

February 15, 2023

Chair Nosse, Vice-Chair Goodwin, Vice-Chair Nelson, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Akash Singh. Some members of the committee know me and others may recognize my name from my advocacy on issues largely related to climate change and its impacts on Oregonians. But HB 2458 is a piece of legislation that I feel deeply about on a personal level and it is in that capacity I am testifying today in support.

The climate for LGBTQIA+ Americans is terrifying. Hundreds of bills have been introduced across state legislatures just in 2023 that seek to destroy the ability of trans and gender non-conforming Americans to even exist. The massacre at Club Q in Colorado Springs was a horrific loss of life that reminded is yet again that every space I gather in with my community is at risk of hateful violence. Every day there is the reality of trans youth being physically and mentally harmed to the point of suicide because of the profoundly ugly bigotry making its way through our political system.

I am gay and gender non-conforming, which is an identity that is mine to craft and mine alone. But I cannot craft it with my full self, and therefore live, if I am not safe to do so. I have always been who I am and like every queer kid, knew I was different for the world will always find ways to identify your queerness before you yourself can. Even if I wasn't always who I am and it was a choice, that would still be my choice to define and mine alone.

The practice of “conversion therapy” (used in quotation marks as this practice is not a form of therapy) is torture. It stems from a bigoted belief that trans and queer people can be “corrected” into what dominant society believes to be the only way to exist. It stems from a desire to rob us of our freedom to live. It stems from an otherness that is present in so much of our lives that is everpresent for us - with our families, workplaces, or just walking down the street and being more aware of how our existence is impacted by the perception of those who have the structural power to define us.

When I was pressured to undergo “conversion therapy”, the words “conversion therapy” were never used but the intent was clear - that I was diseased and needed to cure myself, that I was simply mistaken and had somehow been hoodwinked in a way that only medication could treat, that my refusal to entertain this repugnant notion was an unforgivable act.

Intellectually I expected that some people in my life would react really poorly to my sexual orientation, let alone gender identity. Recognizing something intellectually, however, does not make experiencing it any less hurtful, harmful, painful. The pressure from people I did not expect support from but still cared for to undergo “conversion therapy” drove me to the brink of suicide.

The people who were pressuring me in their own way to undergo “conversion therapy” did not feel that they were doing anything wrong, that they were punishing me. They were under the impression that they were providing an escape, a solution, that it was their version of showing care to a loved one. But the end result is still trauma that I perhaps would not have been able to recover from.

It was not the first time I was at the brink of suicide but I don’t know if I possess all the words to describe the depth of harm that I experienced at not just being seen by some of the people I cared for the most, but by the recognition that my existence as it is was unacceptable to them. That I could not count on them to be there for me unless I underwent some form of a torturous process to prove that the toxicity of their support was the kind I deserved. That I would have to suffer so profoundly to receive what everyone deserves - love and support - profoundly damaged me in ways that I am still recovering from.

The intentions of those forcing or pressuring us to seek that harm are irrelevant of the material harm conversion therapy causes to trans and queer people.

Victor Madrigal-Borloz, a UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, noted that “conversion therapy” is discriminatory, cruel, inhumane, and degrading. In his 2020 report to the UN Human Rights Council, he identifies three primary methods through which conversion therapy is practiced: 1) “psychotherapeutic interventions based on the belief that sexual or gender diversity stems from an abnormal upbringing or experience”, 2) “medical practices rooted in the theory that sexual or gender diversity is an inherent biological dysfunction” and 3) “faith-based interventions that act on the premise that there is something inherently evil in diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.” (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/108/68/PDF/G2010868.pdf?OpenElement>)

The 2020 report above makes the following recommendations as to what governments ought to do in response to the horrific abuse of “conversion therapy” (the language is almost entirely lifted from the report):

1. Ban “conversion therapy” through:

- a. Clear definition of what constitutes “conversion therapy”,
 - b. Banning public fund usage for “conversion therapy”,
 - c. Banning advertisement of “conversion therapy” in any setting public or private,
 - d. Sanctions for non-compliance
- 2. Create, monitor, and support pathways for victims of “conversion therapy” to access reparations, including rehabilitation programs and legal assistance
- 3. Protect children and young people from “conversion therapy” through programs in settings including but not limited to health care, religious, educational, community, and commercial settings
- 4. Carry out campaigns to raise awareness of the cruelty and inhumanity of “conversion therapy”
- 5. Create, monitor, and support programs re: sexual health, orientation, and gender identity
 - a. These programs should include foci on the patient’s orientation and identity and potential conflicts with “religious, social, or internalized norms and prejudices, with a focus on identity exploration and development, reducing distress and the need to address ‘minority stress’, as well as focusing on active coping and social support and the concept of affirmation”
- 6. Foster dialogue with stakeholders including but not limited to medical and health professional organizations, educational institutions, and community-based organizations about the harms of “conversion therapy”
- 7. Repeal laws and regulations “that enable, promote or fuel practices of “conversion therapy, key among them being laws criminalizing diversity in sexual orientations or gender identities”
- 8. Adopt laws and regulations to ensure protection from violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity
- 9. De-pathologization of diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity in State and non-State medical classifications that have an impact on public health policies and diagnostics in all health-care settings, including in medical curricula, accreditation procedures and continuing education;

10. Adopt all measures necessary to eliminate the social stigma associated with gender diversity, including the development, implementation and evaluation of an education and sensitization campaign
11. Adopt all measures necessary to protect trans and gender-diverse children from all forms of discrimination and violence
12. Support the development of research and data collection, disaggregated by all relevant dimensions, on the specific issue of practices of “conversion therapy” and pursuant to the principles and safeguards identified by the Independent Expert, key among them being the participation of affected communities, populations and peoples
13. Design, implement and constantly evaluate education, training and public information campaigns to tackle stigma and prejudice against LGBTQIA+ communities

HB 2458 is one piece of the puzzle but it is an important one, especially in a climate where every day there is a new nightmare awaiting my community.

I am grateful for every morning when I open my eyes because it means that I am still here. I simply ask that you ensure that others can do the same.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Akash Singh

Akash Singh, JD