

# Conversion therapy ban appears headed to become Colorado law - March 2019

A ban on conversion therapy with anyone under 18 appears poised to pass through the Colorado Legislature and be signed into law by Gov. Jared Polis, the first openly gay governor elected in the U.S.

The Human Rights Campaign reports such “therapy” seeks to convert a homosexual or bisexual into being heterosexual through psychological or spiritual interventions or both. They say it’s dangerous, as it can lead to depression, anxiety, drug use, homelessness and suicide, especially among minors.

It also has been rejected “by every mainstream medical and mental health organization for decades,” the HRC says.

House Bill 1129 would ban licensed mental health therapists from providing such treatment to youths. The bill was approved by the Senate State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee on a 3-2 vote Monday and sent to the full Senate for what’s expected to be its final vote and a trip to Polis’ office.

Former Attorney General Cynthia Coffman testified that Colorado youth have a high suicide rate, noting that in February alone, the Safe to Tell program took 345 calls about suicide and suicidal ideation among school children statewide.

“Youth ... whatever their sexual orientation, express a fear of being who they are, and they are growing up in a culture of harsher judgment, belittling and lack of acceptance,” Coffman said. “It’s not often as leaders we have an opportunity to do something for children who have guilt, shame and confusion about who they are, but today’s bill presents that opportunity.”

Lindsay Callahan, a mental health therapist with the Family Resource Network in Colorado Springs, said she needed real therapy after going through conversion therapy. “I’m one of the lucky ones who survived conversion therapy,” she said, as 63 percent of youths who undergo it attempt suicide.

But Dr. Mark Barnes said same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria are not inborn. “People can be healed from these conditions,” Barnes said, but the bill interferes with the doctor-patient relationship.

Stephen Black of the Truth & Liberty Coalition, which promotes Christianity, said he was gay for eight years but has been “free of LGBT chaos” for 35 years. “No one is born gay. They can change and be free of sexual sin,” said Black, of Colorado Springs.

Brad Bergford called the bill a “blatant usurpation of parental rights.” Bergford is with the National Lawyers Association, which was founded in 1993 in response to the American Bar Association’s official support of abortion rights.

Parents, not the state, have the right to decide on their children’s therapy, he said.

“This does not tell parents what they have to do,” said Senate Majority Leader Steve Fenberg of Boulder. “It’s just making sure that licensed practitioners are not offering conversion therapy to young people.”

Owen Ziegler, of the Colorado LGBT Bar Association, said his thesis addressed Exodus International, which was allied with Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family. The Exodus president renounced conversion therapy in 2012 and apologized for it, Ziegler said, and Exodus closed in 2013.

A former Exodus and Focus on the Family employee, Brad Ruebendale, said conversion therapy drove him to the brink of suicide. Instead, he came out as gay and was excommunicated from his church and alienated from his family. “Ban conversion therapy so that youth can stop killing themselves in the name of therapy,” Ruebendale said.

“What a difference this might have made for me as a young LGBTQ person subjected to conversion therapy in Colorado Springs,” said a tweet by Carl Charles, an attorney working in New York City for Lambda Legal, which defends civil rights of LGBTQ people.

At age 15, he said, he was taken to conversion therapy at an evangelical church in Colorado Springs once a week for eight months.

“I would walk down a dark staircase ... I remember counting my steps down those stairs, desperately trying to figure out a way to escape — looking at windows to crawl out of, considering turning around and making a run for it, past my dad’s

idling car and into the nearby neighborhood.” The “therapist” told him, “You are not gay! You will burn in hell! Jesus died so that you can repent from your sins!”

“Eventually, I just sat there, listened to him yell at me, and tried to block him out. I am not broken. LGBT youth are not broken. We were all #BornPerfect.”