



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

January 28, 2020

The Honorable Del. Mark Sickles
House Health, Welfare, and Institutions Committee
Virginia General Assembly
Pocahontas Building, Room W1312
900 East Main Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Re: SUPPORT for HB 386 Testimony from American Atheists in support of bill to protect minors from harmful conversion therapy

Dear Chairperson Sickles and Members of the House Health, Welfare, and Institutions Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its nearly 1,500 constituents in Virginia, thanks you for holding a hearing on HB 386, a vital measure that will protect young people in Virginia from harmful conversion therapy. Conversion therapy consists of dangerous and discredited practices, often religiously based, that falsely claim to change a person'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 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 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) is a mental illness that needs to be cured. This idea which has been rejected by every major medical and mental health group for decades. Conversion therapy does not include therapies that provide acceptance, support, or understanding of LGBTQ identities; that assist a person undergoing a gender transition; that facilitate coping, social support, or identity exploration; or that address unlawful conduct or unsafe sexual practices.

This legislation would amend the professional standards for certain state-licensed health care providers to clarify that conversion therapy is not an acceptable professional practice when applied to young people under age 18, and it subjects licensed providers who conduct such practices to disciplinary action. Moreover, HB 386 states that no state funding shall be used towards the conducting, referring, or compensating the practice of conversion therapy or contracting with individuals or entities involved with its dissemination.

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 young people. These dangerous practices can lead to depression, decreased self-esteem, substance abuse, homelessness, and even suicidal behavior,¹ and for this reason the nation's leading mental health organizations have criticized them.² Unfortunately, professional rules have not kept up with this widespread understanding, and some licensed mental health providers 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 18.³ This same study also estimates that 57,000 such LGBTQ youth will receive conversion therapy from a religious or spiritual advisor before age 18. Although this bill does not prevent conversion therapy practiced by unlicensed religious organizations, American Atheists condemns those practices as well. No young person should be subject to abuse or mistreatment based on the religious beliefs of others.

Young people experience conversion therapy as a form of family rejection, and LGBTQ 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.⁴ On the other hand, family acceptance has been shown to be an important protective factor that can help to prevent suicidal behavior and mental health issues. Providers who engage in conversion therapy with the validation indicated by a state license can mislead families about the risks involved, leading to negative psychological outcomes and irreparable damage to the whole family. This legislation is needed to protect families from these damaging practices.

¹ American Psychological Association, Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. (2009). *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*. Available at <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbcc/publications/therapeutic-resp.html>.

² 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.

³ Mallory C, Brown TNT, and Conron KJ. (2018). *Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth*. The Williams Institute. Available at <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Conversion-Therapy-LGBT-Youth-Jan-2018.pdf>.

⁴ Caitlin Ryan, et al. (2009). Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults. *Pediatrics* 346 (2009).

Thank you for holding a hearing on this important bill to protect the health and well-being of young people in Virginia. We urge you to swiftly pass this life-saving measure. If you should have any questions regarding our support for HB 386, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AG', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Alison Gill, Esq.
Vice President, Legal and Policy
American Atheists

cc: All Members of the Virginia House Health, Welfare, and Institutions Committee