

## **House Bill 139 – Public Testimony**

**Jen Haney Conover, Warren County Records Manager and Co-Chair of the Ohio County  
Archivists and Records Managers Association**

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Chair Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 139, opening certain historic records currently closed to the public after 100 years. Today I am here dually representing Warren County government and the Ohio County Archivist and Records Managers Association, commonly known as CARMA. While most of my testimony today will express why this bill will positively affect Ohio counties, as my colleagues Robin Heise and Brenda Ransom have previously articulated, I too, offer a personal story to how this bill could effect my family.

As the Director of Records Management and Archives at Warren County, I have an obligation to the residents of Warren County to stay current with changing technology and state legislation related to public records accessibility and retention, while providing that accessibility to those public records of historical value. A major challenge to providing this access are the loopholes in Ohio public records laws that allow localities to interpret what can and cannot be open to the public. Equally frustrating is how these interpretations can fluctuate with changing administrations and elected officials. As Robin Heise testified in May of 2017, local rulings and laws differ from county to county. A record that might be open in Greene County, such as the Children's Home registers are not open to the public in Warren County. Now, I want you to imagine explaining to a patron looking for information on the whereabouts of an ancestor from 120 years ago who might have resided at your Children's home. Then

imagine telling this same patron that these records are not open to the public in your county, when they had previously received information from another county about their Children's home records. This has happened time and time again during my tenure at Warren County. Not only is it confusing, but it's frustrating to patrons to deal with these inconsistencies. With the passage of HB 139, there will be much needed consistency and transparency from county to county.

I would also like to point out the fiscal responsibility agencies like mine have to preserve these records that may not be open to the public yet are still mandated to be maintained permanently per local or state rule. Many times these items are in leather bond ledger books that require additional storage and care related to temperature and humidity regulation. I am very fortunate that my facility has the means to store such items, but several counties are not as fortunate. Many of Warren County records that are currently closed to the public are from our Probate Court. These include Lunacy and Mental Illness Records, Adoptions, and Inheritance Tax files that might be exempted from this law because of the Rules of Superintendence 44-47. That being said, it is my hope that the passage of this bill will also be a giant stepping stone in the right direction to address the necessary changes needed to the current Rules of Superintendence towards the accessibility and transparency of invaluable historic records.

In closing, I would also like to share my personal story of how this law would affect my family in the future. In 2014, my paternal grandmother passed away. After her death, our mother informed my siblings that our grandmother had a child put up for adoption that was kept secret. While they have had the opportunity to find more information about their sibling, my father and his brothers will not discuss

the adoption. This is their right, but the rest of my family who want to learn more about another link to our grandmother may never get that opportunity the way the law stands. I may not be alive in forty five years from now when the record at the Ohio Department of Health hits the 100 year mark, but I can go to sleep at night with a clear conscience knowing that I was a part of a bill that would allow my children or grandchildren that opportunity to discover another line of lineage to our family.

Chair Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, and to the members of the House State and Local Government Committee, I want to thank you for again your time and allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today.