

After Hate Group Sues Tampa to Overturn Prohibition of Dangerous Conversion Therapy for Minors, Equality Florida Files Motion to Defend the Ban Alongside the City of Tampa

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Tampa, Fla. – Equality Florida seeks to defend the City of Tampa’s ban on the dangerous and discredited practice of conversion therapy for minors against a lawsuit filed by Liberty Counsel, an anti-LGBT hate group. A motion for Equality Florida to intervene was filed today by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) and the law firm Carlton Fields. Conversion therapy – sometimes called “ex-gay therapy” – attempts to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It has been discredited by the American Psychological Association and every other major professional health organization as ineffective, unethical and dangerous. Conversion therapy has been shown to lead to higher instances of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even suicide. As the state’s largest civil rights organization advocating on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender residents, Equality Florida played an integral role in the passage of Tampa’s ordinance, which prohibits licensed mental health professionals from performing conversion therapy on minors. The City of Tampa unanimously passed the ban in April 2017. In December, Liberty Counsel filed a lawsuit against the city, challenging the ban on behalf of Robert Vazzo and David Pickup – two licensed therapists who want to subject minors to conversion therapy – citing an alleged First Amendment violation. While Vazzo is licensed to practice in Florida, Pickup is not. “Conversion therapy has been discredited by virtually all major American medical, psychiatric, psychological and professional counseling organizations, and worse, it causes real harm to those exposed to it,” said Scott McCoy, senior policy counsel for the SPLC. “When the City of Tampa adopted this ordinance last year, it chose to shield LGBTQ youth from this heinous practice

and its harmful effects. We support Equality Florida’s stand to ensure that the well-being of these children remains protected.” Equality Florida today filed a motion to intervene as a defendant in the case alongside the City of Tampa, citing a direct and unique interest in the case. Equality Florida also filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit, explaining that two federal circuit courts already have rejected similar constitutional challenges to near identical bans on conversion therapy. Finally, Equality Florida filed an opposition to the plaintiffs’ motion for preliminary injunction, demonstrating the significant harms that could befall Tampa’s youth if the ban on conversion therapy is enjoined and the plaintiffs are permitted to engage in conversion therapy. “At Equality Florida, we fight to protect LGBTQ families and children, which is why participating in this lawsuit is at the core of our mission as Florida’s statewide LGBTQ organization,” said Nadine Smith, CEO of Equality Florida. “We worked closely with the City of Tampa, elected leaders, and members of the community to ensure LGBTQ young people are protected from this deceptive and utterly discredited practice of so-called conversion therapy.” Liberty Counsel is known for filing litigation challenging the expansion of equal rights for the LGBTQ community – from defending anti-LGBTQ discrimination in businesses to fighting marriage equality. The SPLC identifies the Orlando-based organization as an anti-LGBT hate group. Liberty Counsel has unsuccessfully challenged conversion therapy bans across the country. Following a 2012 challenge by Liberty Counsel, California’s statewide ban was upheld by a federal appeals court, and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case. It also challenged New Jersey’s law banning conversion therapy, which the U.S. Supreme Court has let stand on two occasions. The plaintiffs in the suit against Tampa – Vazzo and Pickup – also are veterans in the fight against conversion therapy bans. Both were plaintiffs in Liberty Counsel’s failed challenge of the conversion therapy ban in California, where both men have offices. Though Vazzo is licensed in the state of Florida, his offices are in Las Vegas and Culver City, Calif. Pickup, who is not licensed in Florida, has offices in Dallas and Los Angeles. “Tampa has every right to protect its residents against unethical therapists who disregard the strong medical consensus that attempts to change a young person’s sexual orientation or gender identity are not only ineffective, but dangerous,” said Carolyn Reyes, NCLR youth policy counsel who directs BornPerfect, NCLR’s national campaign to protect young people from the harms caused by conversion therapy. “Courts across the country have upheld these laws as valid regulations designed to protect vulnerable children from the serious harms caused by these unethical practices, and we are confident that Tampa’s law will be upheld as well.” Equality Florida is committed to defending its 302,000 supporters, including those protected by the ban in Tampa and by other similar local ordinances. More than a dozen local governments in Florida – both cities and counties – have adopted conversion therapy bans, which is more than in any other state. After a unanimous vote on Tuesday, Broward County – Florida’s second largest county by population – became the most recent locality to adopt an ordinance prohibiting the harmful practice. **The Southern Poverty Law Center**, based in Alabama with offices in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi, is a nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society. For more information, see www.splcenter.org. **The National Center for Lesbian Rights** is a national legal organization committed to advancing the human and civil rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

community through litigation, public policy advocacy, and public education. <http://www.nclrights.org/our-work/bornperfect/>. **Equality Florida Institute** is the largest civil rights organization dedicated to securing full equality for Florida's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community. For additional information, visit www.equalityflorida.org.

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