

Public outpouring at hearings on bills targeting transgender youth

By: [Baylor Spears](#) - October 5, 2023 5:45 am

Wisconsin lawmakers heard testimony on Wednesday on a set of Republican bills that would bar minors from receiving gender affirming medical care and bar transgender girls and women from participating in women's sports.

During the hearings that ran into the night, lawmakers at times had heated disagreements and attendees were reminded to not make disturbances including clapping or booing or they would be removed. The hearing comes as Republican lawmakers in Wisconsin have continued to push bills that would restrict the lives of transgender people despite strong opposition from Democratic Gov. Tony Evers.

Evers has vowed on several occasions to veto any legislation that would hurt the LGBTQ community.

“And my message to LGBTQ folks — especially our trans kids — is this: you are welcome, you are wanted, and you belong here,” Evers wrote on social media last week. “And I’ll veto any bill that makes Wisconsin a less welcoming, less inclusive, and less safe place for you to be who you are.”

On Wednesday as the hearings were going on, Evers met with a group of opponents to the bills to renew his vow.

“We’re going to veto every one of them,” Evers said to cheers and applause.

Banning gender affirming medical care for youth

[AB 465](#) coauthored by Sen. Duey Stroebel and Rep. Scott Allen specifically targets gender affirming medical care.

Under the bill, health care professionals in Wisconsin would be prohibited from providing such care to minors. The bill specifically prohibits providers from administering puberty-blocking drugs, testosterone or estrogen and from performing surgeries including mastectomies and any procedure that “sterilizes an individual.” Medical professionals could have their licenses revoked under the bill if they are found to be delivering this care.

Allen started his testimony by saying: “To any transgender individual who may be listening today...I want to say you matter and you contribute to the state of Wisconsin.”

Throughout his testimony, Allen referred to the care as “experiments.” He said the bill would work to create the space and time for minors to “consider the long-term consequences of gender transition and make an appropriate choice for them when they become a legal adult.”

Stephanie Budge, an associate professor of counseling psychology at the UW-Madison, told the Wisconsin Examiner in an interview that the process for children to receive gender affirming care is already very long and is a decision that already involves the child, the family and a medical team.

“It’s not like it’s something where kids just one day decide that they’re trans and the next day they suddenly have surgery,” Budge said. “That’s not how it works. There’s a big process that happens for youth and how they discuss their identity and the kind of work that they do with their therapy team, their pediatricians or endocrinologist. There are a lot of people who are involved in this process and it’s not easy or quick decision-making.”

Budge said that the majority of gender affirming medical care for youth focuses on pubertal suppression or hormone therapy. She said at UW Health genital surgeries are not performed on those under 18 and other procedures like mastectomies are rare.

The difference for clients of hers that have received gender affirming medical care she said is “night and day.” She added that she hasn’t had any clients that have expressed regret or detransition in her own personal clinical practice.

“I’ve seen people go from me, like feeling like this person probably will not live for another six months to having that person become completely joyful and be able to be themselves, to actually be a kid and to be a person,” Budge said.

According to the [Human Rights Campaign](#), studies have found that de-transitioning is quite rare with levels as low as 1% or 2% and [one study](#) found that transgender youth who start hormones with their parents’ assistance before age 18 years are less likely to detransition compared with those that start as adults.

Many of the state’s major medical organizations, including the Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin, Medical College of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards, Wisconsin Chapter of the American Association of Pediatrics, Wisconsin Medical Society and the Wisconsin Public Health Association, are opposed to the bill.

“Why do you think you know better than all of these medical professionals?” Rep. Lisa Subeck (D-Madison) asked Allen.

“To suggest that there should be no one outside of the medical industrial complex that should weigh in on matters that affect our young people is in my estimation bordering on absurd,” Allen responded.

Beyond medical professions, transgender Wisconsinites and LGBTQ advocates delivered anecdotes to lawmakers about the benefits of gender affirming medical care and the harm that could occur if youth lose access.

Silviana Amethyst of Eau Claire, who is transgender, told the Assembly Health, Aging and Long-Term Care committee, that the hardest part about her transition was undergoing puberty as an adult. She emphasized to lawmakers that transitioning has saved her life.

Amethyst said she faced several challenges while going through her second puberty as an adult, including spending significant portions of her pay checks on removing her beard, shaping her face and neck and doing voice therapy.

“Many of those challenges could have been spared if I could’ve transitioned earlier in life,” Amethyst said. “I wish I had the knowledge and tools in my teenage years to talk about my experiences and pursue transition as a teenager.”

