It’s time for interACTION: Strategizing to End Medically Unnecessary Surgeries

WHO: interACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth is the nation’s oldest and largest organization dedicated exclusively to serving intersex young people. Comprising approximately 2% of the population, intersex is an umbrella term describing over forty naturally-occurring physical variations that cause a person’s body to transcend typical notions of male and female.

Our organization was founded over ten years ago to create a world in which intersex young people are celebrated, rather than made to feel shame and stigma. To achieve this, interACT fights to improve the lives of intersex children through advocacy, youth empowerment, and raising awareness through media. Based on guidance from the intersex community, interACT collaborates with medical associations, local and state governments, educational institutions, other advocacy groups, and human rights bodies worldwide.

WHAT: Intersex traits (sometimes called Differences of Sex Development in the medical community) have existed throughout history. However, in the United States beginning in the 1950s, doctors began to treat intersex babies as a medical emergency despite their being born perfectly healthy. Doctors thought that they could erase bodily differences by performing surgeries in infancy without the consent of those involved. These surgeries include medically unnecessary clitoral reductions, vaginoplasties performed on infants before they can even stand, and gonadal removal procedures that destroy fertility. As these children grew into adults, they began to find each other and let others know of the great harm these surgeries caused, including pain, scarring, incontinence, sterilization, post traumatic stress disorder, and in some cases gender misassignment. These surgeries are driven by a fear of difference, and by a fear of letting intersex individuals have control over their own bodies and decisions.

In addition to every major intersex-led organization in the world, the following entities have condemned this practice: the World Health Organization, the United Nations, the US State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Human Rights Campaign, and every LGBTQ Legal Organization in the United States.

WHERE: Despite outcry from the intersex community for decades, these surgeries continue in every major hospital in every major city across the country—even at hospitals that have progressive policies toward gender nonconforming people.

WHEN: Intersex advocates have demanded for decades that these surgeries stop. The small community of physicians who continue these surgeries resist change, saying that they need more research before they can stop performing mutilating surgeries on intersex children. The rest of the medical community is not even aware of the plight of intersex children.