

Testimony of Sarah Warbelow, State Legislative Director for the Human Rights Campaign, in Support of Senate Bill 2278: An Act to Protects Minors by Prohibiting Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation

to

The New Jersey Senate Health, Human Services, and Seniors Committee
March 18th, 2013

Chair Vitale and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sarah Warbelow, and I am the State Legislative Director for the Human Rights Campaign, America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) 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. On behalf of our more than one and a half million members and supporters nationwide, including more than 40,000 in New Jersey, I am honored to be here in support of SB 2278, An Act to Protects Minors by Prohibiting Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation.

New Jersey has a long tradition of providing robust protections for minorities and youth. Today, your actions can send the strong message that all of New Jersey's residents matter. Now is time to safeguard the most vulnerable among us by ending the abusive practice of subjecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth to damaging attempts to change who they are.

Demonization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people continues to be a very real problem and the consequences for our youth are incredibly acute. Last year, HRC commissioned a study on the current experiences of LGBT individuals between the ages of 13 and 17. While the report contained kernels of hope, our research found that LGBT youth struggle with being accepted for who they are. The top daily concerns for LGBT youth revolved around a lack of acceptance by family, classmates, and society more generally. In contrast, straight youth worried about classes, grades, college acceptance, and financial pressures. This stress is unsurprising considering that 92 % of youth reported hearing negative messages about being LGBT. 63% of those youth say those messages come from elected leaders.

In a misguided attempt to help their children, parents of LGBT youth often turn to so-called "reparative" or "conversion therapy," which is the modern psychological equivalent of snake oil. These practices try to convince LGBT people that their sexual orientation or gender expression is flawed and that with effort they can live as straight people. Research, however, has shown that far from being beneficial or even neutral, these efforts have harmful effects on the participants. The American Psychological Association convened a Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation which reviewed the academic literature on efforts to change sexual orientation. In 2009 the Taskforce issued a report that found the harms observed by researchers from these efforts included depression, suicidal ideation, relationship

dysfunction, gastric distress, nightmares, anxiety, and alcohol abuse. Participants self-reported anger, anxiety, confusion, depression, grief, guilt, hopelessness, deteriorated relationships with family, loss of social support, loss of faith, poor self-image, social isolation, intimacy difficulties, intrusive imagery, suicidal ideation, self-hatred, and sexual dysfunction.

At this time, the majority of national organizations with expertise in mental health either opposes or warns about the negative effects of efforts to change sexual orientation, including: the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American School Counselor Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Psychoanalytic Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Pan American Health Organization.

SB 2278 would send a strong message to LGBT youth everywhere that their lives are valuable and they are perfect just the way they are. Please vote in support of this bill.