

STATE OF PRIDE REPORT

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**TENNESSEE
EQUALITY
PROJECT**

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Statewide Assessment of Pride


As the LGBTQ+ community in Tennessee continues to grow and evolve, Pride events have emerged as vital celebrations of identity, resilience, and solidarity. These gatherings not only foster a sense of belonging and visibility but also serve as platforms for advocacy, education, and community building.

This statewide assessment aims to evaluate the landscape of Pride events across Tennessee, highlighting their importance and challenges while offering valuable insights into effective strategies that enable these events to positively impact local communities.

Through a comprehensive analysis of events, documented media, and stakeholder feedback, we seek to understand how Pride celebrations contribute to the social fabric of our state. By examining the diverse range of activities, from parades and festivals to educational to advocacy efforts and legal efforts, this assessment will provide valuable insights into the successes and areas for growth within Tennessee's Pride events.

Our goal is to support ongoing efforts to create inclusive, safe, and empowering spaces for all members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies. You can find a comprehensive list of Pride events across the state at the end of this report.

In the following sections, we will explore Pride history in Tennessee, the current legal landscape, dynamics of Pride events in Tennessee, strategies for organizers to implement and community resources.

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History of Pride

Stonewall Uprising (1969): Largely regarded as the catalyst for the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the United States, the Stonewall Uprising began in the early hours of June 28th, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York city. The Stonewall Inn was one of the few safe havens for LGBTQ+ people in the 1960s. However, it operated under frequent police scrutiny and raids, which were common at the time. On June 28, 1969, a series of spontaneous protests erupted in response to a police raid at this LGBTQ+ bar.

Early Pride Marches (1970s): To commemorate Stonewall, the first Pride marches were organized in June of 1970. The Christopher Street Liberation Day March, held in New York City, was the first with thousands participating. Similar events took place in other cities, marking the beginning of annual Pride celebrations.

Growth and expansion (1980s -1990s): Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Pride events, and LGBTQ+ advocacy, experienced growth in visibility while expanding across the country. The AIDS crisis also occurred during this time increasing activism and awareness in the community. In 1999, through proclamation, the federal government officially recognized June as Pride Month.

Institutional Recognition and Mainstreaming (2000s- present): Pride events saw great progress in the 2000s, gaining greater mainstream acceptance and recognition. Marriage equality emerges as a priority issue and the repeal of discriminatory policies, such as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” were significant milestones. Pride parades and festivals became major annual events in cities across the country, celebrated with corporate sponsorships and widespread participation.

Contemporary Pride (2020s): In recent years, Pride events have continued to evolve, focusing on intersectionality and inclusion, addressing issues such as racial justice, transgender rights, and global LGBTQ+ issues. The celebration of Pride has expanded beyond parades to include a variety of educational and advocacy activities, reflecting the diverse and dynamic nature of the LGBTQ+ community.

In Tennessee, the first public drag performance occurred in Memphis on Halloween in 1969 as a means to protect people from the local ordinances criminalizing cross dressing, same sex dancing and construed as acts of vulgar character. The first recognized Pride event took place in June 1988, with roughly 200 participants in a march from Fannie Mae Dee’s Park to Centennial Park.

Legal Landscape of Pride



The LGBTQ+ community has experienced an onslaught of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and local government resistance over the years resulting in a patchwork legal landscape and uncertainty for organizing efforts. Throughout the assessment, organizers highlighted local challenges and statewide legal issues that have complicated the planning of community events.

Local Legal Challenges

Local governments across the state have taken action to restrict or eliminate Pride events in their communities. In 2022, the City of Murfreesboro, TN issued an official policy to prohibit the issuance of permits to the Tennessee Equality Project, the organizer of the BoroPride . A lawsuit was filed against the City on behalf of TEP, who was represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, Ballard Spahr and Burr and Forman. The City of Murfreesboro settled the lawsuit for \$500,000 and they were also forced to repeal a local ordinance which included “homosexuality” in its public indecency ban. The city is also required to accept and process permits for TEP and any future events.[1]

In 2022, Jackson Pride attempted to hold a family-friendly drag show in a public park. The Jackson state House Representative and state Senator filed a request for an injunction against the City of Jackson, seeking to prohibit the drag show.[2] When the injunction did not achieve the desired outcome, lawmakers introduced legislation in 2023 aimed at implementing one of the nation’s first drag ban laws. While these policies are commonly referred to as “drag bans,” it’s essential to clarify that they do not outright ban drag performances but instead impose significant restrictions on them.

