

Bathroom access for transgender people debated across South

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Louisiana's governor issued an executive order Wednesday banning discrimination in state government based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and transgender people in South Carolina told state senators that a bill requiring them to use a public bathroom corresponding to their "biological sex" puts them in danger of harassment.

The overwhelming majority of people at the Senate hearing opposed the measure, which mimics part of a North Carolina law signed last month that has brought a national backlash. No vote was taken.

In Tennessee, 60 business leaders — including the CEOs of Williams-Sonoma, Airbnb, Alcoa, T-Mobile and Dow Chemical — signed a letter asking lawmakers to kill similar legislation. The events seemed to unfold across the South almost simultaneously as the fight over LGBT rights raged on.

The South Carolina bill introduced by Sen. Lee Bright would require multistall bathrooms on public property to be designated and used "based on

biological sex." It specifically includes student bathrooms, locker rooms and showers in public schools. It would also bar local governments from requiring businesses to let transgender people use the bathroom of their choice.

Bright said he's had enough of tolerance if that means "men who claim to be women" going into a bathroom with children.

"I don't believe transgender people are pedophiles," the Republican said. "I think grown adult men would use this as protection to violate women in the restroom."

U.S. Attorney Bill Nettles, who was invited to the hearing to discuss instances in South Carolina of transgender people verbally or physically assaulting someone, had a simple answer: "I can find none."

He declined to give any position on the bill, but when asked whether current laws protect people from being victimized, he said, "the state of South Carolina has laws to address assault and battery."

Dex Sexton, 17, of Blythewood, said people don't undress openly in women's restrooms, as stalls provide privacy. If the issue is fear of assault, he asked,



A crowd in the hall listens to testimony during a Senate subcommittee to consider the controversial bill that would ban transgender people from choosing the bathroom they use on Wednesday in Columbia, S.C.

then why are men who have abused little boys not forced to use a different bathroom?

"It's protections against sexual assault that stop them, not because they can't use the men's bathroom," he said.

In Louisiana, the LGBT protection order signed by Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards prohibits state agencies, boards and contractors from harassment

or discrimination based on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, political affiliation, disability or age. State contracts will be required to include a similar anti-discrimination provision.

Edwards, in office since January, also terminated a religious objections executive order issued by former Republican Gov.

Bobby Jindal last year. That "Marriage and Conscience" order from Jindal prohibited state agencies under the governor's control from denying licenses, benefits, contracts or tax deductions to businesses and people that take actions because of a "religious belief that marriage is or should be recognized as the union of one man and one woman."

At the South Carolina hearing, opponents said the proposal would do the opposite of its purported intention.

"Look at me and tell me I belong in the men's restroom," said Culpepper, who was wearing a blue, low-cut dress with red fingernails. Last year, she settled a lawsuit against the state Department of Motor Vehicles after being told to remove her makeup for a driver's license photo. "Our community is already at risk for sexual assault and violence."

Culpepper was among nine transgender people who stood in a show of support. Opponents also questioned how the bill would be enforced.

"In everyday life, how do we determine whether someone we're with is male or female? We look at them. We don't inspect their genitalia," said University of South Carolina law professor Gregory Adams. "Are we going to start looking at their birth certificate?"

The bill has little chance this year. House GOP leaders have said they won't deal with the issue and Republican Gov. Nikki Haley has called it unnecessary.



This aerial photo taken Saturday, and provided by Arizona Department of Public Safety, shows a "help" sign made by Ann Rodgers, 72, in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona.

Woman lost for 9 days credits survival course

Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. — Ann Rodgers ate plants and a turtle and made a "help" sign large enough that a helicopter was able to find her after nine days in the Arizona wilderness.

The 72-year-old Tucson woman, who was found in the White Mountains in eastern Arizona, says studying survival methods and taking a survival course saved her life.

"We kept trekking as long as I could go each day but as soon as that sun started to drop below those high walls, I had to stop, get my campsite ready, make my campfire, bring in my wood to keep it going all night," she said during a news conference Wednesday.

But an expert says she broke the most important rule for being found: Stay with your car. Rodgers' car was found days before her rescue, while she walked through the forest. She also hadn't told her family she was headed to visit them and was never reported missing.

Cody Lundin, a survival instructor in Arizona who co-hosted Discovery Channel's "Dual Survival" series, says one of the first rules those courses teach is to never leave a car because it's more visible than a person. Another is to let people know where you're headed and when.

"Clearly she did whatever she had to do to stay alive. But she didn't need to do what she did. This ordeal didn't need to last for nine days," Lundin said.

Rodgers went missing on March 31 on her way to visit her grandchildren in Phoenix, which is a straight shot from Tucson on Interstate 10. She struggled to explain how she became lost but said she took two wrong turns and ended up on a dirt road in Arizona.

