

Orem lawmaker drafting bill to ban hormone therapy, surgery for transgender minors

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State Rep. Brad Daw, R-Orem, is working on a bill that would limit the ability of transgender youth in Utah to make certain medical decisions related to their gender identity.

The bill, which Daw said is still in the “concept phase,” would ban doctors and physicians in the state from providing hormone therapy or performing sex reassignment surgery on anyone under 18 years old.

“We don’t want to be doing irreversible procedures on minors,” Daw said. “Let them be 18 before making a decision that they can’t possibly take back.”

The representative said his bill would likely still allow for youth to be given puberty blockers, which suppress the release of sex hormones, [according to the Mayo Clinic](#).

Civil rights and LGBTQ+ activists say the bill would be harmful to transgender youth in the state and could increase rates of anxiety, depression and suicide among transgender and gender non-conforming Utahns.

“I think it would be really damaging,” said Marina Lowe, who serves as legislative and policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah. “We know suicide, especially among youth, is a real concern and problem in our state in particular. So our state should be doing everything that we can to make sure that we’re minimizing chances for young people to feel that level of anxiety and depression that could lead to really harmful outcomes.”

National studies have shown that attempted suicide rates among transgender adolescents are higher than other youth groups. A [study](#) published in the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics found that transgender male adolescents reported an attempted suicide rate of 50.8%, compared to about 14% of all adolescents.

“Our findings reveal the disparate burden of suicide-related behavior among gender-minority adolescents in the United States,” the study said, “particularly female to male and nonbinary transgender adolescents.”

A [report](#) from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Williams Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law said that transgender adults are more likely to attempt suicide if they have experienced “rejection by family and friends, discrimination, victimization, or violence,” including discrimination “when accessing health care.”

A [2016 survey](#) from the Williams Institute estimated that there are 7,200 transgender adults in Utah. There are an estimated 150,000 youth ages 13 to 17 who identify as transgender in the U.S, according to a [2017 survey](#).

Supporters of the bill say that kids and teenagers are too young to make health care decisions that they may regret later in life and should wait until they are legal adults to do so.

In a [2015 survey](#) by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 11% of transgender women reported having de-transitioned back to the sex they were assigned at birth, while 4% of transgender men reported doing so.

Of those who de-transitioned, 5% said they did so “because they realized that gender transition was not for them,” while 62% cited pressure from family.

Gayle Ruzicka, president of the Utah Eagle Forum, said she has been advocating to ban surgeries and hormone therapy for the past year. Ruzicka said she has held presentations on the subject urging Utah lawmakers to put forward a bill, adding that Daw be at some of these presentations.

“They are just minors. They are too young to have their bodies changed like that.” said Ruzicka. “Using children as guinea pigs just should not be allowed.”

Even with parental support, Ruzicka said she thinks it is problematic for kids and teenagers to go through these medical procedures or therapies.

“Just like parents can’t give (youth) permission to drink or smoke or to use drugs, they should not be able to take their children in for any body-altering drugs,” she said.

Lowe said she did not find that to be “an appropriate analogy at all.”

What the bill would do, rather, “is ban the ability of parents, in consultation with physicians, to make decisions about what they think is best for their children,” Lowe said. “It’s about taking away the ability of parents to support and help their children.”

Katie Matheson, communications director of Alliance for a Better Utah, called the bill “yet another example of politicians unnecessarily inserting themselves into the patient-family-doctor relationship.”

“It’s absurd that Rep. Daw is effectively pushing the agenda of an un-elected activist, Gail Ruzicka, rather than listening to the people of Utah who are going to be impacted by this bill who are telling him that this will result in suicides,” said Matheson.

Daw said he has and will continue to meet with people on both sides of the issue, as well as with doctors and parents.

“I’m trying to be as open to all concerned parties as possible,” he said.

When asked when he will introduce the bill, Daw said he would not do so until “we have the science and the data that gives us the right direction.”

“And that may indicate no bill,” he added.

Kris Irvin, who identifies as transmasculine nonbinary, spoke during the Women’s March in Provo on Jan. 18 about their experience undergoing breast-removal surgery as an adult.

“Having top surgery felt like, and still feels like, a miracle,” Irvin said. “I no longer have the crushing depression that I was desperately trying to survive.”

Irvin criticized Daw’s bill and said such legislation undermines the rights of transgender individuals.

“For whatever reason, some people don’t want gender non-conforming Utahns to have access to surgeries or medication that can literally save lives,” they said.

Ruzicka said banning hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery would help youth, not hurt them.

“This bill is to protect them,” said Ruzicka. “It’s not harmful, it’s to make sure that no harm is done to them.”