In 2023, Franklin, TN, faced a contentious local permit dispute when the Board of Aldermen voted in a deadlock, with four members in favor and four against issuing a permit for the Pride event. Franklin Mayor Ken Moore ultimately cast the deciding vote, breaking the tie and allowing the permit to be granted for the celebration.[3] This incident garnered national attention, highlighting the ongoing debates surrounding LGBTQ+ rights and local governance.

The victories in Murfreesboro, where a significant settlement was reached, and the decision in Franklin to grant a permit for the Pride event, illustrate that community advocacy and legal action can make a difference.

Legal Landscape of Pride



Every year at the Tennessee legislature anti-LGBTQ+ bills are filed by our state majority. The Adult Entertainment Act, passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by Governor Lee sought to restrict drag performances and has since caused significant changes in how Pride events operate throughout the state.

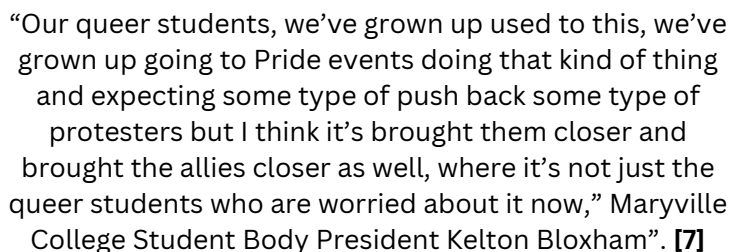
Drag Restriction Law - Adult Entertainment Act

In 2023, the Tennessee Adult Entertainment Act, passed the Tennessee legislature and was signed into law as Public Chapter 2. The AEA created an offense for a person who engages in an adult cabaret performance on public property or in a location where the adult cabaret performance could be viewed by a person who is not an adult.[4] One significant impact of the Act is its direct effect on public drag performances, which have historically been part of LGBTQ+ culture and expression.

As a result, many drag performers and venues face challenges, including increased barriers to hosting events and the potential for legal repercussions. Critics argue that the Act disproportionately targets LGBTQ+ communities, framing drag as inherently sexual and stigmatizing an art form that serves as both entertainment and a means of political expression. The Act has sparked legal challenges and fueled protesting of Pride community events highlighting the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ rights and the importance of protecting artistic expression in the face of restrictive legislation.

Blount County - In 2023, after the passage of the AEA, the Blount County District Attorney sent notice to Blount County Pride organizers, the President of Maryville College, and local law enforcement that it plan to enforce the AEA during the 3rd annual Blount Pride Event.[5]

September 1st, the Friday before the Blount Pride Festival was scheduled to occur, U.S. District Court Judge Ronnie Greer issued a temporary restraining order prohibiting the Blount County D.A. from interfering with the Pride event.[6] After the ruling, the pride event was held on September 3rd and had double the participation from the previous year.



“Our queer students, we’ve grown up used to this, we’ve grown up going to Pride events doing that kind of thing and expecting some type of push back some type of protesters but I think it’s brought them closer and brought the allies closer as well, where it’s not just the queer students who are worried about it now,” Maryville College Student Body President Kelton Bloxham”. [7]

Legal Landscape of Pride



Friends of George's Lawsuit

"Not having drag at a Pride festival would be like having a Fourth of July event and saying you can't talk about George Washington," said Shannon Bryant, who works with Blount Pride. "We should not be in fear of our lives for being LGBTQ+ people just having a nice time out in the world as ourselves." **[8]**

Shannon Bryant

On March 27, 2023, Friends of George's, a Memphis nonprofit that organizes theater and drag shows, filed a lawsuit seeking an injunction to prevent the enforcement of the Adult Entertainment Act (AEA), which was set to take effect on April 1, 2023.**[9]** The lawsuit claimed that the ban on cabaret and drag performances violated the First Amendment.

On March 31, 2023, just one day before the AEA was to be implemented, Federal Judge Thomas Parker of the Western District of Tennessee ruled that the AEA imposed an unconstitutional restriction on freedom of speech, enjoining the District Attorney from enforcing the statute. This ruling specifically barred the Shelby County District Attorney from enforcing the law in the 30th Judicial District, which covers Shelby County.**[10]**

Having received a temporary restraining order against potential prosecution from the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee in September of 2023, Blount County Pride sought to intervene in the Friends of George's lawsuit on September 8, 2023. The Sixth Circuit granted their motion to intervene on September 15, 2023.**[11]**

However, in July 2024, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the lower court's ruling and upheld the AEA. Senior United States Circuit Court Judge Eugene Siler and Circuit Court Judge John Nalbandian affirmed the decision to dismiss the case, while Circuit Court Judge Andre Mathis dissented.**[12]**

Friends of George's then filed an en banc appeal, requesting that the entire Sixth Circuit panel review the case. This appeal was denied by the Sixth Circuit on September 20, 2024.**[13]** As of the end of September, no appeal has been filed; However, an appeal to the United States Supreme Court by the plaintiffs is anticipated.

