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Equality Florida Issues Advisory Warning For Travel

ST. PETERSBURG, FL -- Today, Equality Florida took the extraordinary step of issuing a travel advisory, warning of the risks posed to the health, safety, and freedom of those considering short or long term travel, or relocation to the state. The move comes in response to a wave of safety inquiries Equality Florida has received following the passage of laws that are hostile to the LGBTQ community, restrict access to reproductive health care, repeal gun safety laws, foment racial prejudice, and attack public education by banning books and censoring curriculum.

“As an organization that has spent decades working to improve Florida’s reputation as a welcoming and inclusive place to live work and visit, it is with great sadness that we must respond to those asking if it is safe to travel to Florida or remain in the state as the laws strip away basic rights and freedoms,” said **Nadine Smith, Equality Florida Executive Director**. “While losing conferences, and top students who have written off Florida threatens lasting damage to our state, it is most heartbreaking to hear from parents who are selling their homes and moving because school censorship, book bans and health care restrictions have made their home state less safe for their children. We understand everyone must weigh the risks and decide what is best for their safety, but whether you stay away, leave or remain we ask that you join us in countering these relentless attacks. Help reimagine and build a Florida that is truly safe for and open to all, and where freedom is a reality, not a hollow campaign slogan.”

Governor Ron DeSantis, who has made the extremist policies the centerpiece of his presidential campaign strategy, has weaponized state agencies to silence critics and impose sanctions on large and small companies that dissent with his culture war agenda or disagree with his attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Already, the adopted and proposed policies detailed in the travel advisory have led Florida parents to consider relocating (<https://19thnews.org/2023/02/queer-florida-parents-leaving-state-dont-say-gay/>), prospective students to cross Florida colleges and universities off their lists (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2023/03/31/survey-1-in-8-florida-incoming-freshmen-plan-to-flee-desantiss-education-policies/?sh=c2cc6f42dfda>), events and conferences to cancel future gatherings (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/09/large-gaming-event-set-florida-canceled-dont-say-gay-law/>), and the United States military to offer redeployment for service members whose families are now unsafe in the state. Businesses have spoken out against the governor’s abuse of state power to punish dissent, with Disney CEO Bob Iger calling DeSantis “anti-business and anti-Florida” (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/apr/04/disney-bob-iger-ron-desantis-florida>.) The worsening attacks, especially those targeting transgender youth, have also led to the proposal of policies around the country (<https://thehill.com/homenews/3861492-amid-tidal-wave-of-anti-trans-legislation-democratic-states-race-to-become-refuges-for-gender-affirming-care/>) to provide refuge for those fleeing states like Florida.

The Florida Immigrant Coalition, a statewide immigrant rights coalition of 65 member organizations and over 100 allies, also issued a travel advisory today (<https://floridatraveladvisory.com/>), urging reconsideration of travel to Florida and providing critical information about where immigrant travelers can learn more about their constitutional rights. And just weeks ago, Florida chapters of the NAACP voted unanimously (<https://naacp.org/articles/naacp-florida-state-conference-recommends-travel-advisory-state-response-african-american>) to request similar warnings to the Black community about the risk of traveling or relocating to the state.

Equality Florida’s full travel advisory follows.

MEMORANDUM

To: Interested Parties

From: Equality Florida

Subj.: TRAVEL ADVISORY: FLORIDA MAY NOT BE A SAFE PLACE TO MOVE OR VISIT

Date: April 12, 2023

Today, Equality Florida took the unprecedented step of issuing a travel advisory to individuals, families, entrepreneurs, and students warning that Florida may not be a safe place to visit or take up residence. The advisory comes after passage of laws that are hostile to the LGBTQ+ community, restrict access to reproductive health care, repeal gun safety laws and allow untrained, unpermitted carry, and foment racial prejudice. The Governor has also weaponized state agencies to impose sanctions against businesses large and small that disagree with his attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Florida has recently adopted a slate of hateful laws, and is fast-tracking additional measures that directly target the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals and basic freedoms broadly. Already, those policies have led Florida parents to consider relocating (<https://19thnews.org/2023/02/queer-florida-parents-leaving-state-dont-say-gay/>), prospective students to cross Florida colleges and universities off their lists (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2023/03/31/survey-1-in-8-florida-incoming-freshmen-plan-to-flee-desantiss-education-policies/?sh=c2cc6f42dfda>), events and conferences to cancel future gatherings (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/09/large-gaming-event-set-florida-canceled-dont-say-gay-law/>), and the United States military to offer redeployment for service members whose families are now unsafe in the state. These laws and policies are detailed below.

