



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

April 10, 2018

The Honorable Asm. Mark Stone
Chairperson, Assembly Committee on the Judiciary
Legislative Office Building, Room 104
1020 N Street
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: SUPPORT for AB 2943, Testimony from American Atheists in support of the bill to protect consumers in California from unfair business practices relating to conversion therapy

Dear Chairperson Stone and Members of the Assembly Committee on the Judiciary:

American Atheists, on behalf of its nearly 5,000 constituents in California, thanks you for holding a hearing on AB 2943, a vital measure that will protect consumers in California from unfair business practices relating to conversion therapy, or as this bill refers to such practices, “sexual orientation change efforts.” Conversion therapy consists of dangerous and discredited practices, often religiously based, that falsely claim to change one’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. As advocates for the health, safety, and well-being of all Americans, American Atheists objects to efforts to subordinate medical care to the religious beliefs of providers and institutions.

Conversion therapy, or sexual orientation change efforts, consists of practices, sometime 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 religious beliefs rather than medical facts, such as the false idea that being LGBTQ is a mental illness that needs to be cured. This idea which has been rejected by every major mental health association group for decades. Conversion therapy does not include therapies that provide acceptance, support, or understanding of LGBTQ identities; that facilitate coping, social support, or identity exploration; that address unlawful conduct or unsafe sexual practices; or that provide assistance to a person going through gender transition. This legislation complements existing professional standards for state-licensed mental health providers which clarify that conversion

therapy is not an acceptable professional practice when applied to young people under age 18 with explicit protection for consumers against unfair business practices relating to conversion therapy. Specifically, the bill prohibits “advertising, offering to engage in, or engaging in sexual orientation change efforts with an individual” in relation to sale of services and business transactions.

While there is no credible evidence that conversion therapy can change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, it is clear that conversion therapy poses devastating health risks for LGBTQ 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 criticized them.¹ Unfortunately, professional rules and laws relating to unfair business practices have not kept up with this widespread understanding, and some licensed mental health providers and businesses continue to engage in conversion therapy, often justifying these dangerous practices based on their religious beliefs. Researchers estimate that 20,000 LGBTQ youth ages 13-17 will receive conversion therapy from a licensed mental health professional before the age of 18.²

Researchers also estimate that 57,000 such LGBTQ youth will receive conversion therapy from a religious or spiritual advisor before age 18. Although this bill does not address conversion therapy that is performed outside of a business context, American Atheists condemns those practices as well. No person should be subject to fraudulent services, abuse, or mistreatment based on the religious beliefs of service providers.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of this important bill to protect the health and well-being of consumers in California. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists’ support for AB 2943, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x9 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Alison Gill, Esq.
Legal and Policy Director
American Atheists

cc: All members of the California Assembly Committee on the Judiciary

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

² Mallory C, Brown TNT, and Conron KJ, *Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth*. The Williams Institute (2018). Available at <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Conversion-Therapy-LGBT-Youth-Jan-2018.pdf>.