

Hartford Courant

CONNECTICUT NEWS

Pedophile conspiracy theory enters Connecticut anti-discrimination law debate

By **ALISON CROSS**

May 28, 2023

Once confined to QAnon and now weaponized by conservatives across the country, a fringe conspiracy theory purporting Democratic support for pedophilia has become embedded in the debate over an update to Connecticut’s anti-discrimination law.

Conservative and Christian activists [flocked to social media](#) last week to attack [HB 6638](#), claiming that the bill’s new definition of sexual orientation is a veiled attempt by Connecticut Democrats to ban discrimination against “minor attracted persons” — a term that falsely equates pedophilia to an identity under the LGBTQ umbrella. The crusade, which originated with the [Family Institute of Connecticut](#) and was spread by [CatholicVote.org](#), reached the ears of Senate leadership as the chamber prepares for a final vote on the legislation. In an original statement to the Courant, Senate Republican Leader Kevin Kelly said that he agreed with claims that HB 6638’s definition of sexual orientation is ambiguous and could be interpreted as a loophole for pedophiles. Kelly told the Courant Thursday he is working with Senate Democrats to craft new language that will adopt the modern sexual orientation terminology proposed in HB 6638 and simultaneously ensure that pedophilia could not become protected conduct in

discrimination and human rights complaints. That same day, the Family Institute of Connecticut [said](#) they were “working closely with legislators to make the agreed upon measures.” “We may sit here under the Capitol Dome and all think in one direction because we’re legislators. ... When you get commentary that reads the same language and can come to a different conclusion, then that’s cause for concern and in my mind requires us to go back and wordsmith the language to remove that ambiguity,” Kelly said. “I’m not trying to politicize the issue and (I’m) working with the majority to make sure we get this right. It’s really about the protection of children, plain and simple.” Kelly’s interpretation of the bill was at odds with earlier comments from Democratic and Republican lawmakers in the House, who passed HB 6638 in a [132 to 17 vote](#) following a debate that made no mention of pedophilia. The bill itself makes only two changes to the anti-discrimination statutes.

First, HB 6638 adds age to a [long list of protected classes](#) including religion, national origin, color, race, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status and victims of domestic violence. Second, it updates how the state defines sexual orientation, swapping the [current definition](#), which identifies sexual orientation as a “preference for heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality,” for a new definition that recognizes sexual orientation as “a person’s identity in relation to the gender or genders to which they are romantically, emotionally or sexually attracted.” “The reality is that law does not make illegal activity legal or acceptable,” House Minority Leader Rep. Vincent Candelora said. “An employer is not required to hire a known pedophiliac or maintain employment for somebody, especially if it’s a high-risk situation. ... It’s important for people to understand that in this arena, (in) Connecticut, we don’t protect criminal behavior. Those criminal behaviors are still criminal.”

To keep, or discard the sex crime clause Candelora, who voted in favor of the bill, said opposition from his caucus largely stemmed from concern over potential overreach from the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities and its effects on business owners. Pedophilia did not enter the dialogue until after HB 6638 passed the House when the Family Institute of Connecticut listed the legislation in a [“Bad Batch of Bills”](#) blog post. As evidence that the bill intends to shield pedophiles from discrimination, the organization pointed to the fact that HB 6638’s sexual orientation terminology drops language found in the current definition that specifically excludes sex crime behavior from protection. According to the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, Connecticut is [one of eight states](#) that still has language “explicitly excluding behavior that is already criminal under statute from the definition of ‘sexual orientation.’” CHRO supports the removal of that language, which they said “plays into longstanding erroneous and offensive stereotypes connecting homosexuality and bisexuality to criminal behavior.” Rep. Jeff Currey, who is a co-sponsor of HB 6638 and is gay, said that the new sexual orientation definition’s specific reference to gender negates the need for an explicit exclusion of sex crimes, which are already illegal under state law. “While this new definition does remove the reference to the criminal statutes, it adds in this specific reference to gender, which doesn’t actually exist in the current definition, to make things crystal clear,” Currey said in a statement to the Courant. “In order to be provided with any protection from discrimination under this language, an individual’s sexual orientation would need to be defined in terms of gender attraction. Attraction to plants, as noted by the ranking member during the committee meeting, or minors would absolutely not be protected because neither ‘attraction’ has anything to do with gender.” Kelly believes that the new definition is not an adequate safeguard. He said he is advocating for a version of the sex crime conduct clause to appear in a different section of the statutes. “When you look at statutory construction, any attorney worth his salt is

going to say that when the legislature acts, it knows what it's doing. And when the legislature adopts a law because we know what we're doing, that new law has import. So if we're changing that statute and leaving something off, that's meaningful and could be open to interpretation, either by an attorney or by a court, that that conduct was meant to no longer be untoward," Kelly said. "(HB 6638) does not have the conduct aspect of it included in the definition, which I think is the appropriate way to have this. ... I think they're two different things. And so what needs to happen is that this conduct clause needs to be put in the statutes where conduct is what is evaluated."

