



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

January 17, 2019

The Honorable Sen. Stephen Newman
Chairperson
Senate Committee on Education and Health
Pocahontas Building, Room E604
900 East Main Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Re: SUPPORT for SB 1159, Testimony from American Atheists in support of legislation relating to public schools; family life education; and the harmful physical and emotional effects of female genital mutilation

Dear Chairperson Newman and Members of the Senate Committee on Education and Health:

American Atheists, on behalf of its nearly 1500 constituents in Virginia, writes to provide testimony in support of SB 1159, a bill which requires public secondary schools to include information in their family life curriculum regarding the harmful physical and emotional effects of female genital mutilation (FGM). We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. As advocates for the health, safety, and well-being of all Americans, American Atheists objects to efforts to subordinate health care to the religious practices of others.

FGM, which is the ritual cutting or alteration of female genitalia for non-medical purposes, is predominately forced upon young women and girls and performed by non-licensed practitioners. In a 2016 report, the US Government Accountability Office stated that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that 513,000 women and girls in the United States were at risk of or had been subjected to FGM.¹

Fortunately, Virginia is already one of the 27 states that prohibit this dangerous practice. The state has classified FGM as a class 2 felony,² enabled the prosecution of parents, guardians, and other individuals responsible for the care of minors for imposing FGM on a child,³ and created civil actions for survivors.⁴

¹ United States Government Accountability Office, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Existing Federal Efforts to Increase Awareness Should Be Improved. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/678098.pdf> (Last visited January 16, 2019)

² Va. Code Ann. § 18.2-51.7(A).

³ Va. Code Ann. § 18.2-51.7.

⁴ Va. Code Ann. § 8.01-42.5.

SB 1159 will help to support these important protections by ensuring that young people in Virginia are made aware of the law and the steps they can take to protect themselves. State efforts to oppose FGM are especially important after a recent case calling into question the constitutionality of existing federal laws prohibiting FGM.⁵

Although FGM is frequently performed as part of religious tradition in some cultures, these practices have no medical necessity or benefit. Instead, these practices frequently result in serious injury to the victim as well as a host of serious medical complications. In addition to the devastating physical consequences, FGM can result in significant psychological harm. Virginia has a duty to protect its residents from these dangerous practices regardless of their tradition. This sort of religiously inspired and brutal misogyny has no place in our society.

Thank you for holding a hearing on this important matter. We urge you to pass SB 1159 to inform and protect women and girls in Virginia from FGM. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for SB 1159, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x9 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Alison Gill, Esq.
VP, Legal and Policy
American Atheists

CC: All members of the Virginia Senate Committee on Education and Health

⁵ *United States v. Nagarwala*, No. 17-CR-20274, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 197494 (E.D. Mich. Nov. 20, 2018).