

Media Release



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Jewish Care Victoria Welcomes Legislative Ban on Harmful LGBTI+ Conversion Practices



The Victorian Parliament late last night passed much needed, lifesaving legislation to outlaw 'therapy' practices that attempt to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, a decision welcomed by Jewish Care and Jewish Community Council of Victoria.

The Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020, introduced to the Legislative Assembly last year, and receiving broad cross bench support today in the Legislative Council, will now empower the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to investigate reports of harmful conversion practices.

Under the new law there are a range of options to prevent harm to LGBTI+ people and bring offenders to justice, including consent-based facilitation, education programs, investigation and enforcement action by the Equal Opportunity Commission. Additionally, the legislation enables strong criminal sanctions – up to 10 years' jail – to be enforced against people who against the reasonable intent of the bill, subject others to these damaging practices. Those who try to circumvent the laws by sending Victorians out of the state will also face criminal sanctions and fines up to \$10,000.

Often referred to as 'gay conversion therapy', and described by former Attorney-General Jill Hennessy as "*bigoted quackery*", these practices are based on the falsehood that a person's sexuality or gender identity can be changed or suppressed through a range of interventions including electro-convulsion therapy, counselling techniques, and spiritual guidance.

Conversion attempts have been repeatedly found to be ineffective, unethical, and often harmful, exacerbating anxiety and self-hatred among those subjected to it.

The Australian Psychological Society have stated that there is no evidence that these approaches can change a person's sexual orientation, however there is "*clinical evidence that reparative, conversion and ex-gay approaches can compound the challenges already faced by some lesbians and gay men*" and a "*considerable body of evidence documenting the negative effects of stigma associated with homosexuality, including higher rates of depression*".

Jewish Care & Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) called for this legislative ban and provided a joint submission with the Victorian government in 2019. Jewish Care CEO, Bill Appleby, said "*The trauma can begin to heal from today. Practices such as these are a contravention of a person's fundamental human rights; the harm that may be caused to people subjected to such practices can have immediate and long-lasting adverse effects on health; and conversion practices in the main diminish, devalue, and attempt to erase the presence of LGBTI+ people in our communities. This is a proud day for our state.*"

In introducing this legislation last year, Victorian Premier Dan Andrews said, *“Cruel and bigoted practices that seek to change or suppress a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity will soon be stamped out across Victoria.”*

Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes, debated this bill on the House floor for more than twelve hours yesterday, has said, *“These are landmark reforms that reflect the values of Victorians as an inclusive and fair community. Bigoted and harmful change or suppression practices are not tolerated here – we’re stamping them out for good. We’ve consulted widely to set out the kinds of actions that constitute change or suppression practices – anyone doing the wrong thing should and will be captured by these laws.”*

Samuel Murray, Jewish Care’s Executive sponsor for LGBTI+ inclusive practice, said, *“This legislation sends a strong message to all Victorians that conversion practices are not therapeutic, are known to cause significant long-term psychological and emotional harm, and that a person’s sexuality or gender identity is real and valid and not a mental disorder to be cured. The real danger to LGBTI+ people and their mental health and wellbeing is societal ignorance, prejudice and the pressure to conform to entrenched heteronormative societal values.”*

Judy Fetter, JCCV Executive Director said, *“The intent of this legislation is to help promote an inclusive, safe and respectful society for all LGBTI+ people and all Victorians. The opportunity to provide compassionate guidance by professional mentors should also help protect the rights of those seeking conversion practices without penalty. This includes the valued role of religious leaders, teachers, and parents in our community.”*

Jewish Care, a Rainbow Tick Accredited organisation, has a strong commitment to LGBTI+ diversity and inclusivity and has committed to ensuring the organisation continues to provide a safe and welcoming environment to all staff and volunteers along with the ongoing development of all services and supports to embrace the rich and broad diversity of the Victorian Jewish community.

Victoria is the third Australian jurisdiction to legislate against conversion practices. Both Queensland and the ACT passed similar laws last year, with LGBTI+ activists and human rights organisations lobbying for a national standard. Passing with a vote of 27 to 9, the Opposition were unable to garner support for any of their proposed amendments. The Bill has now been referred to the Governor for Royal Assent and will come into law in twelve months.