

**TESTIMONY OF WENDY MATTHEWS
HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
TAKS FORCE ON ADOPTIONS**

Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to come before the committee today and testify on the issue of adoption in this commonwealth.

I would particularly like to thank Representative Kevin Blaum for introducing and sponsoring House Bills 1533 and 1838.

I consented to testify today because I was faced with an unplanned pregnancy back in 1995, when I was twenty years old. The process that followed really opened my eyes to how government regulates the adoption industry, and what some of those shortcomings are.

I am not a lawyer, nor am I well versed in the provisions of Pennsylvania domestic relations law. What I can offer this committee, however, is a first-hand account of what I went through in 1995.

For openers, one point that I would like to make entirely clear is that at no time have I ever regretted my decision to choose adoption for my daughter Kylie. If the situation arose today, I would make the exact same choice.

Through the open adoption process, I was able to choose a wonderful, loving, caring couple to raise Kylie. They were with me through the whole process, which can be quite scary for a 20-year-old.

And the relationship continues today. In fact, I will be seeing Kylie next weekend.

I am saddened to say that happy ending is not always the case, and I am even further saddened to say that I feel our laws have a lot to do with that fact.

In fact, I ended up executing the final adoption procedure in New Jersey because in my opinion, that state is much more progressive and fair. Pennsylvania's requirements seem to be out of touch, as well as unnecessarily complex.

The Courts

Easily the most frustrating part about the adoption process in Pennsylvania is the completely unnecessary reliance on the court system for ending the termination of the birth mother's rights. In Pennsylvania, because of the 40 days that lapse between the signing of the consent to adopt and the confirmation, the termination of the birth mother's rights can drag on

for much too long. The fact that the courts are always backed up only exacerbates the problem.

Because of this system, it is actually possible for a birth mother to reclaim the child from the adoptive parents even after the baby is in the custody of that family. I do not see how that can ever be productive or fair.

In New Jersey, the courts are not compelled to be involved. All it takes is the consent order signed at a notary in the presence of a lawyer to set the process in motion.

In short, during a time when a woman is making one of the most important decisions in her life, New Jersey law helps to ease the anxiety, while Pennsylvania law, in my opinion, only adds to that anxiety.

Counseling

There is no question in my mind that the most crucial part of my pregnancy was the fact that I had wonderful counseling from Adoptions from the Heart in Camp Hill. If there is any part of my testimony today that I cannot say strongly enough, it is that I think every single potential mother should have access to counseling from day one. It should be offered, and the state should do everything in its power, including committing financial resources, to ensuring that all mothers who want it receive it.

Adoptions from the Heart was there for me through my entire pregnancy, helping me to stay healthy in both body and mind.

I would like to make another point, however, about a place I feel Pennsylvania could do more to protect mothers who choose adoption.

When I first made the choice of adoption, I was confused and scared. And the first agency I contacted was not very helpful in that respect. I understand that adoption is a business to some folks, but the first agency I called took the business part of the scenario a bit too far. I was inundated with unsolicited phone calls from the beginning, badgering me to make a decision and to choose their agency. Thankfully, I found Adoptions from the Heart.

But my experience has made me wonder what kind of oversight the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has over these agencies. And is there a place a woman can go within our state government to file formal complaints against these types of unscrupulous agencies? I do not know the answer to those questions, but I would respectfully suggest to this committee that the issue be investigated, and some guidelines be drafted.

Summary

As I mentioned at the outset, I would choose adoption again in a heartbeat, and have no regrets about doing so. My feelings on abortion are not pertinent to this discussion, but I suppose any one of you here today can make an educated case as to where I stand on that issue. Which brings me to my final point.

If the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania truly has an interest in helping young mothers to pursue the avenue of adoption, then logically, we should be doing everything possible within the law to ensure that option is easy and readily available. There should be no extraneous layers of regulation and court actions involved. Simply put, in my opinion, it should never be easier to get an abortion than it is to choose adoption. I am deeply troubled to report to this committee that I am not entirely sure that is the case in Pennsylvania today.

There are scores of families in Pennsylvania waiting for healthy babies. Our governor should know that fact as well as anyone. But if our laws do not change in the state, we are doing a great disservice to those families. More and more young, scared mothers-to-be will be choosing

places like New Jersey, and Pennsylvania families will be left out in the cold.

Or even more tragically, they will decide that adoption in Pennsylvania is just not worth the hassle, and make other choices about their pregnancy.

Pennsylvania likes to proclaim itself as a nationwide leader on a great many issues. I sincerely hope that a conscious effort is made to make adoptions one of those issues. The passage of Representative Blaum's bills would be a very good start.

Once again, thank you for allowing me to testify here today, and I am available for any questions that you may have.