

Witnesses pack Assembly hearings on transgender bills

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Dem Rep. Lisa Subeck ripped Republicans for trying to restrict medical freedoms with a bill to ban gender-affirming care for kids, which she says would also increase suicide rates.

But co-authors Rep. Scott Allen, of Waukesha, and Sen. Duey Stroebel, of Saukville, argued AB 465 gives Wisconsinites too young to know exactly what they want more time to figure it out before going through what they call permanent changes. Allen said the bill still respects the right to choose and protects youth who might be easily persuaded.

“In a democracy, we respect the choices of others, and we also recognize some choices have such long-lasting effects that those choices should only be left to adults,” Allen said.

Assembly committees on Wednesday heard public testimony on three bills that would impact transgender Wisconsinites, including AB 465. It would bar medical professionals from taking any actions, including performing surgery, that affirms the gender anyone under 18 wants to transition.

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Transgender rights advocates overfilled the Capitol’s largest hearing room in opposition.

Assembly Health, Aging and Long-Term Care Committee Chair Clint Moses pounded his gavel to call order as advocates interrupted bill authors’ testimony. Moses warned those snickering, commenting or cheering in the crowd would be removed if they continued. At least two dozen people overflowed out of the North Hearing Room atrium and into the hall.

Less than 45 minutes into the hearing, Moses announced the committee opened up a second overflow room to hold all those who registered to speak on the measure.

A few speakers registered in favor, but the overwhelming majority were opposed.

Gov. Tony Evers during the public hearing [told advocates](#) in at least one of the overflow rooms “we’re gonna veto every single one of them.”

The Dem gov thanked them for being in the Capitol and staying strong.

“I know you’re here because you’re pissed off, and you want to stop it,” he said. “And you will stop it, and I’ll help you stop it.”

The measure would require the Board of Nursing, Medical Examining Board and Physician Assistant Affiliated Credentialing Board to investigate any allegations of medical professionals violating provisions of the bill and revoke their licenses if they do break the law.

Rep. Robyn Vining, D-Wauwatosa, argued the only major medical groups registered on the bill are opposed. She added authors know full well Evers will veto it, and that their legislation will only cause mental health concerns.

“The mere introduction of it hurts people,” she said. “So I want to know from you: Why?”

Allen argued the American medical field may have its science wrong on gender-affirming care. He said other countries that have been around much longer have already dealt with this issue by creating restrictions on such care.

Given those under 18 in America are barred from drinking, getting a tattoo, joining the military and oftentimes from driving, Allen and Stroebel argued they also shouldn’t be allowed to choose to go through what they called permanent and detrimental physical changes.

Medical College of Wisconsin, Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin, National Association of Social Workers, Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards, Wisconsin Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Wisconsin Medical Society, Wisconsin Public Health Association and others registered against the bill.

Wisconsin Family Action is the only group registered in favor.

Subeck questioned why the authors feel they know so much after noting Wisconsin Family Action is not a group of medical professionals.

“What I hear you say is you think you know better than doctors and physicians,” she said.

Allen said “that’s a valid question,” adding there should be more than just medical professionals weighing in on medical legislation.

“We don’t want the wolves guarding the hen house,” he said. “To suggest there should be no one outside the medical industrial complex to weigh in on this is borderline absurd.”

Mental Health America, Wisconsin Chief Operating Officer Bryan Michael testified the bill goes too far into personal relationships and decisions, arguing lawmakers are legislating “out of fear.”

He also backed up Vining’s argument that introducing bills like this causes mental health concerns.

“When these bills are introduced, there are statistically significant increases in calls by LGBTQ youth to the crisis task line,” he said.

Rep. Rob Brooks, R-Saukville, questioned Michael whether parents or children should be deciding the issue.

Michael argued everyone should have the right to decide their own identity. The bill goes too far in limiting that ability, he said. He wouldn’t give an age for when to allow kids to decide, despite Brooks’ repeated questions.

“That’s why the bill should fail,” he said. “It’s overreaching into the area of medical expertise and professionalism that the Legislature does not have expertise in.”

Wisconsin Family Action Legislative Policy Director Jack Hoogendyk argued many kids “outgrow” the desire to transition to a different gender, adding some youth may require talk therapy and other standard mental health interventions.

“Allowing doctors to give developing youth puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones and even performing surgeries violates the first duty of medicine: do no harm,” he said.

Meanwhile, two other Assembly committees heard testimony on bills seeking to ban transgender athletes from playing on college and high school teams designated for those who were born female.

Similar bills cleared the Assembly last session, but failed to clear the Senate.

The Assembly Education Committee heard testimony on AB 377, which would apply the ban to K-12 sports.

Sam Grover, staff attorney at the Freedom from Religion Foundation, argued the bill would likely have “profound negative effects” on transgender youth “by disaffirming their authentic gender based on an anti-scientific definition of sex.” Grover told the committee sex and gender are distinct, and someone’s genitalia doesn’t necessarily reflect their gender or sex.

Rep. Amy Binsfeld suggested there could be negative effects for cisgender women when transgender women participate in sports.

“One thing I’m just wondering — if we’ve seen the benefit to the trans, have we also seen how the self-identified natural-born female feels about this?” the Sheboygan Republican asked.

Rep. Francesca Hong later asked that committee members not refer to transgender people as “the trans.” The Madison Dem noted the discussion was “incredibly painful” for a lot of people in attendance at the hearing.

Meanwhile, the Assembly Colleges and Universities Committee heard AB 378, which would require UW campuses and state technical colleges to designate their athletic teams as falling into one of three categories: for those who are males, those who are females and co-ed. Those who were male at birth would be prohibited from playing on a team or in a sport designated for women.

GOP Rep. Barb Dittrich, one of the bill’s co-sponsors, argued it was a matter of fairness and those born male have inherent advantages. She argued taking hormones, for example, doesn’t negate things like those born male having a larger lung capacity on average.

State Rep. Jodi Emerson, D-Eau Claire, took issue with the Oconomowoc Republican’s testimony, noting her daughters played high school soccer.

“My daughter’s team on a regular basis scrimmaged a boys’ team a year older and kicked their ass every time,” she said.

State Sen. Dan Knodl, another co-sponsor, said his daughters also played high school soccer. The Germantown Republican said he didn’t remember them playing boys in a “controlled scrimmage,” but in a “real competition,” they’d have been “laid out on their back.”

“There’s a difference. It’s science,” Knodl said. “You and your party will use science when politically expedient for you and ignore it when not.”