

The Advocate, USA

## Iowa Considers 'License to Discriminate' Bill, Plus Restroom Restrictions

The sponsor of the former bill, Dennis Guth, has called homosexuality a health hazard and a cause of "deep loneliness."

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February 02 2018 2:54 PM EST

Iowa lawmakers are considering a couple of anti-LGBT bills – a “religious freedom” measure that could allow widespread discrimination and a “bathroom bill” limiting access for transgender people.

State Sen. Dennis Guth, who has a history of homophobic statements, introduced Senate Bill 2154, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, Thursday. It is designed to give individuals a defense when accused of violations of state or local law for actions related to their exercise of religion, “including any action that is motivated by a sincerely held religious belief, whether or not the exercise is compelled by, or central to, a system of religious belief,” according to the [bill's text](#).

"What we have now is we have the freedom to worship as long as you're worshipping at your church all by yourself. ... You're allowed to have your faith as long as you keep it to yourself, where we really should be able to openly carry our faith," Guth, a Republican, told the *Des Moines Register* last month as he was preparing the legislation.

In drafting the bill, the *Register* reports, he worked with the Alliance Defending Freedom, an anti-LGBT legal group that in December argued before the Supreme Court on behalf of a Colorado bakery owner who cited his Christian beliefs in refusing to provide a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. Guth also said the bill is modeled on legislation passed in Indiana in 2015 – which resulted in boycotts of the state and had to be modified to ease fears about creating a license to discriminate.

Civil rights groups quickly spoke out against Guth's bill. “This religious exemption bill is vague and ripe for abuse,” said a statement released by One Iowa Action executive director Daniel Hoffman-Zinnel. “Broad religious exemptions open the door for people to claim they have a right to decide which laws they will and won't obey. This creates uncertainty for law enforcement and opens the floodgates to legal chaos and frivolous lawsuits at taxpayer expense. It leaves LGBTQ Iowans, single mothers, children, and many others vulnerable to discrimination.”

Iowa law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, public accommodations, and other areas.

Iowa Senate Republicans told Des Moines TV station [KCCI](#) that the bill simply mirrors RFRA that have been enacted in more than 20 states. But only recently have such measures been directed at enabling discrimination rather than just protecting individuals' right to exercise their beliefs. "Many social conservatives are now championing religious freedom bills as a way to protect them from having to provide service to LGBT people," *Time* magazine noted in 2015, at the height of the Indiana controversy.

As they did in Indiana, major corporations and business groups are likely to oppose the Iowa legislation, Sen. Matt McCoy, a Democrat, told KCCI. These include Principal Financial, the Association of Business and Industry, and the Iowa Business Council, he said.

McCoy, who is gay, had a [heated exchange of words](#) with Guth on the Senate floor in 2013. Guth said homosexuality creates health hazards for heterosexuals and threatens to destroy civilization, and asserted that gay people should be encouraged to leave the "lifestyle": "It saves lives to have honest communication not only about the sexually transmitted diseases that shorten lifespans, but also about the deep loneliness that accompanies a life based on youth, beauty, and sex."

McCoy responded that Guth was spouting "warmed-over rhetoric that has been invented by the Christian right," adding, "What I heard today was ignorant and I know where it came from. ... I am not gay by choice, but I choose not to be ignorant."

The other problematic piece of Iowa legislation, the "bathroom bill," was introduced Wednesday in the Iowa House. It would grant schools and businesses an exemption from the public accommodations portion of the Iowa nondiscrimination law, so that they could make transgender people use the restrooms and other facilities designated for the gender they were assigned at birth.

"What the bill just says is that schools and businesses are allowed to take action to protect women and girls by preserving access [to restrooms and locker rooms] based on biological sex," said the bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Sandy Salmon, according to the *Register*. The bill is supported by Family Leader, a conservative Christian group.

LGBT rights advocates disputed the idea that such action is needed. "The gender identity protection in the Civil Rights Act has been included for more than a decade," Aime Wichtendahl, who as a member of the Hiawatha City Council is the state's first openly transgender elected official, told the *Register*. "Has there been a problem of people harassing women in the bathrooms since then? No. This is simply a tactic of the extreme right who will use any excuse they can to harass and intimidate us out of public life."

Indeed, advocates pointed out, transgender people are more likely to be the victims than the perpetrators of crimes.

At any rate, the bill is unlikely to make it out of committee, Judiciary Committee chairman Zach Nunn told the *Register*. "We've got several hundred bills assigned to Judiciary, and we're going to be looking at all of them," he said. "At this point, I don't see that [bill] being in the top tier."

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