

# Voices for Vermont's Children



Respectfully submitted to the Senate Committee on Government Operations

Re: H.644

By Amy Rose, Policy Director, Voices for Vermont's Children

April 2, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to share a few of the voices of people who will benefit from H.644 (if enacted) with you. Voices for Vermont's Children has worked with individuals who have experienced foster care on numerous efforts and the importance of access to records is nearly always named as a top priority.

Voices appreciates the work that brought H.644 to you. Granting record access to many people, while denying access to the person the record is about, is an injustice that the state is working to right. We celebrate the depth of the work that has gone into creating new policy.

Voices has heard from many individuals who do not want to go on record, but are watching this process closely and are eager to celebrate a shift in law. We are including the stories of individuals who have asked to share their words directly with you. As you will see, there is one woman who does not want to see her records, but wants to be able to make that choice for herself. Others have expressed frustration because they are not able to see the records of their life and they see the barriers to accessing them as barriers to their own wellbeing. Some are interested in medical information. Some have expressed that they feel tethered to their records - they aren't able to move forward because the state is still holding a piece of them. Others want to understand their own trauma in hopes of better understanding their triggers. One person drew the chilling comparison of their trauma being stored in their bodies and within a storage facility, waiting to be unearthed and healed.

Voices is aware that some people will not find what they are looking for in their records. However, some will. For most, they will be able to let go of the questions - What is there? What is being kept from me? What don't I know?

Voices supports removing barriers to record access and will support this committee in your work as desired.

With gratitude,

Amy Rose

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I highly support us because I myself was in foster care for 15 years and there are things about my past that I would love to know that I forgot because of trauma and I firmly believe knowing these things will help me grow as a person and to educate myself better to help those that are currently still in foster care how to deal with their ongoing mental health or issues in general. I also support this in general because we have a legal right as adults to have access to previous records such as medical and law documents so why not this as well.

- Mike

To Whom It May Concern,

Several years ago, through the Saint Joseph's restorative justice program I had the opportunity to read my records from Vermont Catholic charities and the state of Vermont if they were found. I was excited because I knew that in 1972 there was quite a thick record of my family of 11. We were all placed in state custody until we were 18, which was approximately 10 to 15 years for us. I was excited because I could possibly learn what happened to my family to cause such a big separation and to learn who my siblings were.

I would be able to learn what happened to the Billow family that would cause two parents to give up their children and have everyone separated for the rest of our lives. I showed up in Burlington only to find out that they were unable to find any records, but they did find 170 pages of information about my biological parents. It was written by a caseworker, Barbara from St Albans. It was titled Project 54. It was the most amazing piece of information about the struggles and hardships of the Billow family. I had two hours to read it and was not allowed to have a copy or remove the document from the room. I skimmed over it trying hard to grasp the general idea of what it was about. It was written in 1962. Just looking over those important pages for two hours was so helpful to me. I learned that my parents did in fact care a lot about our family and worked very hard to try to keep us all together. The struggles they had were unbelievable. It was such a valuable piece of information, showing the hardships of a poor, uneducated young couple with nine children struggling to survive.

I was not able to have a copy or to take it out of the room, so I never really got to read it completely. Those 170 type-written pages are sitting in a box somewhere and not one person in the world, but me, is interested in them. I would love to have them to share with my siblings. The struggles that led to important decisions about our lives is an important historical written piece that I could have copied for everyone in my family. They would know how hard my parents tried during such difficult times. My siblings did not have to grow up thinking that our parents never cared. We never saw our parents again. My father had been in the war which I learned from that document and became very sick and died shortly after our family was separated. After reading some of the documents I was able to send a note to Barbara in Saint Albans to thank her for all her hard work with our family 60 years ago. I would love to have that document to read it completely and share with my siblings. I understand that the document belongs to the state of Vermont, but it is about my life, and I have a right to own it.

Sheila

March 8, 2024

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Kim. I was at the orphanage in Burlington Vermont. I don't know when I first went to the orphanage or how long I was there.

I asked Vermont Catholic Charities for my records several years ago. The person I spoke to told me to send an email which I did. I never received a response.

I grew up always wondering why I was treated so differently than my brothers from all of my family.

I have always wondered about my history. I have been affected by the way I was treated as a young girl by the nuns and my family. I think it is so important to know about my past.

Please, please, please let us have our records. I believe it is our right.

When I first looked into getting my records it was because I needed to have medical history. My youngest grandchild was having horrible seizures and his doctor wanted medical history. I felt so helpless because I had no history of my biological father.

I thank you for listening and sincerely hope you give us what is rightfully ours. Imagine trying to live a productive life and always feeling less then.

Kim

To Whom It May Concern

How do you feel about getting your records?

Now that we are adults in our sixties, it is increasingly difficult to access memories that are fully accurate, with dates, time, and place kind of information. I know I was in the hospital numerous times but the date and the other details are fuzzy. I do know that I had pneumonia, had my tonsils out, got the rabies series, and only god knows what else.

I remember being swung around by a hand and a foot. At first I thought it was a game until I was dropped on my face onto a granite floor. Broken nose and concussion...was that recorded? Did they take me to get medical care?

I was escorted to the nuns' bathroom regularly to be punished and beaten. I want to know why they did that. What infractions had I committed? Were their beatings justified? The beatings took place mostly out of sight of others, where the screams went unheard.