HB 6638 co-sponsor Rep. Dominique Johnson said that at no time during the committee or floor debates did any member of the legislature or public raise concerns that the bill could somehow condone pedophilia. "The lawyer that testified in the Judiciary Committee hearing never suggested that this was a loophole, (or) that this was a legal problem," Johnson said. "I would be hopeful that the senators, who are buying into the argument that is being put out into the ether on social media, use our nonpartisan policy and legal experts to make their own determination." Johnson said she fears that the misinformation surrounding HB 6638 is an attempt to "take the oxygen out of the room" and "create a moral panic." Johnson said she is open to discussing possible revisions with Senate colleagues but she added that the current language in HB 6638 is in line with legislation from several other states. "I think that's the direction where we're going as a society because we understand there's a history to associating our community with criminality that has been used against us as an argument of why we shouldn't be part of the American fabric," said Johnson, who is LGBT. "This is just the same song."

A nationwide trend

Pedophilia and grooming have emerged as right-wing buzzwords, characterizing the LGBTQ community, liberals and their allies, and fueling a resurgence of anti-LGBTQ hate. Dawn Ennis, a journalist and professor at the University of Hartford who is also

transgender, said that the tactic is nothing new. “I grew up in the Anita Bryant era in which she was campaigning against equal rights for gays and lesbians ... the same argument was used that if you give gays and lesbians equal rights, they will groom your children, they will try to convert your children,” Ennis said. “This argument (against) allowing people equal rights no matter how they identify, no matter who they love, is as old as the hills. And all the folks who are against equal rights are just using the same playbook that was used against the LGBTQ community in its infancy of Stonewall 50-plus years ago.” Ennis explained that conspiracy theories, like the ones attached to HB 6638, which suggest that the left is pushing for acceptance of pedophiles as “minor attracted persons” in the LGBTQ community are dangerous and spreading. At a meeting of the West Hartford Human Rights Commission, of which Ennis serves as co-chair, Ennis said a member of the commission asked whether the LGBTQ flag includes pedophiles. “The LGBTQ Pride flag does not represent pedophiles, but this is the thinking. ‘Minor attracted persons’ is not a phrase that is used by anyone in the LGBTQ population,” Ennis said. “And there’s such propaganda being spread by the Family Institute (of Connecticut), by Mr. (Peter) Wolfgang (the executive director), (and) by others across this country who think that people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer are trying to either attract children to convert them, to force them to become something they’re not, or that they’re interested in having sex with children.” The current wave of what many are describing as a right-wing obsession with pedophilia has its roots in the QAnon movement, born from the notorious “[Pizzagate](#),” a conspiracy theory alleging the existence of a child sex-trafficking ring run by Hillary Clinton and Democratic elites in a Washington, D.C., pizzeria. But what started as extremist conspiracy theories, quickly spun into the mainstream, with right wing [pundits](#) and [leaders](#) adopting the rhetoric into a LGBTQ culture war over sex education, pronouns, gender-affirming care and more. A [2022 report](#) from the Center for Countering Digital

Hate and Human Rights Campaign found that in the month after Florida passed its [“Don’t Say Gay”](#) law, social media posts involving “grooming”-related content rose by more than 400% across all platforms. A separate [study](#) from the CCDH published in March determined that tweets and retweets mentioning the LGBTQ community “alongside slurs including ‘groomer,’ ‘predator’ and ‘pedophile,’” rose from an average of 3,000 tweets per day between January and October 2022, to nearly 6,600 between November 2022 and February 2023. The rhetoric leads to real consequences. This month, the Department of Homeland security briefed law enforcement and government agencies on increasing threats against the LGBTQ community from domestic violence extremists and perpetrators of hate crime. According to reports from [ABC news](#), DHS said “These issues include actions linked to drag-themed events, gender-affirming care, and LGBTQIA+ curricula in schools.” The latest [DHS National Terrorism Advisory Bulletin](#), issued on May 24, included “individuals or events associated with the LGBTQIA+ community” on its list of “likely targets of potential violence” as the U.S. remains in a “heightened threat environment.” The [FBI’s National Hate Crime Statistics](#) found that “reported hate crime incidents increased 11.6%” between 2020 and 2021, as “incidents related to sexual orientation, gender and gender identity represented 20.4% of all single-bias incidents reported.” The rise in violence follows a flood of legislation targeting LGBTQ rights. The American Civil Liberties Union has tracked [491 anti-LGBTQ bills](#) introduced to state houses in the U.S. — 62 have passed so far. This year is the highest year on record for anti-LGBTQ legislation, shattering [2022’s record of 278](#). Karleigh Chardonnay Webb, a transgender activist, journalist and [Trans Lifeline](#) operator, said that the conservative and Christian pushback against HB 6638 is a continuation of the “scorched earth campaign against LGBTQ people.” “These groups know that this bill does nothing more than clean up a lot of archaic language,” Webb said.

“They’re trying to make us, who are part of the reality-based community, swing at a pitch in the dirt. And that’s all this is.” The transphobic and homophobic attack is another example of why Webb says in Connecticut and across the U.S., Pride Month will take on a different tone in 2023. “This June, Pride Month, is going to be less party. It’s going to be more protest and it should be,” Webb said. “The biggest thing is that we have to continue to stay vigilant in this state and build on the gains we’ve made. And that isn’t just about the people we vote for and our elected officials. That’s about us in our communities, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our towns, in our social clubs, in our groups, in our circle of friends, within our families. Everywhere we go.”

“We didn’t get the human rights protections that we got because elected officials said, ‘Oh, this would be a good thing.’ No, we, the people, wore out shoe leather, marched in Hartford, got in these people’s faces and said this is the Connecticut we want. This is the state we want.”



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