

Re: Health Professional Support for House Bill 6171

In Rhode Island, infants and young children who are born with physical sex characteristics that vary from the “norm” (sometimes referred to as “intersex” or people with “differences of sex development”) are having life-altering medical decisions made without their consent. Unlike trans and gender nonconforming youth who are explicitly working with their medical providers for gender affirming care, intersex youth continue to be subjected to permanent, life-altering surgeries in order to make their bodies conform to social norms without an urgent medical reason to do so.

I am one of many clinicians, ethicists, and other medical, behavioral health and healthcare professionals committed to caring for vulnerable children in Rhode Island. We are deeply concerned that unnecessary surgeries on infants and children who are born with variations in their sex characteristics continue despite worldwide calls for action on this issue. That is why we are asking you to support HB 6171 -- a bill authored by Senator Tiara Mack, sponsored by interACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth and GLAD: LGBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders -- a human rights bill that will protect bodily autonomy and dignity for Rhode Island children.

People born with variations in their sex characteristics are often subjected to invasive and risky procedures such as clitoral reductions and vaginoplasties in order to conform their genitalia to what is considered “acceptable.” Some also experience gonadectomies -- the removal of ovarian or testicular tissue -- sterilizing procedures that also create the need for lifelong hormone replacement. These surgeries are performed under the well-intentioned but misguided theory that these children will only be able to lead fulfilling and productive lives if their bodies are surgically forced into a certain category in infancy.

In fact, this patient population does not require surgery in order to lead happy, healthy lives, and there is no credible evidence to suggest that they do. These unwarranted interventions have been condemned by three former United States Surgeons General,¹ multiple arms of the United Nations,² Human Rights Watch,³ Physicians for Human Rights,⁴ GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality,⁵ the American Academy of Family Physicians,⁶ and every major intersex-led organization in the world.

By passing HB 6171, you have the power to protect bodily autonomy for, and reduce preventable harm done to, children born with variations in their physical sex characteristics. These children do not need to be “fixed” – but the widespread misunderstanding of their bodies does.

We support Rhode Island’s effort on this critical human rights issue and hope that you will, as well.

¹ M. Joycelyn Elders, David Satcher, and Richard Carmona, “Re-Thinking Genital Surgeries on Intersex Infants,” Palm Center, June 2017,

<https://www.palmcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Re-Thinking-Genital-Surgeries-1.pdf>

² “End violence and harmful medical practices on intersex children and adults, UN and regional experts urge,” 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20739&LangID=E>.

³ Human Rights Watch, “I Want To Be Like Nature Made Me,” July 2017,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/25/i-want-be-nature-made-me/medically-unnecessary-surgeries-intersex-children-us>.

⁴ Physicians for Human Rights, “Unnecessary Surgery on Intersex Children Must Stop,” 2017,

<https://phr.org/news/unnecessary-surgery-on-intersex-children-must-stop/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CPhysicians%20for%20Human%20Rights%20is,their%20gonads%2C%20genitals%2C%20and%2F>

⁵ GLMA, “Medical and Surgical Intervention of Patients with Differences in Sex Development,” November 2016, <http://glma.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewdocument&ID=CEB9FEE4B8DD8B7F4F7575376BD476C3A433379DD853BEA17913AFCCB8270299C0731320B03D2F5E1022F1C15602FBEA>.

⁶ AAFP, “Genital Surgeries in Intersex Children,” July 2018,

<https://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/genital-surgeries.html>.