Several Democrats who have transgender family members testified at the hearings, including Rep. Melissa Ratcliff (D-Cottage Grove) and Rep. Ryan Clancy (D-Milwaukee) and Rep. Greta Neubauer (D-Racine).

Vicar Vica-Etta Steel, who transitioned as an adult, said in an interview with the Wisconsin Examiner that she “dreamt of suicide for years.”

“I attempted suicide, and it took until I was 55 to fully be able to say ‘I need to be able to do this and I need to be out as who I am’,” Steel said.

Steel said the decision to withhold medicine would cause irreversible changes that can be harmful to children who know who they are.

A 2023 [national survey](#) on the mental health of LGBTQ young people conducted by the Trevor Project found that one in three LGBTQ young people said their mental health was poor most of the time or always due to anti-LGBTQ policies and legislation.

Bill would bar transgender girls and women from women's sports

Recent Republican bills that would affect transgender youth are not limited to medical gender affirming care.

The Assembly Education and the Assembly Colleges and Universities committees held hearings on a pair of bills coauthored by Rep. Barbara Dittrich and Sen. Dan Knodl that would prohibit transgender girls and women from participating on girls' and women's sports teams.

Schools under the bills would be required to classify sports teams in one of three categories based on students' sex assigned at birth: males, females or males and females. A "male pupil" would specifically be prohibited under the bill from participating on a team designated for "females."

One bill — [AB 377](#) — would apply to K-12 public, independent charter and private voucher schools, while the other — [AB 378](#) — would apply to the University of Wisconsin System and technical colleges.

The same bills were introduced in 2021 and passed the Assembly, but never received a vote in the Senate.

Dittrich said that the bill was "not a matter of transphobia or hate" — a statement that elicited laughter in the hearing room — but that it was instead a matter of fairness.

"There's a whole army of women in Wisconsin sports that are fed up with giving their titles and awards to those who were born biological males," Dittrich said. During her testimony, Dittrich referenced athletes including transgender NCAA swimming champion Lia Thomas.

Thomas' former college teammate Paula Scanlan testified at the hearing about her discomfort sharing a locker room with Thomas.

"Unfortunately, the canceling and silencing of women who advocate for maintaining the sanctity of women's spaces is becoming commonplace. Those who stand up for privacy, fairness, and equal athletic opportunity are labeled as transphobic, bigoted, and hateful," Scanlan testified. "But what's bigoted and hateful is the misogynistic attempt to erase women and silence our voices, particularly the voices of women like me who are survivors of sexual assault."

Over 20 states have [passed laws](#) since 2020 that restrict transgender athletes from participating on teams that correspond with their gender identity.

[We must remember that proper treatment for Gender Dysphoria blocks all of the changes normally brought about by puberty. A male teenager undergoing treatment will be no stronger or more adept than the average female teenager. While a female being treated will be able to build strength and agility. Ed,]

"We need to wake up. When a female basketball is smaller than a male basketball, we should be foolish to think that hormone treatment or surgery can change the advantage of an individual's hand size," Dittrich said. "Why are we traumatizing the vast majority of our female athletes like this when it is within our power to peaceably solve this problem in a fair way for all."

One supporter Chris Martinson, president of the New London School Board, told the committee about a resolution the board passed in support of the bill and said it was popular in his opinion.

“This is about parents’ rights more than anything else,” Martinson said.

Wisconsin Republican lawmakers have also [reintroduced](#) a bill that would establish a number of new parental rights , including having the final say on the name and pronouns used to address a child in school.

Opponents of the bills Wednesday spoke about the damage that the exclusion of transgender athletes from teams could cause.

DPI Superintendent Jill Underly in a letter cited statistics from the most recent Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which found that about half of LGBTQ youth considered taking their own lives and nearly a quarter made an actual suicide attempt.

“Supporting trans athletes does not threaten girls. Supporting trans kids – including trans student-athletes – supports their physical and mental health,” DPI Superintendent Jill Underly said ahead of the hearings on Wednesday. “Attacking them in the name of protecting girls harms everyone involved, and lets transphobic policies hide behind people hurling accusations of sexism.”

Reverend Hannah Roberts Villnave of Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship said that making a third category of coed teams would not solve the problem or make things fair.

“If we put on our common sense hats and remember what it was like to be 11 years old and what it feels like to be singled out as somehow special and not in a good way... that is not an equitable solution,” Roberts Villnave said.