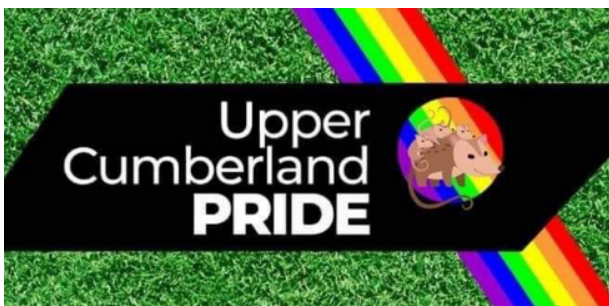
Challenges and Threats Facing Pride Events

The opposition to Pride events reveals a complex landscape of beliefs and motivations, shaped by cultural, political, and personal factors. For some, this resistance stems from deeply held religious convictions or traditional values, leading to vocal protests and calls for the cancellation of these celebrations. Others may view Pride as a challenge to societal norms, perceiving it as a threat to their way of life or community standards. The experiences of those opposing Pride events can vary widely, from organized demonstrations to grassroots efforts aimed at influencing public opinion.

This opposition not only highlights the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ rights but also underscores the need for dialogue and understanding amidst a polarized social climate. As tensions rise and communities grapple with differing perspectives, the varied experiences of opposition continue to shape the narrative surrounding Pride.

Religious opposition has remained a constant theme despite growing support and participation from religious communities in Pride celebrations. Mostly consisting of protestors showing up with signs and Bible verses, it's not uncommon to see these displays of opposition at most Pride events.

The emergence of Nazi and Proud Boy protests at Pride and local LGBTQ+ events has been documented across the state. With Nazi flags becoming increasingly visible and instances of armed protestors appearing **[14]**, many communities have had to rely on local law enforcement and private security to provide risk mitigation and safety for these events.



One notable incident involved a protestor who was arrested for throwing a dead and decaying possum at Pride attendees in Crossville, TN.**[15]** In a remarkable display of resilience, the local Pride participants chose to embrace this bizarre event, transforming the possum into a sort of mascot for the following year's celebration.**[16]**

In relation to Pride and community drag shows, there have been documented bomb threats aimed at Pride events in Nashville**[17]** as well as Nazi protestors displaying swastika flags outside a drag brunch in Cookeville.**[18]** We've also see death threats directed at Pride organizers in small rural towns. According to the latest data from the Southern Poverty Law Center, Tennessee has 37 active hate groups. **[19]** Regardless of the perceived severity, it is crucial to report any threats of violence to local law enforcement and to implement safety protocols when organizing community events.

Political Dynamics

Pride events across Tennessee each have their unique characteristics, yet common themes emerge statewide. Many organizers face hostile opposition from local politicians, as well as escalating safety concerns due to the rise of religious right groups, as well as self-proclaimed Nazi and Proud Boys factions.

Among the various challenges highlighted, the influence of local political dynamics and relationships emerges as the most significant factor deterring opposition and preventing significant issues for organizers.

Political Dynamics

Larger metropolitan areas report having stronger relationships with their District Attorneys' Offices and local law enforcement. In contrast, local city and county officials can delay or outright deny permits, significantly impacting Pride participation in communities, as previously documented. For instance, there have been instances where a city denied a Pride organization's participation in the town Christmas Parade.^[20] Pride organizations that engage early with local and state lawmakers often achieve better outcomes and are more effectively prepared to address potential issues.

Venue Difficulties

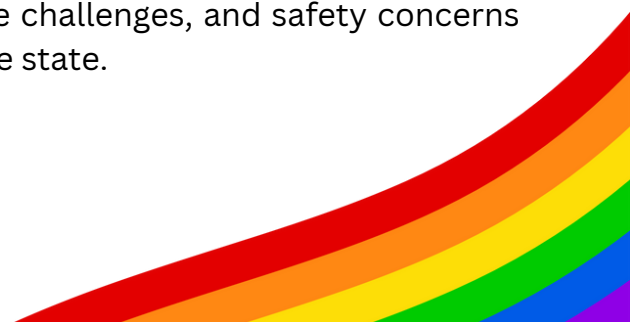
Many organizers face challenges such as losing host venues due to pressure from external opposition, including universities like Maryville College^[21] and Tennessee Tech.^[22] Private venues have expressed hesitancy to rent space for events in fear of backlash.

