

Testimony for Vermont Senate Judiciary Committee

Ellie Lane, Braintree, VT

Re: H.629

Good morning, my name is Ellie Lane, and I live in Braintree. I am a founding member of the Vermont Adoptee Rights Working Group, a core member of the New England Adoptee Rights Coalition. Thank you, Mr. Chair, for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I'm pleased to be able to share my experience using the registry to access information, in hopes that it helps explain why H.629 is so important, and why the current system isn't adequate.

I am a Vermont adoptee. I was born here in 1987 and placed for adoption through a private, Vermont-based agency. I was placed with my adoptive parents when I was three weeks old, and raised in southern Vermont.

Growing up, I knew very little about my birth parents. I had fairly standard non-identifying information - a paragraph about their interests and how tall they were and their hair color and how many siblings they had. I knew more about my birth mother than my birth father, but I didn't learn their last names until adulthood, and I didn't know who my birth father was until I was in my 30's.

I was raised in a small town, where talk of who was a "real Vermonter" and who was a "flatlander" was rampant. When we received history lessons, classmates and teachers tried to relate what we learned to our own family histories and ancestry. Like most kids, I had to create family trees, and write reports about a country my ancestors came from. As an adopted person, I never knew how I fit in.

Just a few years ago, I used the Vermont Adoption Registry to access both identifying information and my original birth certificate, and I want to share that process with you.

For starters, the form adopted people have to submit to request their information from the registry is not available online. Adoptees have to contact the registry, ask for it, and wait. The form requires your social security number and must be notarized and mailed back.

This wasn't something I took lightly. I requested the form several times over the years. I was hesitant to submit it because I didn't know what I would find, and it was a deeply personal and reflective process for me to decide I was ready to learn whatever information was available, and also to weigh what I might do with any information I received. It was the fifth copy of the form that I filled out that I finally had notarized and submitted.

After I submitted the form, I didn't receive a response. It wasn't until I inquired more than a month later to confirm its receipt that I received a response saying that the process might take a while. That was certainly true.

It was more than a year after I submitted the request before I received any information about myself. What I did receive did not include my original birth certificate, but did include the names of my birth parents, their last known contact information, health history forms completed by my birth mother, reports from the hospital where I was born and from my brief time in foster care.

After I received this packet, I had to request a letter from the registry, saying that I was eligible to receive my own original birth certificate. Once I received it, I had to submit that permission slip, along with another form and a photocopy of my drivers license to the Department of Health to request my original birth certificate, which

did come a few weeks later. By the time I received it, I already knew every piece of information on the record. It was still important for me to have.

The actual original birth certificate I did receive was a poor photocopy printed on plain white paper, with a large, dark watermark over the top.

It contains my name at birth, the details of my birth including the actual time I was born and the hospital I was born at, my birth parents names, their ages but not their birthdates, and a P.O. Box for my birth mother from 1987.

This record offered significantly less information about my biological parents than the information I already had, and offered no information that would help me contact them. Access to these original birth records is a separate issue from search and reunion. Unrestricted access to these vital records would do little to contribute to adoptees showing up on peoples doorsteps (which we don't do), but would go a long way towards ensuring our dignity and restoring our basic rights.

By contrast, I lost my amended birth certificate several years back during a move. In order to obtain that vital record, I went online, filled out a form, paid \$12, and had a certified copy in hand within a few weeks.

But back to the beginning, for a moment. I was in my thirties when I learned my birth father's last name. When I learned that my ancestors were fairly early white settlers of Vermont, that geographic landmarks and even hospitals were named after my family. When I could actually put together my family tree, or even began to understand how I fit into the American story. I was in my thirties when I first felt connected, tethered to the world, because I knew where I came from.

This is a basic human right, to know how you are connected to the world, to know what blood pumps through your veins. It's not trivial, or incidental, it's fundamental. Every single person deserves the truth of their own existence, should they want it. And that's what H.629 does for adopted people.

In your committee discussions yesterday Senator White asked where this bill came from. I can answer that question. H.629 originated from a Vermont constituent who contacted his representative, Kathryn Webb, to ask that she pursue legislation that would give his adopted sister the same right to access her own vital record that he, a non-adopted Vermonter, enjoys.

This bill would remove the layers of obstacles placed on adoptees who are requesting access to their birth certificate through a highly restrictive process, and instead provide that access through the Health Department, in the same way as for all non-adopted Vermont-born citizens.

I am here today, asking you to please pass H.629 and restore the rights of Vermont-born adoptees. Thank you.