

Bills on transgender youth will return to Utah legislature

<https://www.fox13now.com/news/local-news/bills-on-transgender-youth-will-return-to-utah-legislature>

FOX13

By: [Ben Winslow](#)

Jun 16, 2021

SALT LAKE CITY — A pair of bills dealing with transgender youth that failed to pass the legislature earlier this year will be coming back.

The legislature's Interim Health & Human Services Committee held a pair of hearings on Wednesday about potential legislation on transgender youth beginning hormone therapies and those who wish to participate in youth sports.

Rep. Rex Shipp, R-Cedar City, floated the idea of banning youth from being able to take hormones or any other transition therapies until age 18.

"Sometimes we just have to say 'Let's wait on this, maybe you're going to be fine and you can transition later if that's the case,'" he told the committee.

Dr. Nicole Mihalopoulos, an adolescent medicine physician who treats transgender youth at a clinic run by the University of Utah, testified that while some children are given "puberty blockers" she does not do gender-affirming surgeries for minors.

"It is not a superficial consideration. It is not taken lightly. It is an in-depth dialogue with a family and a child to better understand where that family is, where that child is, and how best to support them," she said of transgender health care.

But David Pruden, the former director of Evergreen International who now edits the Journal on Human Sexuality, supported Rep. Shipp's legislation.

"Parental rights are important. But the right to harm children or let other people harm your children is something that legislatures deal with all the time," he testified.

Some lawmakers bristled at the idea of the legislature interfering in health care, while others questioned why hormone therapy is necessary for youth.

"Do you think you that can tell me what my kid's medical treatment is going to be?" pressed Rep. Jennifer Dailey-Provost, D-Salt Lake City.

"That's a loaded question, representative," Rep. Shipp replied.

At another part of the hearing, Rep. Cheryl Acton, R-West Jordan, asked Dr. Mihalopoulos: "Do you stress self-acceptance before medical intervention? Accepting the fact you were born male or female?"

"That sounds a little like conversion therapy," the doctor replied.

The hearing was tightly controlled, with time limits for testimony and many witnesses submitting pre-written answers to committee questions. No bills were advanced, but Rep. Kera Birkeland, R-Morgan, [announced that her legislation on transgender girls in sports will be run again.](#)

"This is going to become an issue. If it's not today, it's next year or down the road," she warned the committee.

Rep. Birkeland said she was already hosting roundtable discussions with concerned parents and planned meetings with the LGBTQ rights group Equality Utah and the ACLU. She told the committee she knows of transgender athletes competing presently.

"We have had no record of participation," said David Spatafore, a lobbyist speaking on behalf of the Utah High School Activities Association. "We are aware of inquiries prior to tryouts, but are aware of nothing more than an inquiry."

Spatafore testified that the UHSAA's policy on transgender athletes mirrors the NCAA's. It will allow for a transgender athlete to compete so long as they have been on hormone therapy for a year.

But Rep. Birkeland argued that there are disadvantages for cisgender girls in sports, even with hormone therapy. She said her bill will not deal with transgender boys, but instead will focus on transgender girls and will not ban anyone but may set other guardrails.

"Honestly there's already restrictions for weight requirements in sports, there's boundary restrictions in sports,"

Rep. Birkeland told FOX 13 after the hearing. "There already are restrictions in place for fairness so let's look at broadening some of those restrictions so we can make sure we're fair everywhere possible."

Sue Robbins, who serves on Equality Utah's Transgender Advisory Council, told the committee about 1.8% of youth surveyed in the state identify as transgender. She argued the legislation is targeting an already vulnerable population with a high suicide rate.

"We have a significant amount of our precious youth that will be impacted by what we do here," Robbins said.

Spatafore said that if the legislature were to pass any bill, the USHAA would like to be indemnified from any lawsuits that would happen. Other states that have passed similar bills are facing litigation right now.

Rep. Birkeland said she wanted to keep discussing the issue, but warned that Utah faced lawsuits and citizen referendums regardless. [Governor Spencer Cox earlier this year threatened to veto the bills](#), but they never made it out of the 2021 session.

After the hearing, Dr. Candice Metzler, the executive director of Transgender Education Advocates of Utah said there is more education and conversation needed with lawmakers.

"My hope is that we recognize we have more in common to work through this together to get through this than what would happen as an end-result if we work against each other," she said.