Safety and Law Enforcement

Concerns about safety have led to discussions around the role of law enforcement, including the appointment of LGBTQ+ liaisons. Organizers must navigate the complexities of private versus public enforcement, and many rely on a combination of both for added security.

Protesters have also filed lawsuits against cities for their removal from Pride events. Notable cases include a Christian protester in Franklin, TN,^[23] who was arrested and subsequently sued, along with similar incidents in Johnson City^[24] and Cookeville.^[25] Some organizers point to these events as a reason law enforcement is becoming increasingly hesitant to remove protesters.

In summary, the interplay of political relationships, venue challenges, and safety concerns presents significant hurdles for Pride organizers across the state.



Navigating Threats to Pride as an Organizer

In light of the evolving legal landscape surrounding drag performances and growing security concerns within the community, local Pride organizers have adopted various strategies to enhance safety during their celebrations. Below are some of the approaches shared by organizers in the statewide assessment.

Some of the local responses to these changes include the following:


Drag Performances:

- **No Change:** Continuing with drag performances as planned.
- **Suspension:** Deciding to suspend all drag performances from events.
- **Contractual Restrictions:** Implementing contracts with drag performers that limit specific activities and require vetting of their music and performance details.
- **Separate Private Events:** Hosting multiple events, reserving drag performances exclusively for private gatherings for those 18 and older (no drag at public events).

Safety:

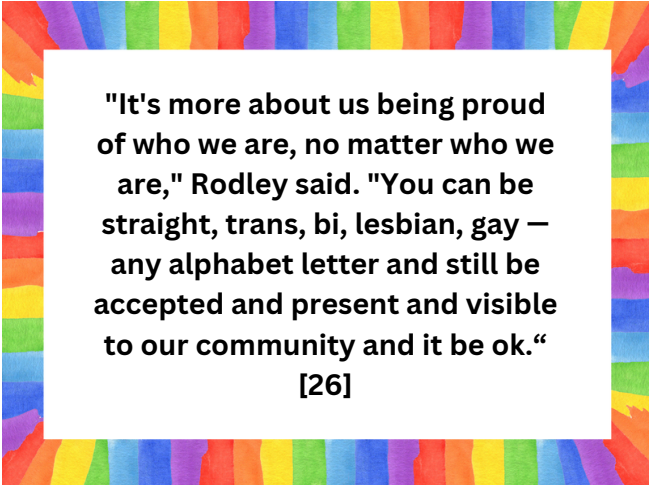
- **Increased Security Measures:** In response to rising security risks statewide, many organizers are choosing to hold private events that employ private security, and metal detectors.
- **Free Speech Zones:** Establishing designated areas at some Pride events to help reduce hostile interactions between Pride participants and protestors.
- **Multiple Smaller Events:** Shifting away from large festivals in favor of hosting a series of smaller community-focused events.
- **Legal observers and volunteer patrol:** Providing additional safety support through enlisting legal observers and volunteers to patrol during the events.
- **Rising Temperatures:** Some localities have shifted their events to the cooler fall months, while others have implemented water misters and enhanced water accessibility to keep attendees comfortable.

Venue Difficulties:

- **Significant Challenges:** Many Pride communities have encountered substantial venue challenges, consistently identified as one of the top barriers to event planning.
 - **Withdrawal of Support:** Several colleges that previously hosted Pride events have withdrawn their support, forcing communities to relocate their annual celebrations.
 - **Minimal Fees:** In response to protestors, some organizers have opted to charge minimal fees (e.g., \$1) to classify their events as private, limiting the presence of protestors inside the venue.
 - **Public Parks:** Meanwhile, other communities have chosen to hold their celebrations in public parks.
- 

Community

Community plays a crucial role in organizing Pride events, serving as the backbone of support, creativity, and resilience that brings these celebrations to life. Pride events are not just festivities; they are powerful expressions of identity, solidarity, and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights. By coming together, community members create safe spaces that foster inclusion, empowerment, and visibility, allowing individuals to celebrate their authentic selves.



