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Metro&State
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Adoption

Views on record redactions differ

By Rita Price
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

By the time she received a copy of her original birth certificate, Meg Collins had prepared for the possibility that the document would have black boxes obscuring her mother's name.

A new law that unsealed the adoption files of about 400,000 Ohio adoptees also allowed birth parents to request that their names be redacted from the records. Collins figured that her birth mother, whom she had been told was a rape victim, might be among the minority asking the state to withhold their names.

But Collins didn't expect the Ohio Department of Health to go further, blacking out additional information

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ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH

Lake Erie water that has turned green from an algae bloom laps ashore at South Bass Island State Park.

Green monster

Algae back with a vengeance in Lake Erie a year after Toledo's water crisis; prognosis poor

By Laura Arenschield • THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

TOLEDO — The area near the public water intake is freckled with algae, small blobs that resemble a massive school of lime-green fish.

It is a jarring sight, especially so close to today, the one-year anniversary of when Toledo officials told nearly 500,000 customers to stop drinking tap water because it was contaminated with

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Higher education

Student data give colleges new tools

By Reis Thebault
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

As college life becomes increasingly digital, universities are finding more ways to keep tabs on their students online and on campus.

Student ID cards can track students around campus. Computers can analyze students' academic data and predict their future performance. For some, this starts to feel like "Big Brother" is watching, a college that would be at home in George Orwell's *1984*.

But analytics companies and

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Ballot issues

Language the next key to pot initiative

By Alan Johnson
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Words matter, especially on statewide ballot issues.

Assuming that ResponsibleOhio's marijuana legalization constitutional amendment qualifies for the ballot — which seems likely given the 95,572 supplemental signatures the group submitted on Thursday — next up is a crucial stop at the Ohio Ballot Board.

The five-member board, chaired by Secretary of State Jon

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Redactions

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that she and others say adoptees are legally entitled to.

"I'm not trying to cause an issue," said Collins, 41, who was born in Ohio but now lives in Florida. "I just want what's rightfully mine."

Supporters of the statute that took effect in March say the language is clear and not subject to interpretation: Only the name of the birth parent can be redacted.

The health department has a more-expansive view. Employees have been instructed to redact the birth parent's name, address, city and county, Melanie Amato, a spokeswoman, said. "The reason is because that is still all personal indicators and private health information."

Some adoptees say the redactions have even included their own birth names, presumably because someone thought a surname might identify the birth parent.

State Sen. Bill Beagle, a sponsor of the legislation, said such steps go beyond the intent of the law. The Republican from Tipp City said he recently met with top officials at the health department.

"I don't know that we had a meeting of the minds," Beagle said. "They asked for some time to go back and contemplate the conversation. Right now, we're waiting on them to process the meeting and to figure out where they would like to go."

Redactions and missing records are sensitive issues among the adoptees who fought for years for the right to obtain their original birth certificates.

The new law sought to level the field in Ohio, giving adults whose adoptions were finalized between Jan. 1, 1964, and Sept. 18, 1996, access to their original birth certificates and adoption files. Those adopted before 1964 have always had full access.

Records for people adopted on or after Sept. 18, 1996, also were open, as long as the birth parent didn't request exclusion. But the 1964-96 group had remained closed until the new law took effect on March 20.

"The basic premise of our bill is that the birth certificate belongs to the adoptee," said Betsie Norris of Adoption Network Cleveland.

Proponents wanted the law enacted with no restrictions, but some legislators were concerned that opening records that had been closed was like "going back on a promise," Beagle said.

The compromise gave birth parents a year to request redaction. "It helped to demonstrate good faith that we were giving birth parents the opportunity to say yes or no," he said.

According to the health department, 259 birth parents had requested redaction by the March 20 deadline. About 35 adoptees have received redacted files so far.

"We crafted kind of what we could all live with very carefully," Norris said of the compromise. "The law very specifically says *name*. It's a very important point."

Some adoptees also say the health department isn't properly overseeing all the social- and medical-history forms that birth parents are supposed to complete if they want their names redacted.

