

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/georgia-needs-to-put-children-first-not-allow-faith-based-exemptions/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, the Georgia State Senate introduced a bill that follows a legacy of similar bills brought forward in other states. The measure, called SB 211, would have allowed faith-based child welfare agencies that receive government funding to discriminate against a wide range of individuals on the basis of religious freedom including, among other groups, prospective LGBTQ foster or adoptive parents.

Fortunately, outcry against the Georgia bill was fierce, and the legislation has since stalled. As Georgia Unites points out, the bill is [blocked for 2019](#). But while efforts to push the discriminatory SB 221 may not have succeeded this year, the threat of a religious freedom bill in Georgia has not disappeared. Discriminatory amendments could still be introduced in the coming weeks, while SB 221 could return next year. That's why advocates for the rights of foster children and the LGBTQ community need to keep the pressure on.

How would a religious freedom bill like SB 221 impact children in Georgia? First, it would exempt anyone in Georgia from state or local law when practicing their religious beliefs. SB 221 mimics the language of other state-driven laws and policies, most recently in South Carolina, justifying discrimination against foster parents based on religious beliefs. And it states that a compelling government interest is required before interfering in an individual's religious practice and that when interference occurs, it is done with the least restrictive means.

Indeed, the bill would legalize discrimination against the LGBTQ community. As Children's Rights Lead Counsel Christina Remlin [writes](#): Taxpayer-funded foster care agencies would be able to turn away qualified same-sex couples and deny our most defenseless children the chance of a better life in a safe and loving home. LGBTQ youth could find themselves targeted by the very system charged with keeping them safe.

Laws like these undermine the equality and rights of people identifying as LGBTQ when accessing resources, businesses and services. In the child welfare field, it also has grave consequences for children who are in desperate need of a stable and permanent home.

But these bills would impact everyone, not only those in the LGBTQ community. SB 221, for example, would allow for discrimination against anyone that does not pass a religious or moral litmus test. It would give child welfare agencies the license to use religious justification in order to deny services to unmarried parents, single parents, those in an interfaith relationship. It would open the door to discriminate against people of different faiths, including Muslim, Jewish, and atheist individuals.

Georgia's first priority should be to find the best placement for children in foster care. Individual agencies contracted to do so should not be able to limit these placements based on religious grounds. Religion is already protected under the First Amendment; this bill, echoing a disturbing national trend, only provides a license to discriminate. What's more, children both within and outside the foster care system are being sent the message that LGBTQ people are not equal under the law.

Georgia is [one of five states](#) in the U.S. that lack state-level civil rights laws of any kind. Its citizens would be better served if the state's elected officials spent their time rectifying that, by proposing and passing a civil rights law that will protect all people, whatever their gender, sexual identity or religion particularly when it comes to protecting children.

As we continue to fight discriminatory bills in Georgia, follow Children's Rights on Twitter for news and updates. If you or someone you know lives in Georgia, encourage them to [call their Senators](#) and urge them to reject any license to discriminate. By working together, we can ensure that Georgia continues to put the best interests of children first.

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First Name	Last Name
Email Address	