Assaults on Medical Freedom

- Florida's Boards of Medicine and Osteopathy have adopted policies banning access to lifesaving medical care for transgender youth and the Agency For Health Care Administration has eliminated Medicaid coverage for transgender adults accessing that care
- Florida is poised to pass laws creating criminal penalties for medical providers who provide medically necessary care for transgender youth, weaponizing the courts to shred existing child custody agreements and reassign transgender youth to an unsupportive parent, and severely restricting access to prescribed medical care for transgender adults
- Florida has passed or is poised to pass bills that restrict access to reproductive health care, including a near-total abortion ban, which threatens to force people to travel out of state or seek unsafe, illegal abortions.

These policies disproportionately harm marginalized communities, including the direct impacts on the transgender community and communities of color, and could lead to serious health consequences. Transgender people in Florida are facing the immediate threat of loss of lifesaving, medically necessary care and families risk interference in child custody arrangements at the hands of an unsupportive parent and a weaponized state court system. These attacks pose an imminent threat to the health and safety of all in Florida and potential travelers should be aware of the risks.

Assaults on Academic Freedom

- The Florida legislature has sought to strip Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs from colleges and universities, that help LGBTQ and minority students thrive
- The Governor has initiated a hostile, right-wing takeover of higher education, and installed partisan allies to implement a conservative overhaul of public universities
- His administration has taken aim at AP African American studies, threatening to sever ties with the College Board over the inclusion of queer history and intersectionality in the course, and college majors, including gender studies

These actions by the Governor pose a serious threat to academic freedom, free speech, and the pursuit of knowledge. DEI departments play a crucial role in promoting diversity and inclusion on campus, and their removal undermines the ability of students and faculty to engage in critical discussions about issues of race, gender, and identity.

Furthermore, the replacement of university presidents with political appointees threatens the independence of higher education institutions, and undermines the ability of these institutions to make decisions that are in the best interest of their students, faculty, and staff. These attacks on public education are deeply concerning, and further reinforce the message that Florida is not a welcoming state for people from all backgrounds. We urge individuals, families, entrepreneurs, and students to consider the implications of traveling to or residing in Florida, and to support efforts to defend public education and academic freedom in the state.

Censorship and Erasure of the LGBTQ Community

- Florida has passed a prohibition on classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in public schools
- This law has already precipitated a raft of damaging impacts in school districts across the state, including
 - Hundreds of book challenges and bans targeting titles written by LGBTQ authors and/or including LGBTQ characters
 - The refusal of districts like Miami-Dade to recognize LGBTQ History Month
 - The removal of rainbow Safe Space stickers
 - The censorship of graduation speech content to remove references to LGBTQ identities
 - Warnings to educators and administrators to hide family photos
- Lawmakers are currently considering a bill to extend that prohibition through 8th grade, while the Department of Education is set to decide on a policy proposal that would expand it to all grades and revoke teacher licenses over violations
- Florida is poised to pass a bill that would ban transgender people from updating their birth certificates to reflect their gender identity

The infamous Don't Say LGBTQ law has made Florida synonymous with the anti-LGBTQ movement to empower government censorship and book banning across the nation. That law, along with additional proposals being considered, has turned the state's classrooms into political battlefields and is telegraphing to LGBTQ families and students that they are not welcome in Florida.

Assaults on Arts, Entertainment, and Sports Participation

- Florida has passed a ban on transgender women and girls from participating in school sports consistent with their gender identity
- Lawmakers are poised to pass restrictions on certain live drag performances, stage shows, and local pride celebrations, limiting parents' ability to determine what content may be suitable for their families

The far-right's obsession with drag queens has put LGBTQ people in physical danger across the country, but especially in Florida. In 2022 alone, the LGBTQ media organization GLAAD found 141 incidents of anti-LGBTQ protests and threats targeting drag events. Right-wing media like Fox News and Libs Of TikTok have misrepresented what occurs at drag events and taken examples out of context to create fear and misunderstanding. This has had real world consequences, with protests and threats of violence against venues hosting drag shows.

In Florida, Orlando organizers were forced to cancel Drag Queen story hour due to threats from Neo-Nazis (<https://www.orlandoweekly.com/news/orlando-area-drag-queen-story-hour-canceled-due-to-neo-nazi-threats-32762594>). This last December in Lakeland (<https://www.fox13news.com/news/demonstrators-wearing-nazi-gear-show-up-outside-lakeland-charity-event-that-included-drag-performers>), masked individuals in Nazi gear, waving Nazi flags ambushed a charity event hosted by drag queens while projecting hateful messages onto local buildings.

