

January 30, 2025

Subject: Written Testimony – Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2025 Executive Budget
Proposal: Topic Health/Medicaid

I am writing to you today as a concerned citizen to provide testimony on how the proposed bill regarding "Part U – Digitize Genealogical Records" in the FY 2026 Executive Budget would impact my ability to access genealogical/community/historical records. I have been researching my family since I was a teenager and recently earned the Certified Genealogist® credential.

When I work with others researching their family history, one of the largest concerns is the cost. Unlike other states and localities where a copy of these vital records is \$10 or available for free online, New York State records are not only considerably more expensive, but the time required to access these files can be excessive – upwards of a year.

My ancestors are anchored in New York State, but when conducting research, I sigh in relief when I find them outside of New York. For example, Washington State has an extensive digital archives program that is free for anyone to search. The vital records are easy to find and access. Looking for an old marriage record in Iowa, I was able to access it for free via FamilySearch. One has to ask why these records can be accessed immediately and at no cost? The provisions in this bill would move New York backwards in terms of availability of genealogical and historical records and make these records inaccessible except to those with considerable financial means. There is already a lookup fee, why would we add a second fee for time on top of this? This change in fee structure would be a black mark for a state that prides itself on equity and ensuring access to programs and materials for all of its residents.

As to the timeline of available records, the existing years should be maintained. Information is available for living people on a variety of venues – census records, general internet searches, etc. There is no rationale for withholding records for those that are deceased for longer than the current limitations – why wouldn't New York allow access to these records using standards currently held by other states and countries? I urge legislators to continue to make records for genealogical research available for births at 75 years (if the individual has died) and deaths and marriages at 50 years.

While Reclaim the Records has received and shared access to these indices at no cost, the information found in them is limited to names only and at times is illegible. In many cases, this is not enough information to verify that you have the correct record (for example, imagine a Jackson married a Smith – how can you verify you have the right information without correlating that information with other information found in the record? While the information is limited, at a minimum, these indices should be available for public viewing and use. There are organizations that would be willing to assist with digitization of these

records if the state cannot. There is no reason that an index should not be available for free in the public domain.

Instead of looking to limit access to New York's historical records, the state should be making an investment in a digitization project that would make these records available to the public in a timely manner and at little to no cost. If you haven't done so, I encourage you to look at Washington State's digital archives (<https://digitalarchives.wa.gov/>). Conduct a search for Louise Donovan and click death records. A listing will come up for her (<https://digitalarchives.wa.gov/Record/View/975A120D3E325C12430AB4348F480D2E>). There is a summary available on the listing page, and you can also click on a PDF to view the document itself. This can be done in seconds, and you will have a copy of the death record for an individual born in Buffalo, NY, in the 1850s who died in Washington State in 1932. Now, if I asked you to try to find the death record for her sister who died in New York State, you might have the results in eight months to a year to as long as two years. The cost of securing this record will depend on if you know the exact date of her death. Imagine working on a project and having to pause it for two years while you wait for a record?

With its importance in the history of the US as a major immigration port and one of the largest states population wise, New York should be taking the lead in genealogical and historical research and record archives, not lagging behind.

Thank you for your time and consideration.


J.P. Marthia