

PROTECTING YOUTH FROM HARMFUL “CONVERSION THERAPY”

WHAT IS CONVERSION THERAPY?

“Conversion therapy,” sometimes referred to as “sexual orientation change efforts” or “reparative therapy,” encompasses a range of dangerous practices that seek to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity. These practices are based on the false premise that being LGBTQ is a mental illness that needs to be cured — a theory that has been rejected for decades by every major medical and mental health organization.

There is no credible evidence that conversion therapy can change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. To the contrary, research has clearly shown that these practices pose devastating health risks for LGBTQ young people. Conversion therapy is condemned by every major medical and mental health organization, including the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, and American Medical Association.

THE DANGERS OF CONVERSION THERAPY

In 2007, an American Psychological Association Task Force undertook a thorough review of existing research on the efficacy of conversion therapy. It confirmed the practice’s inefficacy, and listed over twenty demonstrated harms conversion therapy brings about, including decreased self-esteem, increased self-hatred, depression, self-blame, hopelessness, increased risk of substance abuse, and even suicide.

Moreover, many LGBTQ youth experience conversion therapy as a form of familial rejection. Research from San Francisco State University found that LGBTQ youth who experience familial rejection, when compared to their counterparts who are accepted by their families, are: more than 8 times as likely to attempted suicide, nearly 6 times as likely to have high levels of depression, more than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs, and more than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted infections.

PREVALENCE

Though survivors willing to share their experiences with conversion therapy may be hard to find in some localities, conversion therapy unfortunately still occurs all across the country. Experts estimate that one in three LGBTQ youth have undergone some form of conversion therapy. Many survivors from across the nation have overcome the shame, fear, hurt and retraumatization they may have faced to share their stories in hopes of protecting the next generation from being subjected to the same devastating harms. Additionally, countless mental health professionals who treated survivors of conversion therapy and parents who—once unaware of the dangers—subjected their children to the practice have opened up in public fora about witnessing firsthand the grave consequences of conversion therapy.

WHAT CAN CITIES DO?

Protecting the next generation from the devastating health risks of conversion therapy should be among the primary goals of municipal decisionmakers. Fortunately, city officials need not wait for state or federal officials to act on this vital issue. It is well within a municipality’s authority to protect its youth from conversion therapy providers within city limits, as an exercise of the city’s inherent authority to protect and promote the health, safety, and wellbeing of its inhabitants.

As of this publication, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and the District of Columbia have enacted laws or regulations to protect minors from being subjected to conversion therapy by state-licensed mental health providers. Encouragingly, municipalities in states that have yet to act have forged ahead with local protections, including localities in Ohio, Florida, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Arizona.

In partnership with the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Human Rights Campaign has developed sample legislation that can be adapted to the local context to protect youth from these dangerous practices

CONCLUSION

Efforts to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity have no scientific merit, and in fact have been proven to be incredibly detrimental to one’s health and wellbeing. Sadly, youth are most vulnerable to these devastating harms, which include depression, homelessness, and suicidality. City officials can and should take leadership on protecting their youth from the fraudulent practice of conversion therapy by exercising their legislative authority to protect the health, safety, and wellbeing of their residents. To underscore the importance of this issue, next year’s MEI will reward cities for enacting ordinances that protect youth from conversion therapy.

Conversion therapy has been rejected by virtually every major mental health, education, and child welfare organization in the United States, including:

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
- American College of Physicians
- American Counseling Association
- American Federation of Teachers
- American Medical Association
- American Osteopathic Association
- American Psychiatric Association
- American Psychoanalytic Association
- American Psychological Association
- American School Counselor Association
- American School Health Association
- Interfaith Alliance Foundation
- National Association of School Psychologists
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Association of Social Workers
- National Education Association
- Pan American Health Organization (PAHO): Regional Office of the World Health Organization
- School Social Work Association of America

LGBTQ Youth Who Experience Familial Rejection Are...



8x

MORE LIKELY TO HAVE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE



6x

MORE LIKELY TO REPORT HIGH LEVELS OF DEPRESSION



3x

MORE LIKELY TO USE ILLEGAL DRUGS



3x

MORE LIKELY TO BE AT HIGH RISK FOR HIV AND STDs

Protecting the next generation from the **devastating health risks of conversion therapy** should be among the primary goals of municipal decisionmakers.