Her hybrid car ran out of gas and electric power and she didn't have a signal for her cellphone.

Rodgers spent the first night in her car with her cat and dog, wearing three layers of clothing to keep warm and eating snacks and drinking

water she had packed.

On the second day, Rodgers and her dog walked down a road in search of a ranch that she said she had passed on her way in.

Rodgers kept looking for a sign of people, surviving off plants and pond water. She says she knew which plants were edible because she's lived in and studied the desert for a long time.

White Mountain Apache Forest rangers spotted her car on April 3 and ran a check on the license plate. They called the Gila County Sheriff's Office, which began the search.

Sheriff's Detective Johnny Holmes said Rodgers was difficult to track. He said the sheriff's office used a K-9 unit and obtained her cellphone information to no avail.

"We couldn't find anything of where this lady was," he said.

On April 4, her birthday, Rodgers was near a creek when she spotted a turtle. She grabbed it, cooked it over a fire, removed the shell and ate it.

Rodgers recalled feeling angry as the days passed and there was no sign of help.

"I was frustrated, but I knew there were people who cared enough to make sure somebody found me sometime out there," Rodgers said.

Holmes said they eventually came across what they believed could be her footprints.

On April 9, the sheriff's office gave GPS coordinates to the Department of Public Safety and asked the agency to fly over the area. The DPS helicopter pilot spotted a large "help" sign made of sticks and rocks.

"I was completely shocked. Up to that point I thought we were looking for a body," rescue helicopter pilot Lowell Neshem said. "For me it was like a Hail Mary pass touchdown. I didn't expect to find her alive."

Rodgers was able to walk to the helicopter. She spent a few hours at a hospital, and within a couple of days, Rodgers was back to hiking.

BRIEFLY

Syrian official rules out Assad departure

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — A top Syrian official urged the opposition to let go of its dream of easing President Bashar Assad out of power in a transitional government, complicating peace talks that resumed Wednesday in Geneva on ending the five-year civil war.

As Syrians voted in parliamentary elections in government-held parts of the country — balloting the opposition dismissed as a sham — Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told The Associated Press that a transitional government amounts to a coup d'etat and "will never be accepted."

A transitional government is the centerpiece of the peace program that the United States, Russia and other world powers agreed on at a 2012 Geneva Conference. The terms have been left vague intentionally and are supposed to be worked out in the peace talks, but the presumption, at least in the opposition's mind, is that a transitional government means one without Assad.

Assad recently floated the idea of a national unity government, rejecting the opposition's demand for a transitional ruling body, and Mekdad echoed the rejection.

"We believe such an idea has failed, it is outdated, it will never be acceptable. This amounts in fact to a

coup d'etat. People organize a certain rebellion and then they get power. This will never happen in Syria," he said.

He said most of the world except Saudi Arabia and Turkey — the two top backers of the rebellion — have all but relinquished calls for Assad to step down, having realized after five years of war that the president is fighting "terrorists" in Syria.

CDC: Zika causes severe birth defects

NEW YORK (AP) — Confirming the worst fears of many pregnant women in the United States and Latin America, U.S. health officials said Wednesday there is no longer any doubt the Zika virus causes babies to be born with abnormally small heads and other severe brain defects.

Since last year, doctors in Brazil have been linking Zika infections in pregnant women to a rise in newborns with microcephaly, or an unusually small skull. Most outside experts were cautious about drawing such a connection. But now the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says enough evidence is in.

"There is no longer any doubt that Zika causes microcephaly," CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden said. The CDC said it is also clear that Zika causes other serious defects, including damaging calcium buildups in the developing brain.

Among the evidence that clinched the case: Signs of the Zika virus, which is spread primarily through mosquito bites and can also be transmitted through sex, have been found in the brain tissue, spinal fluid and amniotic fluid of microcephaly babies.

The CDC and other health agencies have been operating for months on the assumption that Zika causes brain defects, and they have been warning pregnant women to use mosquito repellent, cover up, avoid travel to Zika-stricken regions and either abstain from sex or rely on condoms. Those guidelines will not change.

But the new finding should help officials make a more convincing case to the public for taking precautions. Some experts hope it will change public thinking about Zika the way the 1964 surgeon general's report convinced many Americans that smoking causes lung cancer.

"We've been very careful over the last few months to say, 'It's linked to, it's associated with.' We've been careful to say it's not the cause of," said the CDC's Dr. Sonja A. Rasmussen. "I think our messages will now be more direct."

The World Health Organization has made similar statements recently. A WHO official applauded the report.

"We feel it's time to move from precautionary language to more forceful language to get people to take action," said Dr. Bruce Aylward.

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