

Testimony to the Senate Human Services Committee

From: Alison Traynor, MSW, MPH, LCSW

RE: House Bill No. 1430

March 11, 2025

Chairwoman Lee, and Senate Human Services Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in opposition to House Bill 1430.

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 with sixteen years of social work practice in North Dakota. The confusing, seemingly contradictory language within HB 1430, as written, opens the door to harmful and unethical practices in the social work profession. Neither the North Dakota Board of Social Work Examiners or the ND Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers has received any questions or concerns regarding the current Ethical Guidance that HB 1430 seeks to amend. This is because the problem which this bill seeks to address does not exist.

House bill 1430 is a Conversion Therapy bill and Conversion Therapy is unethical, and, for the record, I will take a moment to explain my experience and why healthcare and mental healthcare fields have rejected these practices for decades.

For the past 16-years, I have provided services to 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). According to research, increased risk of suicide among this population is not due to their sexual orientation or their gender identity, but often the result of societal rejection and mistreatment. Conversion therapy is one form of such mistreatment. Treatments which seek to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of youth have been shown to increase suicide risk and other negative outcomes (Cambell & Rogers, 2023; Williams Institute, 2019)

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). Without this premise, treatments of this kind are inappropriate. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention aptly describes the experience of clients who have been subjected to practices which fall into this category. "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. 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 1430 undermines the recommendations of these stakeholders and North Dakota's suicide prevention efforts.

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. These are but a few reasons that the ND Board of Social Work Examiners has determined that these practices are unethical.

While self-determination is an important principal in social work practice, a social worker would not provide a harmful or ineffective treatment to their client because the client or their parent requested it just as a physician would not provide an outdated procedure to their client associated with poor outcomes simply because a client requested it.

Lastly, the North Dakota Board of Social Work Examiners included language in their 2021 update to their administrative rules that conversion therapy is an unethical practice. During the 2023 Legislative Assembly, a similar bill was proposed and rejected by North Dakota law makers. House bill 1430 undermines the rulings of the ND Board of Social Work Examiners and North Dakota law makers and their institutional processes. Chairwoman Lee and Committee members, for these reasons, I urge a Do Not Pass recommendation for House Bill 1430 as it currently stands.