I want to know what happened to me throughout those years. Things I blocked out of self-preservation. It's not normal for institutions to withhold records, why is the Catholic church allowed to do that? Why are they allowed to get away with withholding evidence of evil and wrongdoing? I want to know exactly what happened there. My health, my education, my life. I should be able to access it.

Cheri

March 6, 2024

To Whom It May Concern,

What receiving my records would mean to me.

Imagine your childhood so full of abuse that your mind shuts down and your memories vanish in order to preserve your well being.

Imagine thinking you can't believe a memory because your childhood feels like a lie.

Imagine losing a brother to suicide and never knowing what he went through and why he became who he was.

Imagine never knowing your childhood medical issues.

Imagine being denied your records, records that may give a glimpse of the truth, records that may bring some clarity to memories that have been buried.

This is what having access to my records (and my brother's) would mean to me.

Perhaps I will have a tiny view of who we were back then and begin to believe I wasn't evil, I wasn't mean.

Sincerely,

Debi

To Whom it May Concern.

I can't really think of a great reason as to why I want my records and how having them can help me. I remember much of my life in the institutions the state placed me in. My main reason is hope. Hope to find out how and why. I have many questions with no real answers. After viewing partial records from the orphanage and VT Catholic Diocese, I was hoping the state records would prove the lies from Vt Catholic Charities. I can't imagine the state would have any reason to hide anything as it was not involved much other than taking custody and dumping kids places. What happened in between didn't matter.

If my state records are ever found, I wish to have a copy to read on my own, not in a room with people waiting and watching me. How I feel about what I read and my reactions are my business. It places people in a position of being vulnerable while likely feeling unsafe or acting like a zombie without any feelings. This seems abusive to me. There cannot be a good reason as to why we can't get a copy of our state records. At the very least, people should be allowed privacy when viewing them. It's our lives.

Thank you!!

Sincerely,  
Katelin

Dear Rep. Mrowicki & Amy Rose,

Thank you for being in touch with me to learn more about the work that I offer & to inform me about H.644.

As a former foster child & then an adoptee myself, I am well versed in the challenges inherent with both the child welfare system & for the children who become part of that organization. One of the eventualities of this, historically, is that neither foster children nor adoptees had access to their past records, including their original birth certificates.

I am grateful to have learned about H.100 as there are so many adoptees who have not known about their origins or their original identities. My work as an Adoptee Counselor is to offer support & guidance to adoptees who are striving to establish their identities, often for the 1st time.

I likewise, am in support of H.644 as it provides an opportunity for former or current foster children the option of reviewing their records. For myself, I would choose not to review my own records due to the trauma that was so inherent in my life at this time. However, today with the passage of H644 I would have this option which is a profound & powerful choice in learning more about one's history.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony.

With Regards,  
**Abby**



I support having access to your records because I was a former foster youth and it's important to me to be able to see my records. Everyone should have the right to see their records.

Mercedes

Hi my name is Raelyn. There's a couple different angles I could come at this , but why spare you the details, as no one spared me. These are things that happen in real life & this is how the state claimed to be protecting children. I was severely abused as a child. Poverty. A mentally ill, addict whom I referred to as mom. She had severe mental health to the point where she would stay in bed for days not feeding me, speaking to me. As if I didn't exist. I walked myself home from kindergarten. A addict father whom never had a presence in my life. Until I got older & then he only wanted to talk to me if he needed/wanted something from me. I had head lice for a few years so bad they were crawling down my face. Fast forward a few years. I just turned 12. I was always picked on at school for not having even the basic of things. Or not as pretty. I started to spend a lot of time away from home as I got older. I came home one night from being gone probably at a friend's house...(simply because when I was elsewhere others parents were what I hoped & prayed for.) Anyway I came home to grab a change of clothes, that night I remember well because I was going to have dinner elsewhere. As I went to leave the house again she tried stopping me. See my mom had 2 personalities if she was drinking she would be nice, pretended to show concern. She grabbed me half way out the door & I threw my arm back to get her off me & accidentally hit of her tooth and started to bleed she called the cops and told them to do whatever they needed to with me I wasn't staying there.

So I was arrested & little did I know it be the beginning of years of abuse at the hands of the department for children families (DCF).

I was a ward of the state from ages 12-17. The crazy part is they removed me from my mother because they said she couldn't control me, not abuse. Joke. That was the beginning of a life I had no idea what was in store for me. I was placed in over 122 placements from those ages. Most are now shut down for being inhumane including one in n.h , John. H sununu center. Otherwise know as YDC. I was put in every program, foster home & anywhere else they decided to stick me. I'm a product of the state. I would have been better off on my own. DCF never taught me how to cook, budget,drivers Ed,give me a highschool diploma, the school in those places consist of sitting in a room with some under qualified person told you to do current events then some learning video. Never went to prom. They released me when I was 17 with no money, housing, high school diploma I did not age out once I got out of YDC I worked & got off probation and out of states custody rather I earned it or they knew I was going to be of age They just kicked me to the side. To this day. Today I'm more messed up then ever.

No education. No \$ to get one. I. Suffer from severe mental health that I'm on Social security for. The state of Vermont single handedly ruined me & my life, my soul. They broke me a life of sadness, scared, overwhelmed feelings. Now they are denying me what's mine, Thank you for listening  
Raelyn