

Bills targeting trans community flourish

23 states, most in South, get group's lowest rating

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As a third-generation firefighter and then fire captain, Lana Moore served the city of Columbus for 35 years. In 2008, she came out to her crew as transgender.

While some in the department grumbled, Moore said both her chief and union president were fully supportive, and two years after she retired in 2016, she was inducted into the city's hall of fame.

That's why it pains her to know Ohio lawmakers – for whom, she said, she would have laid down her life as a firefighter – last month overrode Gov. Mike DeWine's veto of HB68, a bill banning gender-affirming care for youths and preventing transgender girls and women from competing in female high school and college sports. And they're still mulling a slate of bills that would restrict transgender rights and visibility.

"It's frightening," Moore said. "They've identified a small minority of people they can stereotype and scapegoat. I'm not a historian, but I paid attention in history class, and it's not hard to recognize what's happening here."

As Republican lawmakers nationwide continue to introduce bills targeting the LGBTQ+ community – and specifically transgender people – at rates on par with last year's record numbers, Moore and community advocates fear a rising tide of hostile rhetoric is designed to ultimately erase them from public life.

This week, Florida officials revoked transgender residents' ability to update gender markers on driver's licenses and ID cards; Utah passed a bill banning transgender people from bathrooms corresponding to their gender identity; and Texas' attorney general pressed a clinic in Georgia for medical records of transgender youths who used telehealth to obtain gender-affirming care there.

The Human Rights Campaign, among the country's largest LGBTQ+



According to KFF, 23 states have enacted laws or policies limiting youth access to gender-affirming care. AARON E. MARTINEZ/AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN FILE

civil rights groups, said 130 bills targeting transgender rights had been filed nationwide so far in 2024, compared to roughly 225 last year.

Overall, the group said, 325 anti-LGBTQ+ bills had been proposed in 2024 as of Jan. 25, compared with 503 in all of 2023.

"For years, transgender people have warned of radical anti-LGBTQ+ forces' true aim: to abuse governmental power to take away our freedoms and drive trans people out of public society," said Kelley Robinson, the organization's president, in a statement decrying what she called a "sinister agenda."

"They want to humiliate, harass and use policy to eliminate transgender people from public life," she said.

Last week, Michigan news outlet Mlive.com reported Republican lawmakers from Michigan and Ohio described banning access to gender-affirming care for adults as well as youths as the "endgame" in a conversation on the social media platform X.

Siobhan Boyd-Nelson, co-interim executive director of Equality Ohio, said the group was "profoundly disappointed" in Ohio "lawmakers' unwillingness to listen to medical professionals, young people and their families. ... There's ab-

solutely no reason for government overreach into the personal medical decisions of Ohioans."

"It has progressively gotten worse, and we know that Ohio is not alone," Boyd-Nelson said.

When Moore grew up in the 1970s, she didn't know the term transgender; not until she saw transgender actress and activist Christine Jorgensen on a talk show did she realize she wasn't the only person who felt as she did.

She now serves on the national board of directors for LGBTQ+ advocacy group GLAAD, fighting to humanize trans people.

"I took an oath as a civil servant and I took it seriously," Moore said. "That didn't end when I retired. But it looks like they've (Republican lawmakers) taken an oath to a political party."

According to health policy research organization KFF, 23 states have enacted laws or policies limiting youth access to gender-affirming care as of Jan. 31, and 21 states have laws or policies imposing professional or legal penalties on health care practitioners who provide minors with such care.

According to the Human Rights Campaign's 2023 State Equality Index, more than 253 pro-equality bills were intro-

duced nationwide last year, with 50 of them signed into law. In contrast, the campaign tallied 571 anti-equality bills in 2023, with 77 of them becoming law.

The campaign gave 20 states and Washington, D.C., its highest rating: "working toward innovative equality." Another five were characterized as "solidifying equality," the index's next highest ranking. But 23 states, most of them in the South, were deemed "high priority to achieve basic equality," the list's lowest rating.

"States are trying to rewrite laws to exclude LGBTQ+ people from sex-based protections, and they are continuing to try to erase LGBTQ+ people from history, from the classroom, from artistic performance, and from sport," the report reads.

Alaina Kupec, president of transgender advocacy group Gender Research Advisory Council + Education, or GRACE, said she started the organization out of exasperation over the rhetoric influencing public perceptions of the trans community.

"Nobody was really changing the narrative being put out by hate groups telling outright lies about transgender people," Kupec said. "I thought, maybe I should be challenging these five-alarm fires we're seeing across the country. ... Other people are defining us instead of us defining ourselves."

Kupec and others say some politicians have seized on transgender issues as a means of distraction, trying to make up for lost votes over abortion rights.

"This is purely political theater designed to capture attention," she said, noting a federal judge last year struck down a 2021 Arkansas law banning gender-affirming care for trans youth, calling it unconstitutional and motivated by ideology. "At the end of the day, the courts are going to knock these things down, because the medical evidence is overwhelming."

Boyd-Nelson, of Equality Ohio, said while some politicians might fixate on these issues to score points with their constituencies, she wonders at what cost.

"Lives are at stake, and that's what's so disgusting about this," she said.