

Colorado Legislature
Senate State, Veterans, & Military Affairs
Testimony *Against* House Bill 17-1156 "Concerning a Prohibition on Conversion
Therapy by a Licensed Mental Health Provider"

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Good afternoon Mister Chairman and Members of the Committee.

My name is Jeff Johnston. I testify on behalf of thousands of men and women who have left homosexuality – including myself. I also represent my wife and three sons – young men who would not exist if I had not walked away from homosexuality.

I work as a Marriage, Gender and Homosexuality Public Policy Analyst at Focus on the Family, so I also represent tens of thousands of our Colorado constituents. I oppose House Bill 17-1156 for many reasons. This written testimony is more detailed than my public remarks.

- 1. This bill is an intolerant attack on religious freedom and people of faith. Medical and mental health groups acknowledge the importance of respecting a client's religion and spirituality. These groups also warn against practitioners imposing their beliefs on a client. This bill is disrespectful toward people with unwanted homosexual attractions or behaviors who seek help dealing with those attractions and behaviors according to their faith.**

I was a young person of faith. I had same-sex attractions, but I did not want to act on them. I believed what the Bible taught – that sexual expression was reserved for marriage between a husband and wife. In my twenties I sought help from a licensed mental health professional. Licensed mental health professionals often help people with moral issues — not just mental health issues. Therapy was a huge help for me in leaving homosexuality.

I can't imagine my despair if I were told I could not see a licensed counselor to help me live in line with my faith. (And make no mistake, while the bill now only bans help for minors, the end goal is to ban therapeutic help for people of all ages – that's what we saw in California when similar legislation was introduced, and that's what we already see in one city.)

Under this legislation, a 15 year-old Christian boy, in a sexual relationship with an 18 year old man (legal under current state law), who is conflicted because of his faith and wants to change his sexual behavior, would not be able to receive help from a licensed therapist. This legislation bans “changing behavior” related to “sexual orientation,” violating this boy’s religious freedom.

- 2. This therapy ban is a flagrant assault on client autonomy and self-determination. Medical and mental health groups acknowledge the client’s right to determine the course of treatment. This legislation contravenes the recommendations of every professional mental health organization as they support client self-determination. This even includes a task force from the American Psychological Association – a group composed completely of gay activists and allies – that reported on “sexual orientation change efforts” (SOCE) in 2009. Even this activist APA task force did not recommend legislation to shut down SOCE**

The APA task force supported the right to self-determination – that is, clients work with a therapist to set their own goals for counseling. Their 2009 report “Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation” stated:

We encourage LMHP [licensed mental health providers] to support clients in determining their own (a) goals for their identity process; (b) behavioral expression of sexual orientation; (c) public and private social roles; (d) gender role, identity, and expression; (e) sex and gender of partner; and (f) form of relationship(s). ((Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on “Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation,” 2009, p. 63)

- 3. This bill threatens parental rights. Colorado law acknowledges that parents “have a fundamental right and responsibility to make decisions concerning the care, custody and control of their children. The law has long presumed that parents act in the best interest of their children.” (C.R.S. 13-22-107 (2016)) Under this bill, parents with a gender confused five-year old could not work with a licensed mental health professional to help the child work toward congruence with bodily reality. If a thirteen-year-old boy were to tell his parents he wanted help to stop viewing gay pornography, under this legislation they would not be able to find a licensed professional to help him change his behaviors.**

Parents should be able to find professional counseling that upholds their faith-informed concerns and desires for their children. In California, the legislator who

presented a similar bill even admitted, *"The attack on parental rights is exactly the whole point of the bill...."*

Where a child may be in conflict with parents over this issue, access should be available to professional counseling that aids the family's relationships and emotional processes without undermining the faith-informed aspects of a parent's concerns. Minors dealing with unwanted homosexual behaviors, identity and attractions or with gender confusion issues are undergoing formational periods of identity development. A family-centered, connected, compassionate, directional approach with a minor is a fundamental benefit and aim of professional therapy.

- 4. This therapy ban is unique and unprecedented because it seeks to ban the goals or outcome of the therapy, rather than a methodology. The proponents of this bill disagree with certain client outcomes, such as a minor choosing to walk away from homosexual identity and behaviors. They oppose gender-confused minors working in therapy to align their identity with their biological sex. They only allow therapy in one direction – toward homosexual or transgender identity and expression. With this proposed ban, legislators are intervening in the complexities of clinical practice and violating the privacy of the counselor-client relationship.**

In previous years, legislators supporting this ban have referenced "re-birthing therapy" which Colorado banned years ago. Rebirthing therapy was banned because of methodology – a girl suffocated in a blanket as she was "rebirthed." So a therapeutic method was banned. This is vastly different from self-determined, faith-based talk therapy that helps those with unwanted homosexual or transgender feelings, thoughts, identity and behavior.

This ban is highly suspect because legislators are intervening in the complexities of clinical practice. Normally boards that oversee mental health professionals make such decisions, but in this instance, legislators are seeking to overrule them. The drive to shut down help for those with unwanted same-sex identity, behavior or attractions is largely political and ideological; it is not rooted in science or research.

- 5. Finally, this bill has been brought before the legislature for three consecutive years now. In the past two years of hearings and testimony on these bills, nobody has brought forward any ethics complaints or standards violations against any licensed mental health professional in Colorado who practices any form of so-called conversion therapy. No complaints. Licensed mental health workers do not use force, abuse, shame or coercion. If they do, their**

client could file an ethics complaint, and their licensing board could discipline them. In three years of testifying, I have seen no complaints brought forward.

This session may be different, but in the past two years, none of the testimony has been from minors who were “harmed” by so-called “conversion therapy.” No testimony was from those who underwent “conversion therapy” as a minor. All those testifying were adults when they saw a therapist – freely choosing their counselor and determining their therapeutic goals.

In addition, much of the testimony for two years – and I suspect some of that from today – has been dishonest and misleading. This testimony has conflated therapy with a licensed or registered mental health professional – with other work done by informal mentors, conferences, pastors, Christian and secular support groups. Even a semester of college-level leadership and worldview classes at Focus on the Family was labelled “reparative therapy.”

For the record, Focus on the Family has never offered and does not offer “conversion therapy.” We are not a counseling group, but we provide resources and support for individuals, marriage and families, and we support life and religious freedom. And we support the rights of those who seek counseling to live out their sexuality according to their faith.

This is really about competing worldviews. One ideology says homosexuality and transgenderism are innate and unchangeable; only “gay- or “transgender-affirming” therapy should be allowed; and any who disagree must be silenced. This is ideology, not science. Research actually demonstrates a great deal of change and fluidity in both homosexuality and transgenderism.

On the other side is a religious or personal belief that says people should be free to choose to leave homosexuality or transgenderism. Do you support freedom? Or should the state force a certain belief on individuals?

I urge you to vote against this ban and support free speech, religious freedom, parental rights, and client choice. Thank you. I’d be happy to take any questions.