

Testimony in Support of House Bill 6540
AN ACT CONCERNING THE PREVENTION OF HIV

By Kailey Townsend
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To members of the Public Health Committee:

I respectfully submit the following testimony in support of H.B. 6540, *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV*. I am a student at the University of Connecticut, intern for True Colors Connecticut and community member of Callen-Lorde Community Health Center of New York City. Callen-Lorde is an organization that like True Colors, assists LGBTQ youth in advocacy and support. I have decided to submit this testimony in solidarity with my fellow community members of Connecticut who are disproportionately affected by HIV and have yet to gain access to PrEP.

This bill would update existing state law to prevent the transmission of HIV among young people. Currently, minors may receive HIV treatment without parental consent¹ – however they cannot independently consent to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a medication used to prevent HIV transmission in the first place. *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV* would implement a targeted provision to address this harmful gap.

Despite progress in HIV treatment, HIV remains a significant public health concern. More than 10,000 people are living with HIV in Connecticut.² Young gay and bisexual men of color are particularly at risk.³ There is still no cure available for HIV, and treatment is complex, expensive, and life-long. Additionally, young people diagnosed with HIV face considerable stigma.

Fortunately, medical advances allow us to prevent HIV before transmission. PrEP is a daily pill that reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by more than 90 percent. Among people who inject drugs, it reduces the risk by more than 70 percent.⁴ In May 2018, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) expanded approval of PrEP to adolescents. The approval followed research showing that PrEP is safe and effective for teenagers.

In Connecticut, however, many of the youth who would most benefit from PrEP are unable to obtain it – for instance, LGBTQ youth who cannot access PrEP due to fear of parental rejection. *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV* would foster trusting relationships between young people and adult providers by opening new avenues for preventative care. Through these relationships, young people can access regular STI

¹ Conn. Gen. Stat. §19a-592

² Connecticut Department of Public Health (2019), *HIV in Connecticut: Data Reported Through 2018*, <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DPH/HIV-Surveillance/CT-HIV-Fact-Sheet.pdf?la=en>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), *HIV and Young Men Who Have Sex with Men*, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/sexualbehaviors/pdf/hiv_factsheet_ymsm.pdf

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, PrEP, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html>

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testing. Providers may also serve as entry points to resources and support for talking to family members or other trusted adults about issues related to HIV, sexual health, and identity.

I am a student at the University of Connecticut which holds the largest population of students at a University in the state - in my four years, I've engaged with many students who have HIV or have had partners with HIV. With gratefulness to receiving PrEP, those who are HIV negative and have not contracted HIV from their partners have been able to continue their studies as intended. Young people in Connecticut deserve that same access to PrEP without the fear of parental rejection or stigma and the opportunity to continue their life pursuits.

As a supporter of Connecticut's campaign, "Getting to Zero," I would like to echo the agency's fight to get to zero infections, deaths, and stigma within this state. I truly believe that H.B. 6540 will help us reach 0-0-0.

No young person should have to wait until after contracting HIV to access care. I urge you to favorably report *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV* to protect youth health and safety.

Respectfully submitted,

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