On that point, the law seems to have a murky spot: The birth-parent packet from the health department says the 15-page history form "must be completed and submitted" along with the redaction request, but a section of the law itself says the history form should be returned after it is completed "to the extent that the biological parent chooses to provide information."

Beagle said he also has talked to health officials about that, too. "What we're hoping is to give these adoptees as much information as possible," he said. "We've made the director aware that there seem to be deficiencies."

For Collins, the medical information is especially important because she has had cancer and other health problems and wants to know what risks her children might face.

"Everything on the form was, 'I don't know,'" Collins said of the history she received. "Vital statistics, we were told, just accepts whatever the birth parents send in."

With help from a researcher, Collins learned the name of the woman who likely is her birth mother a few years ago. The woman didn't want to communicate, though, so Collins sought the records for additional information.

Collins said she has no interest in forcing a relationship. She just wants her own history. "I think that what everybody wants is for them to honor the law," Collins said. "I shouldn't have to sue to get information that is mine."

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Algae

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toxic algae.

About 20 miles east, at South Bass Island State Park near Put-in-Bay, the algae are even thicker. The waves that wash over and stain the park's rocky shore more closely resemble forest-green paint than lake water. The algae were so dense, they hid a water snake swimming a foot from the beach.

Lake Erie's algae bloom is no less potent than a year ago. If anything, scientists say, this year's growing bloom likely will be worse. So far, though, the algae have settled around the islands, shifting from Toledo to tourist spots.

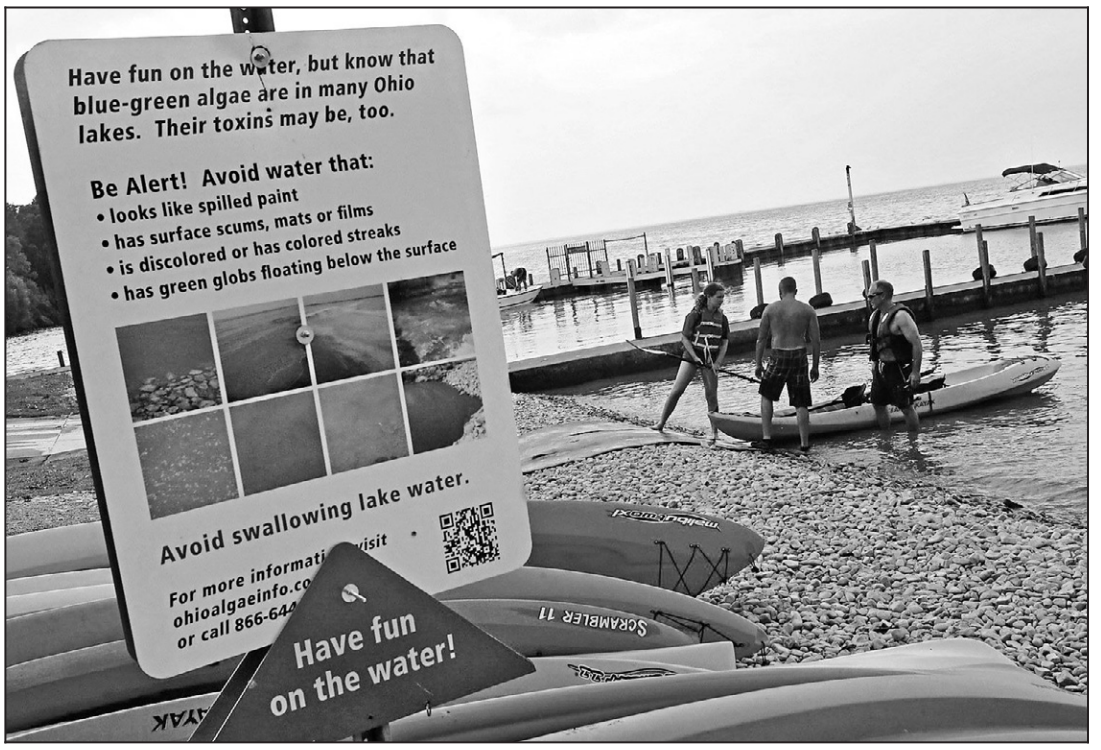
"We have a very serious problem in this region," Toledo Mayor Paula Hicks-Hudson said last week. "We are the ones being forced to clean it up."

