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Wellington Moves Forward on Conversion Therapy Ban Despite Opposition

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Another city in Palm Beach County has moved one step closer to banning conversion therapy for minors. Wellington voted 4-1 Tuesday to move forward. A second vote will take place later this month.

This has become a theme of sorts in the county this year where city after city has banned the controversial practice. Those other places include West Palm Beach, Lake Worth, Boynton Beach, Delray Beach and Riviera Beach.

The Palm Beach County Human Rights Council has been the driving force behind each of those bans.

On Tuesday, June 14 the Wellington Village council met to hear PBCHRC's argument as to why conversion therapy — also known as reparative therapy, the process of eradicating unwanted same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria in LGBT youth — is ineffective and harmful to children.

“A ban on conversion therapy on unwanted homosexual feelings or gender dysphoria would in fact be child abuse,” David Pickup, a licensed reparative therapist who practices in Texas and California told the Wellington Village Council. “How can you take away the rights of children and their parents to their freedom of speech?”

Pickup shared his experiences receiving and administering what he called “authentic” reparative therapy, claiming that the arguments made by PBCHRC were biased and lacked supporting research.

Pickup was not the only one to plead with the commission to vote ‘no’ on the ban. Dr. Julia Harren Hamilton warned the the council that if the ordinance was enacted it would prohibit distressed children from getting help with their homosexual attractions and feelings.

“Dr. Hamilton is intentionally trying to mislead the Village Council,” retired Judge Rand Hoch, the president and founder of PBCHRC said. “Nothing in the ordinance will prevent minors from seeking help regarding same-sex attractions, or gender identity or expression.”

Dr. Hamilton served as the president of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) for years. NARTH was a small yet well-funded for-profit organization of therapists who purported that LGBT individuals had mental disorders, according to PBCHRC.

The organization encouraged anti-LGBT therapy for children as young as three years old. NARTH had its tax-exempt status revoked by the Internal Revenue Service in 2012.

Pickup and Hamilton were not the only dissenters — many Wellington citizens and parents expressed concerns that their rights would be infringed on.

“Elected officials at the local, state and federal levels have a compelling interest in protecting children,” Hoch said in response to parental concerns. “Courts across our nation have repeatedly ruled that the fundamental rights of parents do not include the right to choose medical or mental health treatment for their children that has been determined to be harmful.”

Whether or not conversion therapy is harmful was the question of the Wellington Village Council meeting. PBCHRC psychologist Dr. Rachel Needle went back-and-forth debate style with Pickup and Hamilton over

the research and arguments available that would prove (or disprove) how harmful the practice of conversion therapy really is on LGBT youth.

Dr. Needle asserted that conversion therapy is based on two false premises and can lead to number of potential risks such as shame, depression, social withdrawal, issues with sexual intimacy, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.

“First, [conversion therapy] is based on the falsehood that being gay, lesbian or transgender is a mental disorder or defect that needs to be cured,” Needle said. “And second, it is based on the presumption that being LGBTQ is something that can actually be changed through therapy.”

Needle continued, “Any ethical mental health practitioner should not attempt to cure or repair gender identity or sexual orientation through these scientifically invalid techniques. Attempting to change someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity can have a devastating impact on a minor.”

The American Psychological Association has linked conversion therapy to multiple negative effects including depression and suicide. In 2009, the Association adopted the “Resolution on Appropriate Affirmative Responses to Sexual Orientation Distress and Change Efforts,” which stated that reparative treatment relied on “anti-LGBTQ bigotry and a clear distortion of scientific data,” according to PBCHRC.

After hearing both sides, the council voted four to one to ban conversion therapy for minors. Wellington Mayor Anne Gerwig opposed the measure.

“Wellington is a diverse, inclusive, safe community that strives to provide the best quality of life for its residents — most of all its children,” Wellington Vice Mayor John McGovern said. “Allowing any child to be exposed to the critical health risks associated with sexual orientation change efforts, without any clear evidence that such change is even possible, is inconsistent with our community.”

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