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An emotional call for change



Reported by: *Katrina Irwin*

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Adoptees from across the country rallied at the National Conference of State Legislators in New Orleans Tuesday morning while some local adoptees called for action here in New York State. They are calling on state lawmakers for help.

"Open the records," said Emily Daszkiewicz. "Unseal these records."

Local adoptees and birth mothers joined together in the genealogy section of the main library in Downtown Rochester this morning. It's a place many of them have done research to find their birth parents.

The group is one of several across the state calling for what they say is a civil rights issue: Allowing adoptees to open sealed birth records.

"These people are adults," Daszkiewicz said. "They can vote. They can drink. They can go to war for us. Who are you to say these adults can't have access to these records?"

Daszkiewicz, a birth mother, has not been successful in finding the son she gave up for adoption in 1975.

However, Katherine Tuttle, 41, found her birth mother, Claire Gmelin, in October of 2007. It took seven years worth of research. Having access to her birth records, she says, would have saved a lot of time and grief.

"I would have found her immediately," Tuttle said. "She started looking for me in the 1970s and 80s when I was a little girl and had to give up because she was told that it was closed."

The executive director of adoption resource network at Hillside Family of Agencies says a bill of adoptee rights is nothing new. In fact, there's been proposals for one in the state legislature since the 1980s. But ethical concerns and questions with opening up records have kept a bill from passing.

"Did we make a commitment and provide an assumption to women who were making adoption plans that their identity would be protected forever?" said Lisa Maynard of what some people and agencies ask regarding opening records that were promised to be closed forever.

For the local adoptees and birth mothers, opening the records isn't necessarily about having a relationship with a birth parent or child.

"It's strictly to find out your heritage, any birth concerns you might have, any medical problems you feel, (or) if you want to know your ancestry," said Jeff Hancock, 43, who found out he was adopted just 15 months ago.

"It's closure for me," Daszkiewicz said. "It's closure I'd like to have before I'm gone."

Assemblyman David Koon is sponsoring the Bill of Adoptee Rights in the State Legislature. He says he's been pushing it for three years, but the bill is still in codes committee in the Assembly.