Senate Judiciary Subcommittee – public meeting on March 12, 2026, at 11 a.m.

Senators Lynn Evans, chair, Adrian Dickey, Herman C. Quimbach

Identifying DSD — Differences in Sexual Development

Not every baby is born strictly male or female—and Iowa law needs to recognize that reality.

Discussions about intersex conditions are sometimes mistakenly treated as debates about gender identity or sexual orientation. They are not. Differences in Sexual Development (DSD), also called intersex traits, are recognized biological variations involving chromosomes, hormones, or reproductive anatomy. These variations have been documented by physicians and researchers for decades and affect a small but real portion of the population.

Many lawmakers say legislation should reflect biological reality. Modern medicine agrees that biological sex is usually male or female—but not always. Some individuals are born with chromosome patterns other than XX (typically female) or XY (typically male), such as XO, XXY, or XYY. Others have variations in internal or external anatomy that may not become apparent until puberty or adulthood. In about 1 in 2,000 births, genital differences are visible at birth; less obvious variations may be discovered later.

I first learned about these differences while working at a university research hospital. I saw firsthand how families struggled to understand what was happening with their children and how medical interventions were often rushed, not always necessary, and sometimes harmful. Those experiences made me realize how easy it is to assume that every person fits neatly into male or female categories—until it affects someone you love.

Historically, medical practice often attempted to assign intersex infants to male or female categories through surgery or medication. Today, many professionals and families recognize that such interventions are unnecessary in most cases and that individuals should have the right to make decisions about their own bodies later in life.

The important point for lawmakers is simple: **not every person fits neatly into rigid biological categories**. Laws that assume otherwise risk creating real harm for people who already face complex medical and personal circumstances. If legislation truly intends to reflect biological reality, it must recognize that natural variation exists.

Iowa families who encounter these differences deserve laws grounded in **fact and compassion**, not assumptions or prejudice. Thoughtful legislation can protect all Iowans, including those with Differences in Sexual Development, rather than leaving them vulnerable to discrimination.

Laws that respect science and human variation protect all Iowans—those born typical and those born with Differences in Sexual Development alike.

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