

The Barbara Bush
Children's Hospital

At Maine Medical Center



Testimony of Abigail D'Ambruoso
Chaplain to the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at Maine Medical Center,
In Strong Support of LD 1025,
"An Act to Prohibit the Provision of Conversion Therapy to Minors by Certain Licensed
Professionals"
April 9, 2019

Senator Sanborn, Representative Tepler, and members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services, I am Abby d'Ambruoso, chaplain to the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at Maine Medical Center. I am here today to testify in strong support of LD 1025, "An Act to Prohibit the Provision of Conversion Therapy to Minors by Certain Licensed Professionals."

As a board certified chaplain and a member of the Association of Professional Chaplains, I am committed to adhering to our code of ethics which states, "Chaplains shall seek to represent the best interests of those whom they serve giving voice to the vulnerable whenever possible." This deep commitment to the best interests of my patients brings me here today.

As a chaplain, I am privileged to hear the life stories of many people and to provide spiritual care to those who are suffering. In my 10 years of providing spiritual care around this country, I have witnessed the lasting damage that conversion therapy can cause. For some, the spiritual distress and anguish caused by trying to deny their gender identity or sexual orientation has been severe, as evidenced by suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, and feelings of disconnection and alienation. At the beginning of my career as a chaplain, I met a 15 year old young woman in the adolescent psychiatric ward in the hospital I served at the time. Her family had taken her to conversion therapy in hopes that she would be able to stop being attracted to people of the same sex. Instead, she developed deep despair and self-loathing, and this led her to attempt suicide. She was admitted to the hospital, where I met her through the weekly spirituality group that I offered, and I came to know her quite well as her chaplain. She had a very difficult time believing that God could love her as she was, and she struggled with her own self-worth as she believed that she was broken, deficient, and a failure. It took many months of intense psychiatric care for that young woman to be safe to leave the hospital.

My chaplaincy in Maine has centered more on the immediate aftermath of trauma and general illness, but I have met parents who wonder what they should do as they learn that their child is gay, lesbian, or transgender. Some are wondering "if this is just a phase" or if they can help their child to "grow out of" being attracted to the same sex. I have been asked if I know of anyone who can help their child to not be gay. This is a vulnerable time for parents who are worried for their children, and they are hoping for guidance and assistance. Some have heard that conversion

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therapy might help. As a chaplain, I acknowledge the emotions of these parents, affirm their desire to support their child, and explore their thoughts, feelings, and questions at that time. I then refer these families to mental health providers who are following best practices and guidelines, knowing that these families will have the support that they so desperately need.

The effects of conversion therapy last a lifetime and affect the entire family. In my work, I have also provided support to family members of those who have undergone conversion therapy, including their spouses and children. In one case, I provided spiritual care to a woman whose husband had undergone conversion therapy before their marriage. She had married him knowing this, and they both tried very hard to make their marriage work. However, her husband was depressed and suicidal. They eventually divorced and later her ex-husband began dating a man. She and her ex-husband have been left with lasting spiritual pain, including feelings of alienation, anger, and despair. Their spiritual pain has also affected their children.

The word “therapy” comes from the Greek word for healing, but it is my observation that conversion therapy does extensive and lasting harm to individuals and families instead of bringing healing.

When a child or adolescent shares with a parent that they are attracted to members of the same sex or wonder if they were “born in the wrong body”, parents are often scared, worried, and unsure of how to care for their child. Due to the known damage that conversion therapy can cause, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association have all condemned conversion therapy.

Banning conversion therapy in the state of Maine safeguards our children, protecting them at a vulnerable time. For that reason, I strongly urge the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1025, “An Act to Prohibit the Provision of Conversion Therapy to Minors by Certain Licensed Professionals.” Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.