



March 25, 2015

The Honorable Kerry Benninghoff  
Pennsylvania House of Representatives  
147 Main Capitol Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Representative Benninghoff,

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) is pleased to write today concerning adoptee access to birth records, medical, and familial history of adoptees, as addressed in House Bill 162. Since its founding in 1920, CWLA has worked to advance sound policies, and set standards for best practice that will result in superior services for children and families. Policies and practices concerning the needs of children who are in need of, or placed with an adoptive family have long been a concern of our organization.

Throughout its history, CWLA has been the trusted authority for professionals who work with children and the only national organization with members from both public and private agencies, providing unique access and influence to all sectors of the children's services field. These agencies work across the nation to assist more than 3.5 million abused, neglected, and vulnerable children and their families each year with a range of services from family preservation and child protection to kinship care, adoption, and transition to young adulthood.

CWLA's Standards of Excellence in Child Welfare are developed based on extensive review of the research, evidence, and best practices experience from around the country. Despite the tremendous growth in adoptions, and the many sound practices that exist, states are still challenged to find the right balance between meeting the developmental needs of children and adult adoptees, and respecting the privacy of their birth and adoptive families. In 2000, CWLA's Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services acknowledged this ongoing challenge and at the same time asserted the critical importance of providing adoptees with access to non-identifying and identifying information about themselves and their birth family (Section 6.22-6.33).

In its most recent standards, the CWLA National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare (2013), CWLA again examined these issues as they impact children in adoption and across child welfare, and established the following guidelines for work with all children including those in adoption. We hope that this guidance is helpful in your deliberations.

**Section 1.3 Children should have connections with their family and communities. Children have the right to live with their families of origin unless living with their families is harmful to them. When a child cannot live with both parents, the child has a right to be connected with both parents unless connection with one of the parents would be harmful to the child. The child also has a right to know parents, siblings, and extended family, and to maintain connections with their extended family. A child whose parents reside in different countries should have the right to maintain relationships and contact with both parents and other family members. Governments should respect the right of the child and his or her parents to leave the country and reenter the country, unless restrictions are necessary to protect the child or public's health and safety.**

It should be understood that the child's right to be connected with family is not precluded by decisions that a child be raised by a single parent, a same-sex couple, grandparents, adoptive parent(s), or any other family configuration. Regardless of any decisions about the child's living arrangement and family constellation, the child

has a right to be connected with his/her original parents. When connection is not possible, or is not in the child's best interests, the child has a right to know about his/her original parents.

When a child is adopted, the child has rights to connections with and awareness of both the original family and the adoptive family.

When siblings cannot live with their family they should be placed together unless there is a clear rationale for why it is not in their best interests. Separated siblings have a right to visit each other and to maintain contact. Children have a right to maintain connections with their communities—schools, friends, neighbors, special people, and places they are connected to—even when they are required to move from where they are living.

I.4. Children should have access to information about their family history and background information. Access to and understanding of family history is vital for children's development and sense of self. Such access is also important for understanding family medical history.

I.5. Children should be able to preserve their racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. Children have a right to understand their heritage; to preserve their connections to culture and religion; to learn and preserve their traditions; and to have adults and peers support their development of strong and healthy racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity.

So many children and adult adoptees have faced significant adversity on their path to adoption. We believe that it is vital that they have the information they need to make sense of their past, flourish in the present, and to live productively as adults. While it is vital that policies in this regard respect the concerns and challenges that face birth families, who have also faced difficult circumstances and decisions, it is critical that we keep the needs of children in adoption at the forefront. CWLA applauds the committee for considering these important issues and we encourage the committee to move affirmatively on behalf of all those in the adoption triad, and especially adoptees who have a vital stake in understanding their past.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions in this regard.

**Regards,**

Tim Briceland-Betts  
Policy and Federal Affairs

**CWLA**

1726 M Street NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-688-4154  
General line: 202-688-4200

[Home page](#); [Facebook](#); [Twitter](#).

[\*Join us for CWLA's 2015 National Conference – April 27-29, 2015 – Crystal Gateway Marriott\*](#)