"It's more about us being proud of who we are, no matter who we are," Rodley said. "You can be straight, trans, bi, lesbian, gay – any alphabet letter and still be accepted and present and visible to our community and it be ok."
[26]

These gatherings also provide opportunities for education, awareness, and dialogue, helping to combat stigma and discrimination. Ultimately, the strength of the community fuels the success of Pride events, transforming them into meaningful occasions that promote love, acceptance, and unity for all.

Major community contributors to successful pride events include strong relationships and partnerships with the following:

Media involvement

Many Pride organizers across the state proactively engage with local media, leveraging these relationships to not only respond to relevant events but also to promote their initiatives. By strategically using media coverage, they raise awareness of their activities and encourage greater community participation.

Sponsorships

As national and statewide backlash against corporate sponsorship of Pride events continues, these partnerships remain essential for fundraising and successfully hosting such celebrations. Recent controversies, including Target's response to the promotion of inclusive products[27] and Bud Light's backlash over its partnership with transgender icon Dylan Mulvaney,[28] have prompted shifts in sponsorship and corporate support for the LGBTQ+ community. Several Pride organizers expressed support from local businesses including bakeries, breweries and restaurants.

Religious Communities

Many Pride organizers have benefited from the involvement of local churches, which have participated by sponsoring booths, sharing valuable resources such as parking lot space, and fostering an inclusive environment. This collaboration not only enhances the visibility of Pride events but also demonstrates a commitment to love, acceptance, and support for LGBTQ+ individuals within the community. Embracing this partnership is essential for building bridges and promoting understanding between diverse groups, ultimately creating a more inclusive society.

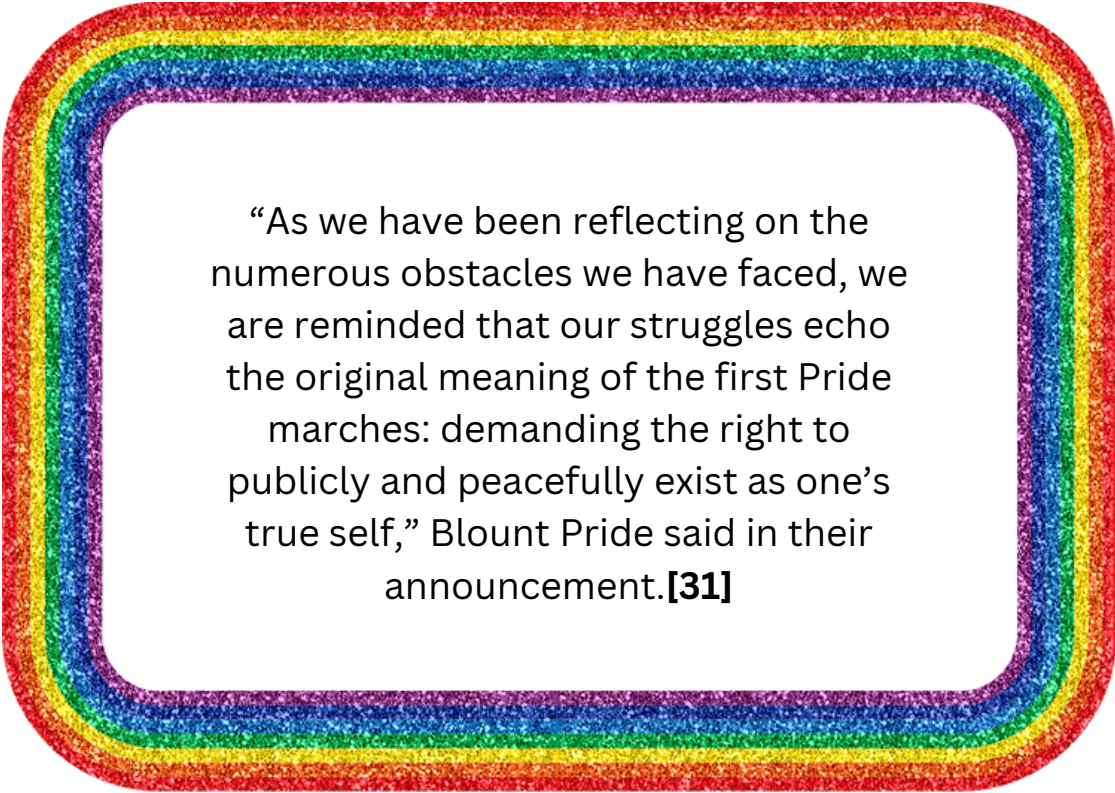
Community

Pride Community Extras:

Many Pride events provide additional resources and services to support their local community members. For instance, Jackson Pride offers a scholarship program to high school students, while Nashville Pride grants financial assistance to new Pride chapters. Additionally, the Upper Cumberland Pride community has taken the initiative to offer gender-affirming clothing to members, demonstrating their commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ members in a unique way.