The blue-green algae that plague Erie and other lakes across Ohio and the nation produce a neurotoxin called microcystin. The toxin targets the liver but also can irritate skin, the eyes and the throat. It has killed dogs that have swallowed it.

The size of each summer's bloom on Lake Erie is directly related to how much phosphorus flows into the lake from the rivers and streams that feed it. Phosphorus comes from fertilizer on farm fields, manure from hogs and cows, overflowing sewer lines and failed septic systems.

For years, scientists have called for a 40 percent reduction of phosphorus getting into Lake Erie, but Ohio lawmakers have resisted passing regulations that would help meet that target.

Things came to a head last summer when Toledo's drinking-water crisis made international headlines and satellite images of the lake that showed a giant swirl of green were broadcast across the globe.



ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH

Cautionary signs alert visitors to South Bass Island State Park to be aware of this summer's algae bloom on Lake Erie.

More online

▶ To watch a video about Lake Erie's algae woes, go to Dispatch.com/videos.

"There has been progress on this, but the progress has been slow and painful, especially for the people here," said Mike Shriberg, regional executive director of the National Wildlife Foundation's Great Lakes Regional Center. "Right now, it's time for the hard work of implementation."

Although some efforts to prevent algae from forming have succeeded in the past year, scientists and environmental groups say there is much more to do.

In the past year:

- The city of Toledo spent more than $5 million to upgrade its water-treatment plant to better handle toxic algae, test for microcystin near the intake and improve its ability to alert people to safety problems.
- State legislators passed a bill banning farmers from spreading manure on frozen or saturated fields, a practice that generally causes manure to wash off into the surrounding watershed.
- Ohio, Michigan and Ontario, Canada, signed an agreement to cut the flow of phosphorus into the lake by 40 percent over 20 years.
- Ohio allocated $2 million for universities to continue research on the Lake Erie watershed, and set aside money for interest-free loans and grants to help cities upgrade their water- and sewage-treatment plants.

"There has been tremendous progress with the water plants, the treatment, the processes," said Sandy Bihn, executive director of the Lake Erie Waterkeeper advocacy group. The "U.S. (Environmental Protection Agency), the state of Ohio, all have worked collaboratively and together to do the best they can to treat the water, to notify the public — I think they're doing everything they can."

But, Bihn said, the state's effort to reduce phosphorus loads has been abysmal.

Others agree.

"We shouldn't have to treat water at the end of the pipe. We need to stop pollution at its source," said Adam Rissien, director of agricultural and water policy for the advocacy group Ohio Environmental Council.

"That means making sure phosphorus that feeds toxic algae never makes it to the lake. The science is clear, and while there are several sources of this pollution, the majority comes from agriculture."

Jeff Reutter, former director of Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory on Lake Erie, repeatedly has said over the years that the lake could recover within a year if phosphorus levels were cut drastically.

Critics also point out that none of the new regulations passed by the state of Ohio limits how much phosphorus is allowed to run off farm fields or from sewer lines. And none of the regulations requires dairy or hog farms to treat the manure those animals produce or track how much flows into the watershed. Other farms are in the same boat.

As far as public health is concerned, Ohio does not limit access to contaminated water. While other states close beaches when toxic algae levels exceed health standards, Ohio posts signs to warn people that they swim at their own risk.

"We've focused both on working with the drinking-water systems to get them as prepared as possible — even in some areas of the state where maybe they haven't had (harmful algae blooms) but they get their water from a reservoir," said Heidi Griesmer, a spokeswoman for the Ohio EPA. "And, of course, we've worked on the surface-water side to continue the work to reduce nutrients going into the watersheds."

Bihn wants the U.S. EPA to set maximum phosphorus limits for the rivers and streams that feed the western part of Lake Erie.

That would require crop farmers, livestock processors, sewage-system operators and others to come up with ways to curb phosphorus based on real data tracked from individual sources.

"We're just not stepping up and doing what's needed to get the sources reduced," Bihn said.

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