

## The New York Times

# Mike Pence and 'Conversion Therapy': A History

By Liam Stack

Nov. 30, 2016

Since Gov. Mike Pence was chosen as Donald J. Trump's running mate in July, he has faced complaints from groups critical of his record on gay and transgender rights, who said he has long been an opponent of the gains made by the L.G.B.T. community in recent years.

Mr. Pence has been particularly dogged by accusations that he is a supporter of "conversion therapy," the practice of trying to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. It has been discredited by the medical establishment and denounced by gay and transgender groups.

Mr. Pence's spokesman, Marc Lotter, denied to The Times over the weekend that the vice president-elect supports the practice, saying a past campaign statement had been misinterpreted. But L.G.B.T. groups remain skeptical, pointing to his record of opposition to gay rights as a member of Congress and as governor of Indiana and an approving reference to conversion therapy in the 2016 Republican Party platform.

So, what is conversion therapy, and why is Mr. Pence so closely associated with it?

## What Is Conversion Therapy?

The phrases "conversion therapy" and "reparative therapy" refer to discredited psychotherapy methods that aim to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Spiritual efforts to accomplish the same goal are sometimes called "ex-gay ministry."

Conversion therapy has been condemned by a range of groups, including the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association, which said it was based on the view that homosexuality is a disorder, an idea "that has been rejected by all the major mental health professions."

Conversion therapy practitioners "often frame the inability to change one's sexual orientation as a personal and moral failure," adding to its harmful effects, the A.P.A. said.

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In the past, efforts to change someone's sexual orientation sometimes involved extreme measures like institutionalization, castration and electroshock therapy, according to the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Today, critics contend that conversion therapy still sometimes includes physical abuse. For example, a New Jersey organization convicted of fraud last year was accused of sexually abusing its clients and forcing them to participate in violent role-play exercises.

Most practitioners, however, primarily use quasi-psychoanalytic methods like one-on-one or group therapy sessions. Rea Carey, the executive director of the National L.G.B.T.Q. Task Force, called it "brutal, inhuman psychological and at times physical abuse."

Brothers on a Road Less Traveled, a support group for men who want to stop being attracted to other men, said its method includes developing "an internal sense of masculinity" and "discovering our true needs underlying some of our homosexual longings and triggers."

There are frequently religious overtones to conversion therapy, which is often promoted by groups with ties to conservative Christian organizations like Focus on the Family, which says on its website that “homosexual strugglers” can “leave homosexuality” with the help of support groups like Homosexuals Anonymous or by “becoming more like Jesus.”

## Mike Pence and Conversion Therapy

A statement on an archived version of the website for Mr. Pence’s 2000 congressional campaign has been widely interpreted as signaling his support for conversion therapy. After listing his opposition to same-sex marriage and anti-discrimination laws that protect gay people, Mr. Pence’s website takes up the issue of the Ryan White Care Act, which provides federal funding for H.I.V./AIDS patients and was reauthorized by Congress that year:

Congress should support the reauthorization of the Ryan White Care Act only after completion of an audit to ensure that federal dollars were no longer being given to organizations that celebrate and encourage the types of behaviors that facilitate the spreading of the HIV virus. Resources should be directed toward those institutions which provide assistance to those seeking to change their sexual behavior.

Mr. Pence had not addressed speculation about his support for conversion therapy until last weekend, when Mr. Lotter told The Times it was “patently false” that Mr. Pence “supported or advocated” the practice.

Mr. Lotter said the vice president-elect had been calling for federal funds to “be directed to groups that promoted safe sexual practices” during his 2000 congressional campaign, and he said it was a “mischaracterization” to see the statement as a reference to conversion therapy.

But he declined to explain which organizations Mr. Pence had wanted to lose their federal funding or what Mr. Pence meant when he referred to groups that “celebrate and encourage” activity that spreads H.I.V. Gay and transgender groups see that language as a reference to their community.

“That is very specific language — some might call it a dog whistle — that has been used for decades to very thinly cloak deeply homophobic beliefs,” Ms. Carey said. “Particularly the phrase ‘seeking to change their sexual behavior,’ to me, is code for conversion therapy.”

## The Republican Party and Conversion Therapy

Conversion therapy was tacitly endorsed in the Republican Party platform for the first time this year in a line that supported the “right of parents to determine the proper medical treatment and therapy for their minor children.”

Reince Priebus, the chairman of the Republican Party and the incoming White House chief of staff, told reporters that the language did not refer to conversion therapy, but gay and transgender groups did not believe him.

Gregory T. Angelo, the president of the Log Cabin Republicans, an L.G.B.T. conservative group, said in an interview the nod to conversion therapy was included at the urging of Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council, which has been called an anti-L.G.B.T. extremist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

“There are only two types of therapies for minors that are notable and that are controversial at present,” he said. “One is ex-gay conversion therapy and the other is transgender hormone therapy, and I hardly believe that Tony Perkins was putting a plank in the Republican Party platform endorsing the rights of parents to provide their children with transgender hormone therapy.”

(The Family Research Council has said it was able to establish its Washington office only with the financial assistance of the family of Betsy DeVos, whom Donald J. Trump named education secretary last week.)

A coalition of former leaders of the ex-gay movement wrote an open letter in July denouncing the platform as “essentially affirming” conversion therapy. They said they could “attest to the emotional and spiritual damage caused to men, women, children and their families” by the practice.

The Republican position differs sharply from the Democrats'. President Obama called for an end of conversion therapy for minors in 2015 after a 17-year-old transgender girl, Leelah Alcorn, killed herself after leaving a suicide note that talked about her time in conversion therapy.

## Have Any States Banned It?

State-licensed mental health professionals have been barred from attempting to change a minor's sexual orientation or gender identity in six states: California, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Oregon and Illinois, according to the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

It said similar laws had been passed in several municipalities, including Seattle, Washington, Cincinnati and Miami Beach, and introduced in eight more states.

*Correction: November 30, 2016*

*An earlier version of this article misstated the surname of Vice President-elect Mike Pence's spokesman. He is Marc Lotter, not Lott.*

Daniel Victor contributed reporting.