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Doylestown becomes first Bucks County municipality to ban conversion therapy

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Doylestown last month became the first municipality in Bucks County to ban conversion therapy for minors.

The borough is trekking alongside other municipalities in the state that pushed for the ban, including Reading, Pittsburgh, Allentown and Philadelphia.

Doylestown Council passed the ordinance, which rules the controversial practice banning conversion therapy for minors as a form of discrimination on Dec. 18.

The controversial ban prohibits mental-health professionals from practicing conversion therapy on anyone under age 18.

Borough officials also say the practice of conversion therapy — therapeutic approaches to alter sexual orientation, gender identity or expression — is threatening to the health, safety and welfare of minors on the LGBT spectrum.

Councilman Don Berk, who sponsored the ordinance, said it was an imperative action for the borough.

“It speaks volumes to the youth — we want them to know we understand it’s not a disease. You are who you are,” Berk said.

The American Psychological Association recognizes anyone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender as natural in human identity, and that such an identity is not a disease, disorder or illness that can be “converted” in therapy.

While the state of Pennsylvania does not have statewide laws prohibiting conversion therapy on minors, cities have taken steps and passed legislation at a local level.

Doylestown Mayor Ron Strouse said he hopes movement on the ban will encourage state action on a state level.

“The ordinance passed was not any reflection of any kind of problem in the community but a reflection that we were taking action because the state hasn’t,” Strouse said.

Only nine states and Washington D.C. have banned conversion therapy.

The Doylestown Council voted 7-1 in favor of the ban, with Councilman Joe Flood being the sole “no” vote.

Doylestown has a Human Relations Commission, which was established in 2010 for any discriminatory complaints. The ordinance would come into play if citizens make a complaint.

Strouse said it’s an unlikely scenario in Doylestown, but the footwork is done in case a problem should arise and an investigation is launched.

Members of community organization Rise Up Doylestown attended the council meetings in support of the ban.

The ban is significant and takes a stand at a local level against an issue that is extreme and damaging, said Marlene Pray, a community leader with Rise Up Doylestown the group and Director of Bucks County LGBTQA youth center, The Rainbow Room.

“There wasn’t an impending wave of this damaging and dangerous practice but it sends such an important message to our community, mental-health providers and primarily to our youth that we believe in them — they do not need to be fixed, they need to be loved,” Pray said.

She added that one of the most inspiring parts of passing the ban was sharing the story with LGBT youth.

While the ban is significant, Pray said it does not eliminate or address the bullying, homelessness or drug and alcohol risks that still exist in communities and schools.

“It’s important to know this is not a structural change that addresses oppression and marginalization of LGBTQ youth in our community. It’s a message of love and we have a lot more work to do.”

<http://www.epgn.com/news/local/12961-doylestown-becomes-first-bucks-county-municipality-to-ban-conversion-therapy>

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