

OPINION

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Anti-LGBTQ bills target most vulnerable



David Plazas
Columnist
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENN.

In 2016, a bipartisan group of Tennessee lawmakers helped kill a bill that would regulate what bathroom transgender students could use.

Rep. Mark White, R-Memphis, and former Reps. Rick Womick, a Republican, and Craig Fitzhugh, a Democrat, agreed the bill was not worthy of passage.

Their reasons ranged from respecting the dignity of all students to keeping state government out of something that is not its business.

Yet, even after that episode, legislation that targets LGBTQ people in Tennessee has continued to return year after year.

While most of these bills are watered down or set aside by the end of the Tennessee General Assembly's annual session, Tennesseans should know that these proposals target boys, girls, men and women who are underrepresented, vulnerable and marginalized.

Legislation penalizes transgender student athletes

The latest bill to draw public attention would prohibit transgender youth effectively from competing in sports.

House Bill 3/Senate Bill 228 would limit gender-specific middle and high school sports to athletes based upon the sex listed on their birth certificates.

Gov. Bill Lee, when asked at a news conference Wednesday about the bill, referenced an executive order from President Joe Biden that Lee called an "overreach."

The governor said that transgender athletes "participating in women's sports will destroy women's sports ... I think it's bad for women and women's sports."

To be clear, Executive Order 13988, signed by Biden on Jan. 20, prohibits discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Among other things, it says: "Children should be able to learn without worrying about whether they will be denied access to the restroom, the locker room, or school sports."

Statistics: Transgender Americans are more vulnerable

The term transgender is not a noun, but an adjective, because it describes people: friends, neighbors and fellow citizens.

However, transgender Americans face higher rates of poverty (29% vs. 10.5%) and violence (54% vs. 15%) than the general population, according to the Human Rights Campaign, U.S. Census and Gallup. HRC, a pro-LGBTQ equality nonprofit, reported that 37 transgender or gender nonconforming people were killed in the U.S. in 2020 — a record since the group started tracking this figure in 2013.

The Trevor Project reports that 52% of transgender or nonbinary youth have considered suicided compared with 34% of cisgender LGBTQ youth, according to its National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2020. LGBTQ youth overall are four times as likely to attempt suicide than straight, cisgender young people.

The overall youth suicide rate is 10.7 out of 100,000 people, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Biden's executive order draws on the 2020 Supreme Court decision *Bostock v. Clayton County*, which extends the Civil Rights Act protections to LGBTQ Americans.

It is reasonable to have a discussion based on facts, evidence and testimony, especially from trans people. However, lawmakers should ask, is this legislation aiming to address an issue that even exists? That too merits discussion.

Legislation based upon fearmongering and emotion makes schools less safe for children.

This country has contended again and again with worries about what will happen to society if accommodations are made for people because of their race, gender, and more recently sexual orientation and gender identity: from the armed services to lunch counters to the school gymnasium.

America, at its best, is a pluralistic society, but it has clearly not always fulfilled the promise of equality.

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Lessons from COVID-19 can help us fight opioids



Your Turn
Abby Trotter and Tom Starling
Guest columnists

It was an unprecedentedly brief period from the time researchers genetically sequenced the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, popularly called COVID-19, and published their findings in the journal *Nature*, to the approval of a vaccine by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for emergency use.

This unparalleled achievement from the biopharmaceutical industry, working closely with medical providers and the U.S. government, to combat a public health crisis was swift, deliberate and — by all accounts to date — remarkably successful.

To this we say, let the unprecedented become our new normal. We now know what can arise when the world's leading scientists, the life science industry,

health providers and governments come together to solve a crisis. The outcome has shown us that we can and should continue to meet health challenges with similar streamlined and unified efforts.

What are we going to tackle next? Unfortunately, COVID-19 has exacerbated and elevated numerous mental health challenges, which were already at crisis level before the pandemic. Mental Health America of MidSouth regularly administers relevant screenings, and this year's numbers show dramatic increases in several mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and more. These numbers are up 10 times from just a year ago.

Suicide rates have been climbing for the last several years, as well, according to the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network. Today it is a leading cause of death in Tennessee, with more people dying from suicide than car wrecks.

Opioid abuse is a public health threat that existed well before the COVID-19 pandemic and one that has grown significantly during 2020. Those abusing are often attempting to self-treat their

anxiety, depression and COVID-related trauma. Recent data on opioid abuse tells a terrible tale of more than 130 people dying daily in the U.S. from opioid-related overdoses.

