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June 27, 2014

The Human Rights Campaign Testimony before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on Health

Re: SUPPORT for DC B20-501 – Conversion Therapy for Minors Prohibition Amendment Act

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Good morning, Chairwoman Alexander and Members of the Committee. My name is Alison Gill, and I am Senior Legislative Council at the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. Today, I am here to testify in support of B20-501, a vital measure that will protect young people from dangerous and discredited practices that falsely claim to change one's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.

So-called “conversion therapy” or “sexual orientation change efforts” are practices, sometime performed by licensed mental health providers, which seek to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. These practices are based on the false idea that being LGBT is a mental illness that needs to be cured, an idea which has been rejected by every major mental health group for decades. SOCE does not include therapies that provide acceptance, support, or understanding of LGBT identities; that facilitate coping, social support, or identity exploration; or that address unlawful



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conduct or unsafe sexual practices. This legislation enacts professional standards for state-licensed mental health providers to clarify that sexual orientation change efforts are not an acceptable or responsible professional practice when applied to young people under age 18.

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There is no credible evidence that conversion therapy can change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, and it is abundantly clear that conversion therapy poses devastating health risks for LGBT young people. These dangerous practices can lead to depression, decreased self-esteem, substance abuse, homelessness, and even suicidal behavior, and for this reason the nation's leading mental health organizations have roundly decried them.¹ Unfortunately, due to discrimination against LGBT people and the fact that professional rules have not kept up with this widespread understanding, some licensed mental health professionals continue to engage in conversion therapy. The District already prohibits other discredited psychological practices, such as psychosurgery and convulsive therapy - this legislation is simply necessary to bring mental health services in the District into accordance with professional best practices.

Research shows that young people experience conversion therapy as a form of family rejection, and LGBT youth who experience family rejection face increased health

¹ For example, the American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Counseling Association, American Psychiatric Association, and American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy all have position statements criticizing conversion therapy.



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risks. In one study, such youth were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs compared with peers who had not experienced such rejection.²

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On the other hand, family acceptance has been shown to be an important protective factor that can help to prevent suicide behavior and mental health issues. Providers who engage in conversion therapy under the veneer of state license can mislead families about the risks involved, leading to negative psychological outcomes and irreparable damage to family cohesiveness. This legislation is needed to protect families from these damaging practices.

We recommend one minor change to the bill - it is important that the bill's title accurately reflect its intentions to protect from youth conversion therapy, and therefore we recommend it be titled the "Youth Mental Health Protection Act."

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of this critical bill to protect LGBT youth. I would be happy to address any questions that you may have.

Attached:

Compiled Policy and Position Statements on Conversion Therapy
Compiled Letters of Support for B20-501

² Caitlin Ryan, et al., *Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults*. PEDIATRICS 346 (2009).