

March 28, 2019

The Honorable Alan Clark
Chair
Committee on Judiciary
Arkansas Senate
500 Woodlane Street
Suite 320
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Dear Chairman Clark:

We, the undersigned faith leaders and organizations, write with great concern about SB 352 and ask that you oppose this bill because it authorizes discrimination that will ultimately harm the youth that the child welfare agencies are bound to protect.

SB 352 is aimed at permitting child welfare providers that receive taxpayer dollars and participate in government-supported child welfare services to discriminate against prospective parents if they are not in full agreement with the religious tenets of a faith-based child welfare provider. We have seen this happen in South Carolina, where a faith-based provider turned away people of the Catholic and Jewish faiths who wanted to help children in foster care--for the sole reason they did not share the same beliefs of the provider.

Permitting taxpayer dollars to subsidize discriminatory practices such as this will hurt children in need of loving and supportive homes. There are more than 4,775 children in the Arkansas foster care system, approximately 1,300 of whom are eligible for adoption. In 2016, over 200 Arkansas youth "aged out" of the foster care system, leaving them at a higher risk for poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and early parenthood than youth adopted while in foster care. SB 352 would exacerbate the problem by reducing the number of available foster and adoptive homes, thus making it harder for the children of the Arkansas foster care system to find a home. In addition, the bill seeks to allow providers to prioritize their own beliefs and interests over the best interests of the children they agree to serve. We oppose the use of taxpayer dollars to subsidize discrimination and reject the idea that government-funded child welfare agencies should enjoy a blanket exemption from professional standards and practices that emphasize that every placement must, first and foremost, be made with the best interest of the child in mind.

As people of faith and faith-based organizations, we celebrate the important work of so many faith-based child welfare agencies that support foster youth. We are also deeply committed to religious freedom, but that freedom doesn't give anyone the right to impose their beliefs on others or to put children in harm's way. To argue that religious

freedom justifies the use of taxpayer dollars to discriminate against prospective parents is a distortion of such freedom, and a misunderstanding of civil rights law.

We are partners in the sacred work of those faith-based child welfare agencies seeking to unite children with forever families and share their calling to build a world of wholeness and compassion. Further, our values as Americans and as people of faith compel us to ensure that every child finds a home, and that every family that can provide a safe, supportive, and loving home for a child is matched with the child that will make their family whole.

Again, we urge you to reject this discriminatory bill. Please do not allow the harms in SB 352 to become law.

Sincerely,

Arkansas Faith Leaders, Congregations, and Organizations

The Rev. CB Baker, Episcopal, Pine Bluff
Rabbi Barry Block, Congregation B'nai Israel, Little Rock
The Rev. Dr. William Branch, Jr., Presbytery of Arkansas, Little Rock
The Rev. Gail Brooks, Canvas Community Church, Little Rock
The Rev. Jay Clark, Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, Little Rock
Dr. Preston Clegg, Second Baptist Church- Little Rock, Little Rock
The Rev. Stephen Copley, Faith Voices Arkansas
The Rev. Dr. Denise Donnell, Human Rights Campaign, Little Rock
Pastor Randy Eddy-McCain, Open Door Community Church, Sherwood
The Rev. Jason M. Ferguson, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Little Rock
The Rev. David C. Freeman, First United Methodist Church Little Rock
The Rev. Kaleb Graves, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Fayetteville
Dr. Ray Higgins, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas, Little Rock
The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey O'Neal Kelley, United Methodist, Conway
The Rev. Frank LeBlanc, Westover Hills Presbyterian Church, Little Rock
Rabbi Eugene Levy, Reform Jewish, Little Rock
The Rev. Marie Mainard O'Connell, Presbyterian Church (USA), Little Rock
Rev. Martin Pike, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, Little Rock
The Rev. I. Malik Saafir, Cooperative Baptist, Little Rock
The Rev. Britt Skarda, Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, Little Rock
The Rev. Melanie Tubbs, United Methodist, Augusta
The Rev. Mary Vano, St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, Little Rock
The Rev. Greg Warren, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Conway
The Rev. Anika T. Whitfield, Christian Faith, Little Rock

**Affiliations are listed for identification purposes*

Anti-Defamation League South Central
Canvas Community Church, Little Rock
Congregation B'nai Israel, Little Rock
Faith Voices Arkansas
New Millennium Church, Little Rock
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Conway

[Note: List of signers in formation]

cc: Members of the Committee