

Colorado Legislature
Senate State, Veterans, and Military Affairs Committee
Testimony *Against* House Bill 16-1210 “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'm here representing myself, my family and hundreds of men and women I know who have left 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 this legislation for many reasons.

1. State licensing boards – for Marriage and Family Therapists, Licensed Professional Counselors, Psychologists, Psychiatrists and other licensed and registered mental health professionals – have adequate standards in place for mental health professionals in Colorado. These include:

- Educational and supervision requirements,
- Testing and licensing requirements,
- Informed consent and intake forms required for each client,
- Ethics and complaints procedures – there is a simple, online or computer process for filing a complaint.

There are adequate standards in place and recourse for clients who claim to be harmed by a therapist. It is unnecessary and highly unusual for legislators to intervene in the clinical process.

2. Licensed therapists don't use coercion or aversive therapy for unwanted homosexual behavior, identity or attractions. As mentioned, ethics, conduct and practice guidelines adequately cover these issues.

3. During two years of committee hearings and testimony on these bills, nobody has brought forward any ethics complaints or standards violations against any licensed mental health professionals in Colorado who have practiced any form of so-called conversion therapy. No complaints.

4. In two years, none of the testimony has been from minors who were “harmed” by so-called “conversion therapy” or by those who had “conversion therapy” as a minor. All those testifying were adults when they underwent therapy.

And much of the testimony conflates *therapy*, with a licensed or registered mental health professional, with other work done by Christian and secular support groups, informal mentors, conferences, pastoral counselors – even a college semester of classes at Focus on the Family called “The Focus Leadership Institute.”

5. Those testifying have also mentioned high rates of substance abuse, depression and suicide for LGBT-identified young people. These statistics are from a single study with a small sample of LGBT-identified young adults who experienced *family rejection* – not “conversion therapy.”

There is not one outcome-based, peer-reviewed scientific study demonstrating that minors – or anyone, for that matter – are harmed by working with a counselor to diminish unwanted homosexuality.

6. Several people have also testified about being suicidal during the process of reconciling with their homosexuality. Suicide is a complicated issue. The National Alliance on Mental Health states that about 90% of individuals who die by suicide experience mental illness. To reduce this complicated issue to simplistic statements, such as “conversion therapy causes teen suicide” is simplistically deceptive, trivializes the therapeutic work of those who leave homosexuality, and is a gross politicized misuse of a serious problem.

7. Licensed therapists don’t use coercion or aversive therapy for unwanted homosexual behavior, identity or attractions. The licensing groups in the state have ethics, conduct and practice guidelines which cover these issues.

Finally, my opposition to this bill is deeply personal:

Some of my earliest childhood memories are of engaging in sexual play with other neighbor boys. There was the blonde boy from kindergarten. The neighbor who I often spent the night with when we were about six – he led the way in sexual exploration. The boy down the street, when I was about seven; we would go into a closet together and simulate sexual activity.

I felt a great deal of shame, guilt and fear about these activities, and kept silent about them for many years. I withdrew from healthy, non-sexual relationships with other boys and men. I questioned my identity and sexuality, especially during adolescence. What did this mean about me? Did this mean I was homosexual? Was I gay?

I want to be clear: Childhood sexual abuse does not cause homosexuality – there is no “one thing” that leads to homosexuality. But it certainly is a contributing factor for many people, as it derails heterosexual development.

In my twenties I went to see a counselor for unwanted same-sex attractions and sexual activity. Because of my faith, I believed that God had designed sexual intimacy to unite a husband and wife in marriage. I was also familiar with the greater health risks associated with homosexual behavior. And, I wanted a family of my own, a wife and children.

Thankfully, a licensed professional counselor was available to help me. I signed an “informed consent” form before we began. Counseling did not focus on my “sexual orientation” or “changing from gay to straight.” We talked about and worked through issues that many counselors deal with, including: family and relational dynamics; significant childhood events; understanding and managing emotions; my self-image, replacing lies with truth; building healthy relationships; forgiving others; and receiving forgiveness.

Most such therapy involves helping people live according to their faith. It helps them pursue a healthy identity and sexual integrity. I wish that I had found such care earlier, in my teens, and I’m grateful for several mental health professionals who have provided hope and healing over the years.

Banning this therapy is an egregious assault on free speech, client autonomy and self-determination, parental rights and religious freedom. Please vote against this harmful bill.