

February 14, 2023:

To the House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care:

I am writing in support of HB2458, a measure that would ban the deeply harmful practice known as conversion therapy. I am a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in LGBTQ affirming mental health care for adults. My practice is based in Portland and because of the increased access to services telehealth has afforded Oregonians, I am lucky enough to work with transgender and queer clients throughout the state, many of whom live in rural areas where there are no affirming LGBTQ resources available.

Over my years in practice, I have worked firsthand with many clients who have been subjected to conversion ‘therapy,’ both as children and as adults. Many of these clients felt coerced into attending, but many more saw the false promise of being “normal” as a ray of hope, as the only way to fit in to their families, churches, communities. While all of the clients I have seen who attended conversion therapy ended up with trauma from these experiences, it is the clients who went willingly as adults and believed they were getting legitimate help and hope that have had the most insidious lasting damage to their psyches. I have sat with these clients for years, tending to their hopelessness and shame, their perceptions that they were created wrong, that by being their authentic selves, they had somehow failed their God, their families, their communities.

Every major mental health organizing body has made strong public statements expressing that conversion therapy should not be considered mental health treatment. There are decades of research showing that this practice is ineffective at changing sexual orientation or gender, and does irreparable harm to those subjected to it. Even the United Nations General Assembly has called for a global end to this practice, citing global research, including from the United States, showing that conversion therapy is tantamount to torture. As a psychologist who has worked with international survivors of political torture and local survivors of conversion therapy, I agree with this comparison completely.

Therapeutically, it takes years of treatment to even attempt to heal this type of lasting trauma. Both anecdotally from my practice and from the research on mental health outcomes of survivors of conversion therapy, many have lifelong depression, suicidality, panic attacks, difficulty forming close relationships, in addition to chronic internalized shame and difficulty expressing their authentic gender and sexual orientation. The emotional costs to individuals who have been through this practice are astronomical. The financial and logistical costs of long term trauma treatment for the thousands of Oregonians who will need it if conversion therapy is not banned is unfathomable. At a time when Oregon’s mental health system is already strained due to lack of access to care, limited qualified providers who specialize in LGBTQ mental health, insurance restrictions on timeline of care, financial marginalization etc., the last thing our state needs to allow a fraudulent “treatment” to continue, when we know it will create a larger lasting burden on legitimate mental health care.

You have a chance to help the mental health of Oregonians by banning this practice. Ban conversion therapy because it is a sham treatment, snake oil for our most vulnerable Oregonians. Ban it because it will cost our system more; ban it because Oregon should stand with the

American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration for effective mental health treatment. Ban it because Oregon should be on the right side of history, and not condone a practice that the United Nations considers torture. Ban it based on the testimony of professionals like myself, who have seen and treated the damage done, and have been left forever changed by these experiences. Ban it based on the testimony of survivors, who are speaking out with courage, and a fierce sense of compassion to make sure others aren't subjected to the same horrors they were. But most of all, ban it because it's the right thing to do.

Many thanks for considering this issue.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ari Kramer