Some Pride celebrations are even receiving support from politicians and celebrities alike. Notably, First Lady Jill Biden visited Nashville's Pride in 2023^[29], and some Pride events featured headline performances from stars of RuPaul's Drag Race.^[30]

The significance of Pride celebrations, is more than just parades or parties; they are powerful affirmations of identity, resilience, and community support. Let us continue to celebrate diversity, advocate for equality, and uplift one another, ensuring that the vibrant spirit of Pride remains a beacon of hope and resilience. In standing together, we affirm that love always triumphs over hate, and that our community is stronger when we support one another.



“As we have been reflecting on the numerous obstacles we have faced, we are reminded that our struggles echo the original meaning of the first Pride marches: demanding the right to publicly and peacefully exist as one’s true self,” Blount Pride said in their announcement.^[31]



Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the completion of this report.

Special thanks to the state-wide Pride organizers who provided insights and feedback , which greatly enhanced the quality of our understanding of the current environment and efforts surrounding Tennessee Pride events . We recognize the immense sacrifice and heartfelt dedication they put into building community, often facing challenges with resilience and unwavering commitment. Their passion for fostering inclusivity and connection among diverse groups not only enriches Pride events but also strengthens the fabric of our communities and state.

We would like to acknowledge the resources and information shared by various organizations that made this project possible.

Lastly, we would like to thank the law firms representing Pride organizations and drag performers across the state in litigation efforts:

BoroPride Lawsuit

ACLU Tennessee

<https://www.aclu-tn.org>

Ballard Spahr

<https://www.ballardspahr.com>

Burr & Forman

<https://www.burr.com>

Friends of George's Lawsuit

Donati Law, PLLC

<https://www.donatilaw.com>

Watson Burns PLLC

<https://www.watsonburns.com>

Apperson Crump

<https://appersoncrump.com/>

Blount County Lawsuit/Intervenors in FOG:

Horwitz Law PLLC

<https://horwitz.law>

Thank you all for your contributions!



Resources

Organizational resources and associations:

InterPride

Website: <https://www.interpride.org>

TN Pride Chamber

Website: <https://www.tnpridechamber.com/>

USA Prides

<https://www.usaprides.org/pride-101>

Celebrating Pride

<https://www.mend.io/blog/lgbtq-open-source-projects-we-love/>

Western States Center - 2024 Pride Advisory Guide

<https://www.westernstatescenter.org/protectingpride>

CenterLink

<https://www.lgbtqcenters.org/>

National LGBT Taskforce

<https://www.thetaskforce.org/>

Legal resources:

National Lawyer's Guild

Website: <https://www.nlg.org/>

ACLU - Tennessee

Website: <https://www.aclu-tn.org/>

The Human Rights Campaign

<https://www.hrc.org/>

Lambda Legal

<https://lambdalegal.org/>

Transgender Law Center

<https://transgenderlawcenter.org/>



2024

TN Pride Events

Blount Co, TN

- Blount Pride, Sept. 7

Bristol, TN

- TriPride, Oct. 12

Chattanooga, TN

- Chattanooga Pride, Sept. 29-Oct. 6

Clarksville, TN

- Clarksville Pride, June 29

Columbia, TN

- Columbia Pride, Oct. 19

Cookeville, TN

- Upper Cumberland Pride, June 8

Dickson, TN

- Dickson Pride Festival, Sept. 7

Gatlinburg, TN

- Gatlinburg Pride March, June 2

Jackson, TN

- Jackson, TN Pride, Sept. 28

Johnson City, TN

- Rainbow Festival, June 29

Knoxville, TN

- Knox Pride Festival, Oct. 4-5
- SoKno Pride, June 29

McMinnville, TN

- Middle TN LGBTQIA+ Annual Get Together, Sept. 8

Memphis, TN

- Mid-south Pride, Sept. 7
- TriState Black Pride, June 13

Murfreesboro, TN

- BoroPride, Oct. 12

Nashville, TN

- Nashville Pride, June 22-23
- Nashville Black Pride, Oct. 25-27

Pulaski, TN

- Pulaski Pride, June 8

Rutherford County

- RuCo Pride, June 29



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Legal Landscape of Pride Friends of George's Lawsuit

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Challenges and Threats Facing Pride Organizers

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