Assaults on Business

- DeSantis has recently signed a bill that restricts businesses from providing diversity and inclusion training to their employees, a blatant attempt to dictate to businesses what they can and cannot do, and to prevent them from training their employees to be better prepared for a diverse workforce and customer base
- The Florida legislature is expected to pass SB 1438, which weaponizes state agencies with more power to politically target LGBTQ-friendly businesses who open their doors to live drag performances, with threats of fines, license revocation, and jail time. Individuals that admit minors with an accompanying parent would be charged with first degree misdemeanor crimes.
- The governor has weaponized the state legislature against businesses that stand with their LGBTQ employees and clients and against his agenda, most notably wielding two special sessions of the legislature to punish Disney, the state's largest single-site employer

The Miami Herald recently reported (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article273247175.html>) that DeSantis-controlled agencies sought to punish and revoke the liquor license of an Orlando establishment that hosted a live drag performance even after the state's own investigators reported that they saw nothing "lewd". The discriminatory targeting of LGBTQ-friendly businesses by the state will have a broader chilling effect over drag performances, an intended consequence of this type of censorship.

Disney has also recently denounced the governor's actions against them, with CEO Bob Iger calling the state's policies "anti-business and anti-Florida" (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/apr/04/disney-bob-iger-ron-desantis-florida>).

These laws and actions are harmful to businesses and their employees, as they undermine efforts to create inclusive workplaces and hinder the ability to effectively engage with diverse customers and clients. It also sends a message that Florida is not a welcoming state for people from all backgrounds and that discrimination is acceptable.

Efforts to Foment Racial Prejudice

- Florida has passed a bill that would limit the honest teaching of history and systemic racism in schools
- The state passed another that restricts voting access for people of color and is currently considering additional voting restrictions
- DeSantis' new elections police have abused their power to aggressively target and prosecute returning citizens, mostly Black Floridians, for voting after official government entities told them they were eligible to vote (<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/26/desantis-voter-fraud-defendants-florida-00053788>)

These laws create an unsafe and unwelcoming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, women, people of color, and other marginalized communities. They send a message that discrimination and prejudice are acceptable in Florida, and we cannot in good conscience encourage people to visit or move to a state that is openly hostile to their basic human rights.

As a result of these dangerous and discriminatory laws, we urge individuals, families, entrepreneurs, and students to reconsider travel plans to Florida and to consider the impact that their travel and economic choices can have on promoting equality and justice for all.

Repealing of Gun Safety Laws

The passage of deadly permitless carry makes Floridians less safe (<https://everytownresearch.org/solution/strong-standards-for-carrying-concealed-guns-in-public>) and signals the reversal of the progress made after Pulse and Parkland. Coupled with the state's infamous Stand Your Ground law, Permitless Carry threatens to exacerbate Florida's violent crime rate at a time when the state's homicide rate ranks 20th in the nation, exceeding both California and New York.

LGBTQ Floridians know all too well that the gun lobby's obsession with easy access to deadly weapons can make hatred and bigotry lethal (<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/do-guns-make-us-safer-science-suggests-no/>). Gun violence is not abstract or hypothetical -- it is stealing our loved ones. Those considering travel to Florida should weigh the potentially deadly consequences of the DeSantis Administration's decision to eliminate basic training and permitting requirements in order to concealed carry a firearm.

Attacks on Immigrant Communities

Florida has passed and is poised to pass legislation targeting immigrant communities, with consequences that could include arrest for operating a vehicle, no matter the state you are from, reduced access to health care services, and compromised safety. A bill currently being considered by the Florida legislature could impose criminal penalties on any who shelter, support, or provide transportation to undocumented immigrants. And these moves come just months after Governor DeSantis trafficked migrants from Texas to Massachusetts in a cruel scheme to use their suffering as campaign marketing material.

The threats posed to immigrants in Florida led the Florida Immigrant Coalition to issue its own advisory urging reconsideration of any travel to the state. That advisory can be found here (<https://floridatraveladvisory.com/>).

Conclusion

Taken in their totality, Florida's slate of laws and policies targeting basic freedoms and rights pose a serious risk to the health and safety of those traveling to the state. We regret that these attacks have already led many to flee the state and are driving others to consider relocation. And, in a state whose economy is fueled by visitors from around the world, it is with great sadness that Equality Florida has had to take the extraordinary step of responding to inquiries by issuing an official advisory warning about the risks of travel to the state.

Equality Florida will continue providing information and resources to those impacted by these laws and policies. Visit our Open Doors Florida directory (<https://opendoorsflorida.com/>) to find businesses with nondiscrimination policies and procedures. And if you experience discrimination, report it to our team here (<https://eqfl.org/lgbtq-protections>) or call our Main Office at 813-870-3735.

It is our hope that those Floridians who can, will stay and engage more deeply in the fight against the state's all-out assaults on democracy and freedom. This moment calls for a grassroots movement in defense of justice and equality for all -- so that we can turn back the tide of right wing authoritarianism, recommit to building a state that is safe and open to all, and once again celebrate Florida as a free state.

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