

This letter is intended to serve as a good faith recommendation that HB 1333 should not pass. I try to assume that others have good intentions, so I am assuming that this bill was introduced with the intention of protecting children/youth. However, I feel it has a much higher chance of harming our LGBTQ+ youth than it does at protecting anybody. I work closely with at-risk, homeless, and struggling LGBTQ+ youth, and many of them are afraid of this bill and several other proposed anti-trans bills on the horizon for North Dakota. I have had young people express to me that they now feel afraid to dress in the clothes they like, or even to exist in public as transgender individuals.

I do not take any issue with wanting to shield children from things like nudity, exposure to pornography etc. That is common sense, and we already have laws against public nudity and indecent exposure. What I take issue with is the bill's assertion that "male and female impersonators" inherently serve a "prurient interest". Gender experimentation and questioning, cross-dressing etc. are normal and completely non-sexual components of many North Dakotans' quests to live as their most authentic selves. There is nothing inherently sexual or "prurient" about a man wearing a dress, or a woman wearing a suit. When considering the welfare of children/minors, we need to be thinking about all of them, including our LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk than their peers for homelessness and suicidality, and are particularly vulnerable to abuse, human trafficking, and discrimination. They need desperately to see themselves represented. For many LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those in rural states like ours, there are very few opportunities to see happy LGBTQ+ adults represented around them. Drag queens and drag kings serve as powerful symbols of inclusivity and resilience for their local LGBTQ+ communities. I have seen firsthand how our local queens can lift spirits when making appearances at pride parades, skate nights, etc. and how young people light up when they see them.

There are drag shows that are intended for patrons over 18 and advertised as such, just like there are movies that are rated "R". Children are not, and should not be allowed at those shows. But that doesn't mean that drag as an art-form is inherently "prurient", just as going to the movies is not inherently "prurient".

This bill will not be protecting young people and is in fact harming them. There has been a noticeable negative impact on our local LGBTQ+ youth simply reading and hearing about the proposed bill. It is already scary enough for these young people to have to grow up trans/gender-conforming in a place that is often unwelcoming to them. Drag performers remind them that it is ok to be different, and that people like them can grow up to be happy and celebrated. We have nothing to gain from criminalizing drag, but we do stand to lose needed role models and sources of support for many LGBTQ+ North Dakotans, who will now be afraid to simply exist in public.