

LGBT activists say new bills, including ones in Utah, target transgender youth

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At the urging of conservative advocacy groups, Republican legislators in more than a dozen states are promoting bills that focus on transgender young people. One batch of bills would bar doctors from providing them certain gender-related medical treatment; another batch would bar trans students from participating on school sports teams of the gender they identify with. The proposed laws, if enacted, “would bring devastating harms to the transgender community,” said Chase Strangio, a transgender-rights lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union. He warned that the medical bans — now pending in Colorado, Florida, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Carolina and South Dakota and likely to surface elsewhere — could trigger suicides among young people yearning to undergo gender transition.

The bills’ goals have been endorsed by several national conservative groups, including Alliance Defending Freedom and Eagle Forum.

“We’ve got lots of legislators working on this,” said Gayle Ruzicka, an activist with Eagle Forum’s Utah chapter. “We don’t let this happen to children.”

The bill recently introduced in South Dakota would make it a felony for medical providers to perform operations or administer hormone therapy to help minors change their gender. The Missouri bill would subject doctors to revocation of their license if they administered gender-reassignment treatment, and parents who consented to such treatment would be reported to child-welfare officials for child abuse.

“I cannot imagine what happens to transgender people if these criminal bans pass,” said the ACLU’s Strangio, a transgender man. “I don’t think we can possibly raise the alarm enough, because people are going to die.”

The medical director of the Trevor Project, a youth suicide prevention service, also expressed dismay, saying the bills could deprive some young people of potentially life-saving treatment. “They would force doctors to make an untenable decision and could result in their imprisonment for providing best-practice medical care,” said Dr. Alexis Chavez, a transgender psychiatrist.

A Utah legislator, Republican Rep. Brad Daw, said he has accepted Eagle Forum’s request to begin drafting such a bill, though his current proposal now contains some changes from the language suggested by the advocacy group.

While his bill would ban surgeries and hormone therapy for minors, it would allow puberty blockers — medications that temporarily puts puberty on hold.

“We want to do what we think is reasonable practice, which is put off that kind of one-way ticket decision until the youth is an adult,” he said.

Daw said he wants to be sensitive and respectful to transgender kids and their families but remains concerned about medical steps toward transitioning.

"What we want is really good policy off the bat," said Daw, who's still drafting the bill for the legislative session that begins Jan. 27.

For transgender kids and their families, though, the idea of putting those steps out of reach is terrifying. Robyn Rumsey of Roy, Utah said her child was withdrawn and angry before coming out as transgender at age 12.

"As parents we were completely thrown, to say the least," she said. In consultation with a counselor and doctors, Dex Rumsey gradually began wearing short hair and boy's clothes, then began using puberty blockers and eventually testosterone.

"It wasn't a decision that was taken lightly," Robyn Rumsey said. It's made her son, now 15, into a happy, thriving person, she said. The family is considering surgery later this year.

"We have seen this child completely turn around," she said. Dex considered suicide before coming out, and if he didn't have access to hormones she worries those thoughts would return. Just learning about the idea of a ban sent him into a panic and a sleepless night, she said.

"I know that it would be a life or death situation for my son. We would be desperate to find help and medication for him," she said.

Dex Rumsey said the time since he's started hormone therapy has been the happiest of his life.

"I was never comfortable under my own skin. I always felt wrong, disgusting and I hated myself. These hormones have allowed me to feel comfortable with who I am. It's allowed me to be happier. I don't hate myself, I'm not depressed, I don't feel suicidal anymore," he said.

That kind of sentiment should be a particular concern to state leaders looking to bring down the state's suicide rate, said Troy Williams with the group Equality Utah.

If a law were to pass, Dex Rumsey said he'd want to leave the state. "I don't think they realize the damage these types of things are causing," he said.

The Alliance Defending Freedom is also leading a nationwide campaign to prevent transgender girls from competing with other girls in high school sports. It has filed a federal discrimination complaint on behalf of Connecticut girls who competed in track-and-field and say state's inclusive policy on transgender athletes has cost them top finishes and possibly college scholarships.

"Forcing female athletes to compete against biological males isn't fair and destroys their athletic opportunities," said attorney Matt Sharp, the ADF's state government relations director. "Likewise, every child deserves a childhood that allows them to experience puberty and other natural changes that shape who they will become."

So far this year, bills to restrict transgender students' sports participation are pending in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, Tennessee and Washington state, according to the ACLU. Idaho State Rep. Barbara Ehardt told the Idaho Statesman she's preparing a similar bill. In several cases, the bills would override trans-inclusive policies adopted by state high school athletic associations.

The Alabama measure, titled the Gender Is Real Legislative Act, would bar any K-12 public school from participating in interscholastic sports events which allow trans athletes to compete according to their gender identity.

“The GIRL Bill seeks to support female student-athletes, so that they may compete against each other and not have to compete against male students with an unfair advantage,” said the bill’s author, Rep. Chris Pringle.

Several national women's rights and sports organizations are pushing back, saying that barring transgender people from sports teams aligning with their gender identity often means they are “excluded from participating altogether.”
