

Bill to ban 'conversion therapy' for minors advances

February 18, 2015

radioiowa.com



State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council member Aditi Rao of Cedar Falls (center) testifies at subcommittee meeting.

A bill that would outlaw so-called “conversion therapy” for minors in Iowa has cleared a subcommittee in the Iowa Senate. Senator Matt McCoy, the only openly gay member of the Iowa legislature, says there is no “cure” for homosexuality.

“Best practices for the past 40 years, the (American Medical Association) and everyone else has stated you can’t change a kid’s orientation and to do so harms them irreparably,” McCoy says of “conversion” therapy. McCoy is the bill’s chief sponsor and he’s fashioned it after legislation signed into law in New Jersey by that state’s Republican governor, Chris Christie. “Helping a child deal with their sexual orientation is a really important part of the coming out process. It’s important for the parents to have that therapy. It’s important for the child to have that therapy,” McCoy says. “But that is

completely different from the kind of therapy that teaches a person to reject what is their strong instinct, their desire to be with the same sex.” If the bill becomes law, state-licensed psychiatrists, therapists and social workers would be barred from offering counseling sessions designed to change a minor’s sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Denise Hagerla, a social worker in West Des Moines, supports the bill. Hagerla says she’s worked with over 100 people who she calls “survivors” of conversion therapy, and she’s been approached by parents who want to get it for their children. “I can give every reason that this...simply doesn’t work, that it’s unethical. I can list all of the professional organizations that have made very clear statements against this practice, but what I can’t assure is that those folks and those families can’t walk out my door and find another practitioner who actually will do those things,” Hagerla says. Hagerla was among more than a dozen people who spoke at Tuesday’s subcommittee meeting. Aditi Rao of Cedar Falls, a leader in the State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council, called conversion therapy a “human rights abuse.” “The people who go through this therapy are set up for failure in life,” Rao said. “They face depression and just horrible circumstances and it’s not right for this to be allowed in the state and we should not be tolerating such abuses to minors.” Danny Carroll, a lobbyist for The Family Leader — a conservative Christian group, opposes the ban on this type of therapy. “The Family Leader, myself as a father and grandfather, we believe that parents should be free to pursue the professional medical care for their children that they believe to be in the best long-term interest of their children without any interference from government,” Carroll told the senate subcommittee. The bill got the support of two Democratic senators and cleared a subcommittee late Tuesday afternoon. Republican Senator Julian Garrett of Indianola, another member of the subcommittee, opposed the ban on conversion therapy. “We shouldn’t be about depriving people of choices,” Garrett said. “We talk about choice in a lot of other areas and we’re all about choice and freedom and all that — and here we’re going the other way.” The bill does include a religious exemption which would allow Iowa churches and clergy to offer such counseling. Iowa pastors from Christian, Unitarian and Jewish perspectives attended Tuesday’s subcommittee hearing and urged senators to ban the therapy. Reverend David Sichelka, the senior pastor at the United Church of Christ in Urbandale is the chair of the Interfaith Alliance of Iowa. He said conversion therapy “manipulates kids” into being something they are not. “The damage from that is just heartbreaking and it rends families apart and it crushes the spirits of the people who are subjected to it,” Sichelka said. The American Psychiatric Association opposes so-called “reparative or conversion therapy” as the group says it’s based upon the mistaken assumption that homosexuality is a mental disorder and a patient can change his or her sexual

orientation with counseling. The states of California and New Jersey have banned conversion therapy for minors. A judge in New Jersey upheld that state's ban last week, calling conversion therapy consumer fraud.

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