

Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence – Oppose HSB 593 Harmful Religious Exemption

The Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV) urges you to reject this legislation. We represent 22 crime victim service provider agencies across Iowa and the collective experience of agency staff who dedicate their lives to supporting victims of violent crime, specifically, survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Our direct service providers routinely witness the pain and suffering of crime victims, as well as their stunning resilience in surviving repeated violent acts (often over the course of months and years), inflicted on their minds and bodies by people they know and care about.

We strongly support religious freedom, one of our nation's fundamental values protected by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. We also support American values of equity and fairness as well as laws enacted to protect against discrimination and ensure fair treatment for all.

Domestic violence is not a single-issue problem and harm inflicted does not occur in a vacuum. It remains a persistent public health problem with crisis levels of prevalence. Inequity is a root cause. Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, criminal background, etc., impact how individuals experience violence and how systems and people respond and meet survivor's needs. If we want to end and prevent violence, we must prioritize policies to advance equity and prevent discrimination.

We oppose this bill because we believe it is unnecessary and will become a vehicle for enabling discrimination and for harming or restricting the freedom of others. Iowa's civil rights laws strike the right balance. They provide extensive protection for religious freedom and also stand out for providing comprehensive protection against discrimination that explicitly includes LGBTQ residents.

This proposal implements a broad religious exemption that conflicts with our laws by allowing people to claim their religious beliefs give them the right to decide which laws they will follow. In other words, this proposal would make it easier to discriminate by allowing entities and people to ignore laws that protect health, safety, and essential civil rights. It would create legal chaos and the negative impact extends well beyond Iowa's anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ residents.

This bill is bad for everyone- but it significantly harms Iowans who disproportionately experience discrimination. Relationship violence does not discriminate- it occurs regardless of gender, race, economic, immigration or education status- but young women, LGBTQ women, and women in communities of color experience the highest prevalence.

Domestic violence involves coercive and controlling behavior. An abusive partner seizes every opportunity to use inequality as a weapon to control another person. Race, immigration status, income, gender identity, sexual orientation- all are used as weapons in a domestic violence situation and routinely prevent victims from seeking help and create significant barriers to safety.

Religious exemptions undermine safety for victims of violence by making it easier for those doing harm to engage in coercive behavior. Consider an abusive partner who challenges his arrest for domestic abuse assault because his religious tenets say that a man has the right to discipline his wife. Quite frankly not too long ago this was not a religious belief but a societal norm. Or consider victims, including same sex couples or women of color or immigrant survivors, who never call for help because it risks putting their families in more danger than the harm they endured due to biases and discrimination in our legal systems.

Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children. Iowa enacted housing protections in 2016 to prevent victims from being routinely evicted because of the abuse. This proposal would enable landlords to ignore the law by claiming a religious exemption to justify the eviction of

same-sex couples, practicing Muslims, etc. It would undermine decades of fair housing laws more broadly by making it legal to not even rent to someone in the first place.

Iowa doesn't need this. American history is replete with examples of religion being used to justify discrimination and violence based on race, gender, sexual orientation. Iowa is a national leader in enacting laws that proactively address discrimination and strike the right balance between protecting rights and accommodating freedoms.

Please reject this proposal. It creates barriers to safety for crime victims and could lead to an array of harms to safety, health, and the rule of law- in addition to enabling discrimination that is in direct conflict with Iowa civil rights laws.

Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Comments for House Judiciary Subcommittee, January 27, 2022

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