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Adoption Bills Reported From Senate Committee

Emotions ran high Wednesday in the Senate Families, Seniors and Human Services Committee after some two hours of testimony largely in opposition to legislation, ultimately reported to the full Senate, that would allow faith-based adoption agencies to decline services based on sincerely held religious beliefs of the agency.

The committee began with estimates from [Sen. Judy Emmons](#) (R-Sheridan), chair of the committee, that it would last slightly more than hour. But as that time came and went, it became increasingly obvious the committee planned on reporting [HB 4188](#), [HB 4189](#) and [HB 4190](#) after its first hearing in the Senate.

"This is several pieces of legislation that has been debated for a few years now, so it seemed time to keep moving it forward in this process," Ms. Emmons told reporters after the meeting.

Numerous individuals and agencies testified in opposition to the bills, most expressing concerns about the morality behind agencies receiving public money being allowed to pick and choose who they would serve. Many of the concerns were that the legislation would make it even more difficult for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community to be able to adopt despite meeting all the eligibility requirements otherwise.

"With over 3,000 kids in the system, do we really want to codify this kind of discrimination into law?" Sommer Foster, director of political advocacy for Equality Michigan, which advocates on behalf of the LGBT community, asked the committee. "Anyone who stands between a child and a loving, capable family is not seeking solutions."

Susan Grettenberger, vice president of social policy for the National Association of Social Workers, and herself a foster parent, said the bills have a potential to harm children and that social workers enter the profession with the understanding that "ethical obligations to serve all clients supersede personal beliefs or preferences."

She continued: "Discrimination against someone because they don't fit with an agency's values is a problem. But equally, if not more importantly, this is about the children needing a forever home who do not have the option of going to another agency to find a new family."

"A bill like this creates an even further hostile environment for families trying to be foster parents as well as children looking for a safe place to be," charged Pastor Matt Bode of the Detroit Cooperative Parish, who is also a foster parent with his husband. "It offends me from a moral perspective that our tax dollars can go toward an agency that does not believe I am worthy to be a parent."

"These bills threaten the religious freedom of the general public in the name of protecting the religious freedom of the service provider, in this case, child placing agencies," said Mary Pollock, legislative vice president for Michigan National Organization for Women.

A few, primarily Catholic, groups spoke in favor of the bills.

"This is practical legislation that will ensure a diverse range of child placement agencies continue to operate in collaboration with the State on behalf of vulnerable and neglected children," Michigan Catholic Conference Vice President for Public Policy Tom Hickson said in a statement. "While a greater number of placements are needed now more than ever, it makes for good public policy to protect the faith-based agencies' successful relationship with the state in order to ensure more rather than fewer options are available to families."

"These bills allow faith-based agencies to continue finding loving and caring families while honoring our beliefs," Vicki Schultz, representing Catholic Charities, said. "Please protect us."

[Sen. Bert Johnson](#) (D-Highland Park) was the lone opposition vote to the bills, which were reported 4-1 along party lines. He offered numerous amendments to each of the bills, including requiring a child-placing agency to list on its website the circumstances under which an agency would refuse services, as well as ensuring adoption agencies are complying with state and federal anti-discrimination laws.

"I support religious freedom, but do not think religion should be used as a basis of discrimination," Mr. Johnson said.

All of his amendments were defeated along party lines. Prior to voting, he requested that Ms. Emmons table the legislation and have further conversations about the bills instead.

"I think it's bad form and bad policy, and I certainly don't think it serves the best interest of the children of the state of Michigan," he said.

Asked about Mr. Johnson's request after the meeting, Ms. Emmons told reporters, "This has been around for a while - multiple years - and it's time to keep it moving. I think things get bogged down when you drag them out and I think it was time to move it."

SNYDER REVIEW: Dave Murray, deputy press secretary for [Governor Rick Snyder](#), said the administration is reviewing the legislation carefully.

"The governor has raised some concerns and will be closely reviewing latest changes and working with legislative partners," Mr. Murray said in an e-mail, although he did not respond to a request seeking further details on what specifically those concerns were. "The administration has a strong commitment to ensuring the most responsive, effective adoption system possible and we've made key progress in strengthening children's services and matching kids in foster care with permanent families. That is always the outcome we need to help meet."

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