Thankfully, organizations in our own state are stepping up to address these tragedies by raising awareness of our mental health needs and also providing alternative pain medications.

One local company has developed a novel approach to fighting opioid abuse. Headquartered in Nashville, Cumberland Pharmaceuticals has an FDA-approved non-opioid pain medication, Caldolor, available for use.

The drug was born from Vanderbilt research and can be used in minimally invasive surgeries for pain treatment in the place of an opioid. This is significant because opioid abuse often begins with a simple surgery, and Caldolor can often eliminate the need for opioids in those circumstances.

However, Tennessee is still a leading state for opioid abuse and, sadly, the rate at which Caldolor is prescribed here is significantly less than our peer states.

Why wouldn't Tennessee support its own, homegrown solutions to thwart a public health crisis? A look at costs and insurance reimbursements provide some clues.

The cost for an opioid dose is minimal. Since alternative pain medications are newer, their cost is more expensive, but still modest. For a modest increase in cost, it makes sense to use an opioid alternative as a preventative to a lifetime of abuse for the patient.

Alternative pain medication is but one example in a list of solutions that our state's and nation's biopharmaceutical companies have delivered to treat a public health epidemic. Now we need to make sure we have an environment for the coordinated adoption of these therapies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated both challenges and possibilities.

Abby Trotter is executive director of Life Science Tennessee. Tom Starling, Ed.D. is president and CEO of Mental Health America of MidSouth and is on the Steering Committee of Nashville-Health.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Support criminal justice reform

My son was given a 12-year sentence for a nonviolent drug offense. Another family member was sentenced to 15 years for a first time, non-person offense with no chance of parole due to mandatory minimum sentencing.

Sadly, my family members' experiences are not unique. Tennessee's prison population grew 12% over the past decade, driven by a growth in time served due to increasing sentence lengths and decreasing parole releases. Incarceration with such lengthy sentences for individuals who do not pose a threat to public safety has multiple negative effects.

I agree with District Attorney Frederick Agee's recent op-ed, "Legislature should support Gov. Lee's criminal justice reform effort." The General Assembly needs to support Lee's task force that examined Tennessee's prison and jail population and proposed meaningful, commonsense solutions. Their findings showed an overreliance on incarceration for nonviolent individuals and technical violators of community supervision and

a deficit of treatment and reentry resources necessary to succeed when returning to their community after incarceration.

Tennessee could become a national leader in implementing criminal justice reform that will, in turn, decrease the burden on our law enforcement, court system and state as well as improve outcomes for returning citizens. It's time for Tennessee to take steps to advance proportional accountability and open second chance opportunities for countless brothers and sisters in prison.

Tara Eslick, Fayetteville 37334

The ideal state legislators

My ideal state legislators create laws to serve the common good for all the state's residents.

They make commonsense, practical, fiscally-responsible decisions that have long-range benefit, especially for the underserved. They see poverty with children going hungry in their state as unacceptable and work together with other legislators, in the spirit of cooperation, to

feed people, provide affordable health-care and housing, and educate and train people for twenty-first century jobs, so that all people have a fair opportunity to become self-sufficient, positive contributors to their community and state.

They worship God and put their faith in action, bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. They humbly seek a measure of God's wisdom and their colleagues in decision making. They respect and promote the sanctity of life for people of all ages and of the life of our planet.

They promote public and private partnerships to create a healthier, better educated, gainfully employed populace. They balance the needs of business with protecting the environment. They create a regulatory environment where business innovation can thrive. When necessary, they also correct businesses that take advantage of their customers, stockholders and the communities where they operate. They lift up their neighbors in need because it makes humanitarian and economic sense for us all to rise together.

They treat others as they too would want to be treated.

Gary Tucker, Kingsport 37660

Don't abolish gun permits

The least we can do to protect Tennesseans is to make sure those who carry loaded weapons in public have a permit to do so. A permit at least shows they have had a background check and safety training.

Gov. Bill Lee should not dismiss the requirement to hold a permit so lightly. He is supposed to represent *all* Tennesseans, and a recent poll shows that 65% of us would be less likely to vote for him in the next election if he supports House Bill 18, which would allow people to carry loaded, hidden guns in public without a background check or any safety training.

We depend on our elected leaders to do what is right for our safety and protection, and that means requiring permits for people to carry loaded weapons in public. Lee should *not* allow permitless carry in Tennessee.

Karen Daniel, Nashville 37221

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