

Transgender minors protected from parents under new WA law

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OLYMPIA — Minors seeking gender-affirming care in Washington will be protected from the intervention of estranged parents under a measure Gov. Jay Inslee signed into law Tuesday.

The new law is part of a wave of legislation this year in Democratic-led states intended to give refuge amid a conservative movement in which lawmakers in other states have attacked transgender rights and limited or banned gender-affirming care for minors.

Existing Washington law generally requires licensed shelters and host homes to notify parents within 72 hours when a minor comes into their care. Under the new law, facilities can instead contact the state Department of Children, Youth and Families, which could then attempt to reunify the family if feasible. Youths will also be allowed to stay at host homes — private, volunteer homes that temporarily house young people without parental permission.

More than a half-dozen states, from New Jersey to Vermont to Colorado, have passed or are considering similar bills or executive orders around transgender health care, civil rights and other legal protections. In Michigan, Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in March signed a bill outlawing discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation for the first time in her state.

Oregon lawmakers are expected to pass a bill that would further expand insurance coverage for gender-affirming care to include things like facial hair removal and Adam's apple reduction surgery, procedures currently considered cosmetic by insurers but seen as critical to the mental health of transitioning women.

Shield protections have been enacted this year in Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey and New Mexico. California, Massachusetts and Connecticut passed their own measures last year, largely barring authorities from complying with subpoenas, arrest warrants or extradition requests from states that have banned gender-affirming treatments.

Protections in blue states are being baked into law as Republican-led states take steps to bar access to gender-affirming care for transgender minors, which for people under 18 typically involves puberty blockers or other hormone treatments. Restrictions have gone into effect in eight states this year — including conservative Utah and South Dakota — and are slated to in at least nine more by next year.

Those who oppose gender-affirming care raise fears about the long-term effects treatments have on teens, argue research is limited and focus particularly on irreversible procedures such as genital surgery or mastectomies.

Yet those operations are rarely performed on minors. Doctors typically guide kids toward therapy or voice coaching long before medical intervention. Puberty blockers, anti-androgens that block the effects of testosterone, and hormone treatments are far more common than surgery. They have been available in the U.S. for more than a decade and are standard treatments backed by major doctors' organizations, including the American Medical Association.

In Washington, local Republican lawmakers have spent weeks railing against the legislation signed into law Tuesday. Senate GOP leader John Braun said in March that it would drive "a wedge between vulnerable kids and their parents." Online, some users have twisted the content of the measure to suggest it will see the state ripping children from their homes.

But those claims misrepresented the legislation, which is intended to keep estranged young people housed, according to experts and the lawmaker sponsoring the bill. The bill does not address custody and would not result in the state taking children away from their homes and parents.

The Washington legislation requires the state Department of Children, Youth and Families to make a "good faith attempt" to notify parents after they are contacted by shelters or host homes and offer services designed to "resolve the conflict and accomplish a reunification of the family," according to the bill text. Family reunification efforts would be pursued when possible, according to Washington state Sen. Marko Liias, a Democrat who was the bill's primary sponsor.

"If a young person is totally estranged from their parents, has no meaningful relationship, we need someone to care for that child," Inslee said at a news conference last month.