



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN®

April 7, 2016

The Honorable Rep. Ann Pugh
Chair, House Committee on Human Services
Vermont State House, Room 46
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Re: SUPPORT for S. 132, Testimony from the Human Rights Campaign in support of the bill to protect minors in Vermont from the abusive practice of conversion therapy

Dear Chairperson Pugh and Members of the House Committee on Human Services:

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), on behalf of its over 4,000 members in Vermont, thanks you for the opportunity to submit testimony on S. 132, a vital measure that will protect young people in Vermont from dangerous and discredited practices that falsely claim to change one's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. We urge you to consider and swiftly pass this important legislation.

The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. As an advocate for LGBT young people, HRC believes that no young person should be coerced or subjected to dangerous practices that lack legitimate medical purpose, such as conversion therapy.

Conversion therapy, sometimes referred to as "sexual orientation change efforts," are practices, sometimes performed by licensed mental health providers, which seek to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. These practices are based on the false idea that being LGBT is a mental illness that needs to be cured, an idea which has been rejected by every major mental health group for decades. Conversion therapy does not include therapies that provide acceptance, support, or understanding of LGBT identities; that facilitate coping, social support, or identity exploration; or that address unlawful conduct or unsafe sexual practices. This legislation enacts professional standards for state-licensed mental health providers to clarify that sexual orientation change efforts are not an acceptable or responsible professional practice when applied to young people under age 18.

There is no credible evidence that conversion therapy can change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, and it is abundantly clear that conversion

therapy poses devastating health risks for LGBT young people. These dangerous practices can lead to depression, decreased self-esteem, substance abuse, homelessness, and even suicidal behavior, and for this reason the nation's leading mental health organizations have roundly decried them.¹ Unfortunately, due to discrimination against LGBT people and the fact that professional rules have not kept up with this widespread understanding, some licensed mental health professionals continue to engage in conversion therapy.

Research shows that young people experience conversion therapy as a form of family rejection, and LGBT youth who experience family rejection face increased health risks. In one study, such youth were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs compared with peers who had not experienced such rejection.² On the other hand, family acceptance has been shown to be an important protective factor that can help to prevent suicide behavior and mental health issues. Providers who engage in conversion therapy under state license can mislead families about the risks involved, leading to negative psychological outcomes and irreparable damage to family cohesiveness. This legislation is needed to protect families from these damaging practices.

Additionally, while we would be hopeful that the current language of S. 132 would be interpreted to cover practices that seek to change a person's gender identity, we believe it is important to explicitly prohibit efforts to change a person's gender identity for clarity and to guarantee that all youth are protected under the bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of this critical bill to protect LGBT youth.

Sincerely,



Sarah Warbelow
Legal Director
Human Rights Campaign

¹ For example, the American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Counseling Association, American Psychiatric Association, and American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy all have position statements criticizing conversion therapy.

² Caitlin Ryan, et al., *Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults*. PEDIATRICS 346 (2009).