

Testimony in support of Vermont State Senate bill H.230 in the Health & Wellness Committee

By Llu Mulvaney-Stanak

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Madame Chair Ayer, Senators Lyons, Cummings, McCormack, and Ingram, good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak to you regarding bill H.230.

My name is Lluvia Mulvaney-Stanak. I am a life-long and proud queer Vermonter, born and raised in Barre City, a graduate of Castleton University and the University of Vermont, and currently, the Interim Executive Director of Outright Vermont.

Today I am speaking in support of H.230. My support of this bill comes from both from my own personal experience and from my career of working with queer and trans youth here in Vermont over the last 15 years.

In 1993, I was 13 years old. Ellen had not yet come out on her show. “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” and the “Defense of Marriage Act” were the laws of the land. Civil Unions were only a dream and a bill not yet uttered in this very statehouse.

There were zero Gay/Straight Alliances in Vermont schools and zero out gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or trans people that I knew growing up in Barre City.

To be LGBTQ, especially here in Vermont, even as an adult, was essentially to be invisible.

For a young person to talk about being gay or potentially gay was basically impossible.

Despite all those pressures, at 13 I began to question, explore, and realize my own sexuality and gender. I didn’t feel safe or comfortable talking about it with my friends, my parents, or even my twin sister---and, I didn’t feel safe talking about it with my therapist.

My parents were the most progressive and socially just adults I knew. But, I didn’t know how they would react to me possibly being gay.

What I did know is that my therapist regularly spoke with them about what we discussed in my sessions so I knew I couldn’t bring it up there either.

So, I didn’t. Even as I endured four years of bullying at Spaulding High School.

I had to wait five years, till I was in college and 18, before I actually had the full trust and privacy of a professional to even ask questions about my sexuality and gender.

It is 2017, nearly 25 years later, and while many milestones and victories have been met to normalize LGBTQ lives in our country and state, this critical issue has remained the same.

Young Vermonters **do not** have the right of privacy from their parents in their own mental health treatment regarding their sexuality or gender.

This issue has only grown over time, now that more and more young people are exploring their identities at younger and younger ages.

The most recent 2015 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, cites that nearly 10% of Vermont middle school youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or questioning.

The YRBS does not ask gender identity as a question, so estimates of the total population of queer, trans and gender non-conforming youth are thought to be much higher.

A recent GLAAD survey discovered that nearly 20% of young people ages 18-25 identify as LGBTQ. Thus, we can safely assume that somewhere between 10-20% of young people in Vermont are exploring issues of sexuality and gender on a regular basis.

Young people's identities and sexualities are a critical part of growing up. From as early as elementary school, young people are exploring crushes. In middle school there are dates to dances and first kisses. By high school youth are exploring even more formative areas of relationships.

What is still modeled as "normal and healthy relationships" in our society, in schools, and in health classes are heterosexual ones.

Young people who do pursue same-sex relationships, often do so in secret, making disclosing dating or sexual violence all that much more difficult. Health and healthy relationship curricula often center on straight relationships, putting youth at the margins even further from intervention and support systems. The YRBS survey also noted that **a quarter** of Vermont lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth reported being physically abused or forced to have sex by a partner in the last year. Further, **nearly half** of these same youth have self-harmed or had suicidal ideations. **Nearly half.**

The pressures of being a young person are already intense, but the added impact of questioning your identities, in addition to the isolation that can result, is deeply harmful.

Youth need a safe adult to turn to, to ask questions, to confide in, to seek support.

Ideally, young people's parents should be these adults.

But, at Outright Vermont we know from countless first-hand experiences, including my own, that youth are not always comfortable--it might not even be safe, to talk about everything with a parent.

In fact, nearly 40% of homeless youth nation wide identify as LGBTQ---a direct result of unsafe homes and often being kicked out of the house based on their sexuality or gender identities.

When talking to parents is not an option, talking to mental health providers can be. If youth do not have access to confidentiality, especially if they confide about their sexuality or gender identities, the therapeutic effects are effectively void.

It doesn't have to be this way.

If a young person has the right to privacy about their sexuality or gender, the therapeutic space can be what it should be: affirming, transformative, and healing. A place where a young person realize themselves as full human beings and be counseled to make healthier and safer life choices.

Knowing that you can disclose to your mental health provider, in the midst of the often over-whelming process of exploring your sexuality and or gender, the impact the lives of Vermont youth would be monumental. The end result would be more happy, healthy young people.

For nearly 30 years, Outright Vermont's mission has been to build safe, healthy, and supportive environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth ages 13-22. Passage of H.230 would drastically further that mission and we fully support it.