devoted exclusively to the new law.

By November 2011, the estimated 200,000 Illinois adult adoptees will be able to secure their original birth certificate and begin to answer the questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I come from?

I look forward to the day when I will be able to walk into the state's Office of Vital Records, pay my \$15 and get a copy of my original birth certificate. On it will be the name of the woman who gave birth to me 53 years ago. To most, it may not sound like a big deal, but to many adult adoptees, it's of seismic magnitude.

Democratic state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz of Chicago represents the 12th District in the Illinois House.

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