

Testimony to the House Human Services Committee

From: Alison Traynor, MSW, MPH, LCSW

RE: House Bill No. 1332

January 24, 2023

Chairman Weisz and House Human Services Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in opposition to House Bill 1332. My name is Alison Traynor. I am the President of North Dakota's Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, but I submit this testimony as an individual Licensed Clinical Social Worker. I have fourteen years of experience serving North Dakota youth and adults, specializing in suicide prevention. Members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community are disproportionately represented among the clients I serve because they are four times more likely to have contemplated suicide than the general population (Johns et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2020). This increased risk of suicide among LGBTQ+ youth is not due to their sexual orientation or their gender identity, but rather the result of internalized abuse. Conversion therapy is one form of mistreatment shown to increase suicide risk. The practice is based on the belief that homosexuality is a mental illness requiring treatment. This premise has been invalidated by the American Psychiatric Association and their written Diagnostic Statistics Manual (the manual that all mental health providers use for both diagnosis and treatment). The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention aptly describes my experience of clients who have been subjected to these practices "Conversion therapy has been found to interrupt healthy identity development, create mistrust of mental health professionals, and deteriorate relationships with family, all of which can be especially detrimental to children and adolescents. [Ensuring that young people are not

subjected to] conversion therapy protects youth and reduces suicide risk. It is vital to hold professionals, such as licensed social workers accountable and require that they follow an ethical code, including the prohibition of services with no scientific basis.” According to the Generations Study funded by the National Institute of Health, members of the LGBTQ+ community who experienced conversion therapy were nearly twice as likely to think about suicide and to attempt suicide compared to their peers who hadn’t experienced conversion therapy.

In North Dakota, we are experiencing a public health crisis. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth ages ten to twenty-four and North Dakota’s suicide rate is increasing. According to the CDC, in 2020, the suicide rate in North Dakota was 18.1 people per 100,000, compared to 13.5 people per 100,000 across the United States. The Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) recommend evidence-based interventions tailored to high-risk populations such as LGBTQ+ as part of their comprehensive approach to suicide prevention. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention have strong positions against Conversion Therapy. House Bill 1332 undermines the recommendations of these key suicide prevention stakeholders and North Dakota’s effort to save lives from suicide.

There is broad consensus among mental health and medical communities that conversion therapy is dangerous. In 2016, Cornell University summarized forty-seven research studies concluding that conversion therapy is ineffective and harmful. Unfortunately, the pain and shame associated with these experiences make it even more difficult for youth and adults who have experienced conversion therapy to come forward to provide their personal testimony. As a social worker, I

have an ethical responsibility to advocate for my clients. It is on behalf of my clients that I share that conversion therapy hurts kids and families in North Dakota.

Lastly, the North Dakota Board of Social Work Examiners, whose members are appointed by Governor Burgum included language in their 2021 update to their administrative rules that conversion therapy is an unethical practice. House Bill 1332 undermines this Governor-appointed board of professional social workers and its process.

Mr. Chairman and Committee members, for these reasons, I urge a Do Not Pass recommendation on House Bill 1332.