

# OPINION

## A federal ban on so-called conversion therapy is past due

By Jeffery Leving

Despite overwhelming medical evidence that so-called conversion therapy is nothing more than the pseudoscientific practice of attempting to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity through psychological or spiritual interventions, it remains legal to perform on minors in half the states in America.

It is time that the federal government follow the lead of the other 26 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and more than 100 cities nationwide, as well as several other countries, by banning the harmful and debunked practice.

In June, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that directed the Department of Health and Human Services to establish guidance blocking federal funding for organizations that subject LGBTQ youths to conversion therapy, which has been roundly discredited by medical professionals.

Under the order, HHS guidance would bar programs and organizations that receive federal funding from subjecting people to conversion therapy and provide support to those who have been subjected to such practices.

The department will also seek to educate the public on the practice. The order also includes a commitment to expand mental health resources that are inclusive of LGBTQ youths and asked the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to provide more detailed guidance on providing LGBTQ-affirming mental health support.

The American Psychological Association says children, as well as their families, guardians and advocates, should not



Youth activist Javier Gomez reacts as President Joe Biden hands him a pen after signing an executive order June 15 at the White House. The order in part is aimed at discouraging so-called conversion therapy. **NICHOLAS KAMM/GETTY-AFP**

engage in conversion practices. Instead, they should “seek psychotherapy, social support and educational services that provide accurate information on sexual orientation and sexuality, increase family and school support, and reduce rejection of sexual minority youth.” The APA points out that conversion or “reparative therapy” for LGBTQ people has been linked to cases of depression, anxiety and suicidality.

The mental health advocacy group The Trevor Project found similar results, reporting in a recent survey that LGBTQ youths who had been subjected to or threatened with conversion therapy practices were more than twice as likely to

report attempting suicide within the past year as those who were not. More than one in 5 transgender youths, and more than one in 10 cisgender youths (those whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth), said they had been subjected to or threatened with such practices.

The United Nations’ special rapporteur on torture has said that, in some instances, conversion therapy can “lead to severe and life-long physical and mental pain and suffering and can amount to torture and ill-treatment.”

Conversion therapy grew in popularity in the 1960s and ’70s when homosexual-

ity and transgender identity were treated as mental disorders, and “cures” included counseling, physical punishment and even surgical intervention.

Since then, LGBTQ identities have been widely recognized as healthy forms of human development. The World Health Organization no longer classifies homosexuality and gender dysphoria as disorders, and “conversion” attempts have been discredited as ineffective and harmful.

While Biden’s executive order was a positive step, it didn’t go far enough. Sadly, the U.S. is behind other nations in banning this debunked practice. At the end of 2021, several other countries had laws banning conversion therapy. Last year, several others followed by either enacting legislation or taking other actions.

Among them are Canada and France, which ban conversion therapy for minors and adults, regardless of perceived “consent,” in clinical and religious settings. Anyone found guilty of offering or practicing conversion therapy is subject to a fine or jail time.

New Zealand, Greece, Israel, India, Vietnam, and several Mexican and Australian states also have banned conversion therapy.

In the United States, this is an issue that affects many families on both sides of the political aisle and one that the new Congress should take up this year. There is no reason why this harmful practice should still be legal in half our states.

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