

'Discriminatory on purpose': Locals condemn anti-trans bathroom laws

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Gibran Cuevas on Tuesday discusses anti-transgender laws passed by the Tennessee legislature and signed by Gov. Bill Lee this month.



Jacob, Juniper Meadows, Gibran Cuevas, Lynn Tipton, Carla Underwood, Shannon Brown, Catherine Smith and Ari Baker on Tuesday discussed how they've been affected by new "bathroom bills" passed by the Tennessee legislature that they say target transgender people like them.



Catherine Smith on Tuesday discusses the negative effect she says newly passed laws in Tennessee will have on transgender people like her.



Mental health professional Shannon Brown discusses what she says are the harmful effects of new and controversial Tennessee "bathroom" laws she says target transgender people.

Blount County activists, transgender people and a local mental health expert are condemning controversial “bathroom bills” recently signed into Tennessee law as both discriminatory and a mental health disaster waiting to happen. Gov. Bill Lee on May 17 signed House Bill 1182/Senate Bill 1224 into law, requiring public places that have multiperson bathrooms to post a sign declaring whether or not transgender people are allowed to use them. This follows another school-specific bill Lee signed May 14 — House Bill 1233 — which opens schools up to legal action if they don’t provide accommodation for people who don’t want to share a restroom, locker room or shower with a transgender person.

Shannon Brown, founder and owner of Psychotherapy & Forensic Services in Maryville, contacted The Daily Times on Friday, May 21, requesting an interview with a group of local activists and trans people who wanted to speak on what they perceive as the new laws’ damaging effects. In an interview Tuesday, each expressed variations of frustration and anger with bills they said are engineered to ostracize trans people. As a mental health practitioner, Brown said she was especially concerned because the suicide rate among trans people already is alarmingly high. “These laws do so much more harm in that when kids are reading about them, what they’re learning is that Tennessee is not for me,” she said. “What it ends up doing is having such a negative impact on their mental health and well-being.” The laws, she said, are “discriminatory on purpose,” exactly the opposite of what transgender students need. She said lawmakers now are responsible for the “lives that are at stake, the lives that will be lost as a result of feeling hopeless and isolated. “It’s awful, what they’ve done. It’s inexcusable. And it has to stop,” Brown said. She and the others call for local leaders, business owners and individuals to push back in whatever way they can.

“A lot of our work is community-building, here in Blount County,” Ari Baker said, noting though the state legislature has a supermajority voting for anti-trans laws, that doesn’t represent all local perspectives. “Instead, we’re saying ‘Here’s how to make your life more livable.’” Baker also noted the law could hurt businesses, too, given the new set of potential liabilities it creates. Exactly how the law will be enforced is still unclear and that’s a risk no one wants, he said.

According to reporting from The Associated Press, Nashville District Attorney General Glenn Funk said Monday in a statement that he would not enforce the new sign law. “I believe every person is welcome and valued in Nashville,” he told the press. “Enforcement of transphobic or homophobic laws is contrary to those values. My office will not promote hate.” Outside enforcement, trans people say the bills’ invasion of their personal lives is harmful and scarring.

Retired Police Officer Gibran Cuevas recalled a time when he was transitioning and had a restaurant's management call the police on him. Though the situation was resolved, it was dealt with in front of the whole restaurant. "Talk about embarrassing, humiliating and shaming people," he said. "We're all trans people who have stories about going into multipeople bathrooms," Baker emphasized. "We all have stories like Gibran's." Some in the group said community support and cooperation will be key as advocacy movements forge forward, noting public activism may help mend damage the bills might cause.

Numerous Tennessee transgender and LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations have slammed the bills, including Tennessee Business Against Discrimination in an annual open letter arranged by the Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce. The group recently published a letter signed by 57 corporations and 160 small businesses that urged Tennessee lawmakers to avoid legislation that "targets or excludes LGBT people of all ages." First among the signees was Amazon, a company set to build two warehouses in Blount, hiring at least 800 people in the next few years. "We have a long history of supporting equality and we're opposed to laws that discriminate or encourage discrimination," the online retail giant said in the letter, adding it "strongly encourages Tennessee to revisit any laws that may harm the LGBTQ community so that the state cannot only be a premiere location for business investment, but also be a leader in diversity and inclusion."

Local state Reps. Bob Ramsey and Jerome Moon voted in support of versions of House Bill 1182/Senate Bill 1224 and House Bill 1233, according to the Tennessee General Assembly website. Discussing his vote for House Bill 1233, Ramsey said he favored school administration having authority over these kinds of decisions. "I understand just bringing up the subject is divisive and isolates certain populations," he said, adding no one had called him from the school system with concerns about the law. He encouraged Blount residents to reach out to his office to discuss their concerns. "I think it's appropriate to have males in male facilities and females in female facilities," Maryville Republican Sen. Art Swann said by phone, discussing his yes vote. When asked about opponents' concerns and potential mental health issues, Swann said, "If you have a law on the books you ought to enforce it. Mental health is not something you can legislate one way or the other." State Rep. Jerome Moon, R-Maryville, also voted for the bills. The former Daily Times publisher did not reply to three calls and a text message seeking comment.