

# Utah banning 'conversion therapy' with Mormon church backing

November 27 2019, by Brady McCombs

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In this Jan. 3, 2018, file photo, the angel Moroni statue, silhouetted against the sky, sits atop the Salt Lake Temple at Temple Square in Salt Lake City. Utah is set to become the 19th state to enact a ban on the discredited practice of conversion therapy after state officials revised a proposal to win back the support of the influential Church of a Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File)

Utah is on its way to becoming the 19th state to ban the discredited practice of conversion therapy in January after state officials formed a proposal that has the support of the influential Church of a Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Republican Gov. Gary Herbert announced Tuesday night that church leaders back a regulatory rule his office helped craft after legislative efforts for a ban on the therapy failed earlier this year.

The faith known widely as the Mormon church opposed a previous version of the rule because it wanted assurances that church leaders and members who are therapists would be allowed to provide spiritual counseling for parishioners or families—which were included in the latest conversion therapy ban plan.

The faith opposes gay marriage and teaches that intimate same-sex relationships are a sin. The religion has stuck to that belief while urging members to be kind and compassionate to LGBTQ people.

Conversion therapy is a practice used to try to change peoples' sexual orientation or gender identity.

The rule would ban Utah therapists from subjecting LGBTQ minors to the practice that the American Psychological Association has said is not based in science and is harmful to mental health. The Utah rule proposal is set to go to a 30-day public comment period beginning Dec. 15 and take effect as soon as Jan. 22, Herbert said.

The success in getting the church's crucial support for the regulatory rule generated praise from LGBTQ advocates and conversion therapy survivors who had expressed frustration with the yearslong battle in Utah to ban conversion therapy. The rule uses language from a state legislative proposal that failed this year despite church leaders saying they would

not oppose it.

"It means youth will be getting adequate services that will help them rather than harm them," said Nathan Dalley, 20, who had conversion therapy when he was 16. "This is a change that's been needed for so long. It's too late, but I'm happy it is here."

Dalley grew up as a member of the Latter-day Saint faith and said he was told during his therapy to snap a rubber band on his wrist every time he felt attracted to men. His therapist also scrutinized his posture, his walk, his gestures and interests. Dalley said the experience deepened his feelings of depression and culminated in a suicide attempt several months after the therapy.

Church government affairs director Marty Stephens reiterated in the governor's news release that the faith denounces conversion therapy and wants a ban. He said in an interview with The Associated Press last month that the faith doesn't ascribe to "pray the gay away" thinking but that prayer and religious teachings can be helpful to people trying to navigate life's challenges.



In this May 30, 2019, file photo, Utah Gov. Gary Herbert speaks during a conference in Salt Lake City. Utah is set to become the 19th state to enact a ban on the discredited practice of conversion therapy after state officials revised a proposal to win back the support of the influential Church of a Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Herbert announced Tuesday, Nov. 26, that church leaders support the tweaked version because it uses language from a legislative proposal that failed despite the church not opposing it. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File)

The religion holds tremendous influence in Utah, where the majority of state lawmakers and nearly two-thirds of the state's 3.1 million residents are members of the faith. Herbert is a member and so are all six members of the state's congressional delegation, including U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney.

The church had said in an Oct. 15 letter to state regulators that it would

support a "carefully tailored" rule to ban "abusive" practices like conversion therapy but contended an earlier regulatory proposal banning the practice defined sexual orientation and efforts to change sexual orientation so broadly that it "would imperil legitimate and helpful therapies to the detriment of minor clients."

For example, the church had claimed the bill would have prohibited therapists from discussing strategies for avoiding same-sex intimacy when young people seek help to adhere to the faith's teachings.

The revised rule stipulates that the ban doesn't apply to clergy members or religious counselors acting in a religious capacity, or to a parents or grandparents who happen to be a mental health therapist if they are talking to children or grandchildren.

Justin Utley, 42, who attempted suicide more than a decade ago after going through conversion therapy, said he's concerned about the exceptions granted to the church even but said the new rule is a positive step.

"Progress is progress in this state. You kind of have to make some compromises," Utley said. "My concern, though, is clergy who are licensed professionals having this ability to justify conversion therapy by claiming that they've turned off the switch and now are acting as a clergy member instead of a licensed professional. That's a very dangerous precedent."

During a public hearing about the rule in September, Utley and other supporters of a conversion therapy ban said enduring the therapy led to shame, depression and suicide attempts.

Opponents argued that the rule would prevent parents from getting help for children with "unwanted" gay feelings or even from talking about

sexuality with their kids.

Herbert said "the stories of youth who have endured these so-called therapies are heart rending."

He added: "I'm grateful that we have found a way forward that will ban conversion therapy forever in our state."

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