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Testimony regarding House Bills 4927 and 4928
House Committee on Families, Children, and Seniors
September 11, 2013

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

On behalf of our members and supporters across the state, Equality Michigan urges you to oppose HB 4927 and 4928, which would provide child-placing agencies with a broad right to deny an adoption based on any criteria they deem contrary to their religious or moral convictions. Permitting such broad discretionary authority will have unforeseen harm on the adoption process in Michigan. Additionally, there is reason to believe these bills will be abused in ways that violate the values of Michiganders.

Our state sanctioning a license to discriminate is destructive and unethical. With 14,000 children in Michigan's foster care system at any one time and at least 3,000 in our foster care system actively seeking a safe home to prosper in, our focus should be on cultivating stable environments to raise these children. We should not be turning away capable and willing families eager to love and support a child in need. The strength of one's convictions is not justification in and of itself for any action - and it is a despicable excuse for damaging another human being.

As any veteran politician will tell you, history is the ultimate judge of our actions in these chambers.

Until the 1950s, the common belief in this country was that left-handed people were in conflict with the religious and moral convictions of their day.^[1] While ten percent of the world's population is left-handed, the Bible alone contains twenty-five unfavorable references to the left hand. Today the notion of denying an adoption because a parent is left-handed may seem crazy, yet the same could not have been said less than a hundred years ago.

As recently as the 1970s, child-placing agencies made requests allowing them to use race as a criteria in deciding adoptions. At the time they believed it was their duty to prevent interracial adoptions. Legislators who got caught up in the whirlwind and granted these requests regretted it later and saw these laws repealed.^[2] What word would we use today to describe an elected official if they voted in favor a bill discouraging interracial adoptions?

As written, this bill could be easily manipulated in many ways. What happens when an adoption to a Jewish couple is denied because they are in conflict with that agency's moral

[1] A Left-Handed History of the World – Wright, Ed – Pier 9, 2011

[2] Adoption History - First Person Plural – PBS POV <http://www.pbs.org/pov/firstpersonplural/history.php>

beliefs, but are also the only adoption agency the couple can afford. How about a divorcee now standing in conflict with religious doctrine? Should we pass a law allowing anyone with a divorce to be denied an adoption? Can we possibly support a left-handed man being denied an adoption because the agency can cite the twenty-five biblical references decrying those who are left-handed? Allowing government regulated and often funded agencies this much leverage in discriminately denying adoptions on such a broad measurement will not, if history is a guide, serve well children seeking homes. And serving children is, indeed, the purpose for which this committee was created. I have yet to hear any explanation as to how this bill serves the interests of children – it appears instead to serve the political interests of vocal extremists.

As I mentioned, I represent Equality Michigan – we are the only statewide anti-violence and advocacy organization serving Michigan’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. We see examples of the harm caused by laws like this everyday. While over 70% of Michigan voters now believe laws should not allow discrimination towards LGBT people, we continue to see our constituents used as a pawn in debates like these.

Is reintroducing this bill the best use of our time here today? Are there no greater issues impacting Michigan’s families and children which deserve our attention?

ONE crisis is real, and that is that Michigan’s children need homes and Michigan’s 14,000 foster care kids need leaders to clear pathways, not create obstacles, to safe and loving forever homes.

The allegation that these bills are necessary to protect adoption agencies is false. Beyond speculation and theory, no real evidence has been presented verifying that this is an actual concern rather than a fabricated political issue.

The only examples provided by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops cite examples where the church closed agencies **in protest** of local ordinances and state laws and not as any result of any outside entity.^[3] The Catholic adoption agencies often referenced CHOSE to limit the services offered by their charity as a political statement. Forcing the legislature to act on this issue so churches do not close down their own adoption agencies in protest is responding to blackmail; it is not making good public policy. Catering to this threat sets a dangerous precedent for the future. In fact, a visit to the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC website^[4] shows that, in fact, despite announcing that laws had forced them to close their adoption program, they in fact still operate an adoption program. So even their claim that they have been forced to close programs turns out to be false.

How will history judge our actions here today in ten, twenty, or fifty years? Are there truly concerns that this bill addresses, or does it simply make a political statement on a topic that may seem irrelevant one day. Is a statement of fear and discrimination one that Michigan will be comfortable with? Is it a legacy you are comfortable passing on to your children?

[3] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/fortnight-for-freedom/upload/Catholic-Adoption-Services.pdf>

[4] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - Pregnancy and Adoptions - <http://www.catholiccharitiesdc.org/PAS>

Today's committee hearing is, once again, wasting our money on bills that do nothing to help the 14,000 children residing in foster care in Michigan. Anyone who stands between a child and the loving and capable family they so desperately need is not focusing on solutions, but instead adding to the problems of these young people. We can do better at caring for our most vulnerable, and we owe it to these children and to Michigan to spend more time trying.

Equality Michigan urges you to consider history and to **vote no on these bills.**

[3] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/fortnight-for-freedom/upload/Catholic-Adoption-Services.pdf>

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