

Polygamy bill clears a Utah House committee

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SALT LAKE CITY — A bill that reduces bigamy among consenting adults to an infraction in Utah has cleared another vote in the state legislature.

[Senate Bill 102](#), sponsored by Sen. Deidre Henderson, R-Spanish Fork, passed unanimously out of the House Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Committee.

"The wall Utah has built to keep people out of polygamy is the very wall that's keeping them trapped inside," Sen. Henderson told the committee.

The bill lowers bigamy to an infraction, putting it on par with a traffic ticket. But in concert with other crimes like abuse, welfare fraud, or child-bride marriages, it is a second-degree felony.

"The threat of a felony and going to prison remains," said Rep. Lowry Snow, R-Santa Clara, the bill's House sponsor.

The bill has the support of the Statewide Association of Prosecutors, the Utah Office of Crime Victims, the ACLU of Utah, the YWCA and others as it moves through the legislature. But current and former members of Utah's polygamous communities are divided on it.

"With the current law in the state, we have codified discrimination, prejudice and stigma so even people who want to leave can't do it," said Shirlee Draper, an ex-member of the Fundamentalist LDS Church and a victim advocate with the group Cherish Families, testifying in support of the bill.

Hildale Mayor Donia Jessop also spoke in support of the bill, arguing that Utah's current laws allowed FLDS leader Warren Jeffs to abuse his followers. Jeffs is currently serving life in a Texas prison for child sex assault related to underage marriages.

"It was in this environment that Warren Jeffs rose to power," Mayor Jessop said. "He exploited our fear of the outside and began to abuse our families, tearing them apart and taking children from their parents. Nobody dared oppose him for fear of losing our families, our homes and other assets."

But others argued that lessening the anti-polygamy laws will not help free people to report abuses.

"With me knowing polygamy was illegal, it helped me to leave the Kingston polygamous cult," said Melissa Ellis, the vice-president of the Sound Choices Coalition. "With polygamy being illegal, it nagged at me and pushed me to leave."

Ian Jeffs, a nephew of Warren Jeffs, did not believe it would change behaviors.

"I feel like decriminalizing the practice will only embolden leaders, not break the seclusion or expose any more of the abuse," he testified.

Alina Darger, a plural wife, said she grew up afraid of law enforcement.

"What about me? What about my family that had 'polygamous bitches' sprayed on their car and driveway but was afraid to call law enforcement?" she said.

The bill has previously [cleared the Utah State Senate under unanimous votes](#). It now goes to the full House for debate.