

Leelah's Law Response – Draft
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“Tonight, somewhere in America, a young person, let's say a young man, will struggle to fall to sleep, wrestling alone with a secret he's held as long as he can remember. Soon, perhaps, he will decide it's time to let that secret out. What happens next depends on him, his family, as well as his friends and his teachers and his community. But it also depends on us -- on the kind of society we engender, the kind of future we build.”

- *President Barack Obama*

Thank you for taking the time to sign on to this petition in support of banning the practice known as conversion therapy.

Conversion therapy generally refers to any practices by mental health providers that seek to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Often, this practice is used on minors, who lack the legal authority to make their own medical and mental health decisions. We share your concern about its potential devastating effects on the lives of transgender as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer youth.

When assessing the validity of conversion therapy, or other practices that seek to change an individual's gender identity or sexual orientation, it is as imperative to seek guidance from certified medical experts. The overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrates that conversion therapy, especially when it is practiced on young people, is neither medically nor ethically appropriate and can cause substantial harm.

As part of our dedication to protecting America's youth, this Administration supports efforts to ban the use of conversion therapy for minors.

The use of conversion therapy

The medical and mental health communities have long made clear that they reject the practice of conversion therapy, aimed at “changing” one's sexual orientation. Recently, efforts to change an individual's gender identity have also been shown in countless instances to have dangerous effects. More than 40 years ago, the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder, and in 1998 released a statement “[opposing] any psychiatric treatment, such as ‘reparative’ or ‘conversion’ therapy.” It asserted that “such directed efforts are against fundamental principles of psychoanalytic treatment and often result in substantial psychological pain by reinforcing damaging internalized attitudes.”

Similarly, the American Psychological Association has repeatedly affirmed its stance against these practices, recently stating that efforts to change an individual's sexual orientation can pose serious health risks to LGBTQ + individuals. Numerous other accredited medical and mental health organizations have echoed this sentiment, including the World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Counseling Association.

Steps by states

As part of their duty to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of their citizens, several states have taken their own steps to protect minors from the potentially dangerous effects of conversion therapy. California, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia have all banned licensed professionals from using conversion therapy on minors. Since last year, lawmakers in 18 other states have introduced similar legislation.

In a 2013 signing statement for his state’s legislative ban, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie expressed that “exposing children to these health risks without clear evidence of the benefits that outweigh these serious risks is not appropriate.” In February 2015, a New Jersey Superior Court judge ruled that advertising a service that could change a person’s sexuality is fraudulent and violates the state’s consumer protection laws.

While a national ban would require congressional action, we are hopeful that the clarity of the evidence combined with the actions taken by these states will lead to broader action that this Administration would support.

The importance of family support

Family relationships are pivotal to the physical and emotional well-being of any child, including LGBTQ+ youth. Every child needs love, support, and acceptance to grow, dream, and thrive. LGBTQ+ youth with supportive families and friends show greater well-being, better general health, and significantly decreased risk for suicide, depression, and substance abuse.

Countless families and guardians across the country proudly support their LGBTQ+ children. Too many LGBTQ+ youth, however, lack this support system, which can have devastating consequences. Negative family reactions to LGBTQ+ youth can be perceived as rejection by children, often contributing to serious health issues and inhibiting a child’s development and well-being. And when it comes to LGBTQ+ youth, some actions by family and caregivers can be harmful, despite even the best intentions.

This Administration believes that young people should be valued for who they are, no matter what they look like, where they’re from, the gender with which they identify, or who they love.

We hope that the resources below can be of use to LGBTQ+ youth, their families, and friends.

LGBTQ+ youth issues are an Administration priority: Resources for LGBTQ+ youth, their families, and friends

Bullying

In 2011, the Department of Health and Human Services launched StopBullying.gov, aimed at providing valuable resources and support to youth, parents, and community members with the goal of building a safe environment for all youth, including LGBTQ+ youth.

Family acceptance

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) supports positive dialogues between providers, families, and LGBTQ+ youth, and has developed *A Practitioner's Resource Guide: Helping Families to Support Their LGBT Children* to help providers implement best practices in engaging and helping families and caregivers to support their LGBTQ+ children.

LGBTQ+ youth homelessness

To advance the Administration’s goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020, federal agencies have developed partnerships to create and promote a research-informed framework that focuses on improving data quality and service capacity to support highly vulnerable homeless youth, including LGBTQ+ youth, youth involved in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, and pregnant and parenting youth.