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Transgender People

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'I've kept her safe': Families flee states with transgender care bans to protect their children

By **Bram Sable-Smith, Daniel Chang, Jazmin Orozco Rodriguez, and Sandy West** KFF Health News

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Hal Dempsey wanted to “escape Missouri.” Arlo Dennis is “fleeing Florida.” The Tillison family “can’t stay in Texas.”

They are part of a new migration of Americans who are uprooting their lives in response to a raft of legislation across the country restricting health care for transgender people.

Missouri, Florida, and Texas are among at least 20 states that have limited components of gender-affirming health care for trans youth. Those three states are also among the states that prevent Medicaid — the public health insurance for people with low incomes — from paying for key aspects of such care for patients of all ages.

More than a quarter of trans adults surveyed by KFF and The Washington Post late last year said they had moved to a different neighborhood, city, or state to find more acceptance. Now, new restrictions on health care and the possibility of more in the future provide additional motivation.

Many are heading to places that are passing laws to support care for trans people, making those states appealing sanctuaries. California, for example, passed a law last fall to protect those receiving or providing gender-affirming care from prosecution. And now, California providers are getting more calls from people seeking to relocate there to prevent

disruptions to their care, said Scott Nass, a family physician and expert on transgender care based in the state.

But the influx of patients presents a challenge, Nass said, “because the system that exists, it can’t handle all the refugees that potentially are out there.”

In Florida, the legislative targeting of trans people and their health care has persuaded Arlo Dennis, 35, that it is time to uproot their family of five from the Orlando area, where they’ve lived for more than a decade. They plan to move to Maryland.

Dennis, who uses they/them pronouns, no longer has access to hormone replacement therapy after Florida’s Medicaid program stopped covering transition-related care in late August under the claim that the treatments are experimental and lack evidence of being effective. Dennis said they ran out of their medication in January.

“It’s definitely led to my mental health having struggles and my physical health having struggles,” Dennis said.

Moving to Maryland will take resources Dennis said their family does not have. They launched a GoFundMe campaign in April and have raised more than \$5,600, most of it from strangers, Dennis said. Now the family, which includes three adults and two children, plans to leave Florida in July. The decision wasn’t easy, Dennis said, but they felt like they had no choice.

“I’m OK if my neighbor doesn’t agree with how I’m living my life,” Dennis said. “But this was literally outlawing my existence and making my access to health care impossible.”

Mitch and Tiffany Tillison decided they needed to leave Texas after the state’s Republicans made anti-trans policies for youth central to their legislative agenda. Their 12-year-old came out as trans about two years ago. They asked for only her middle name, Rebecca, to be published because they fear for her safety due to threats of violence against trans people.

This year, the Texas Legislature passed a law limiting gender-affirming health care for youth under 18. It specifically bans physical care, but local LGBTQ+ advocates say recent

crackdowns also have had a chilling effect on the availability of mental health therapy for trans people.

While the Tillisons declined to specify what treatment, if any, their daughter is getting, they said they reserve the right, as her parents, to provide the care their daughter needs — and that Texas has taken away that right. That, plus increasing threats of violence in their community, particularly in the wake of the May 6 mass shooting by a professed neo-Nazi at Allen Premium Outlets, about 20 miles from their home in the Dallas suburbs, caused the family to decide to move to Washington state.

“I’ve kept her safe,” said Tiffany Tillison, adding that she often thinks back to the moment her daughter came out to her during a long, late drive home from a daylong soccer tournament. “It’s my job to continue to keep her safe. My love is unending, unconditional.”

For her part, Rebecca is pragmatic about the move planned for July: “It’s sad, but it is what we have to do,” she said.

A close call on losing key medical care in Missouri also pushed some trans people to rethink living there. In April, Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey issued an emergency rule seeking to limit access to transition-related surgery and cross-sex hormones for all ages, and restrict puberty-blocking drugs, which pause puberty but don’t alter gender characteristics. The next day, Dempsey, 24, who uses they/them pronouns, launched a GoFundMe fundraiser for themselves and their two partners to leave Springfield, Missouri.

“We are three trans individuals who all depend on the Hormone Replacement Therapy and gender affirming care that is soon to be prohibitively limited,” Dempsey wrote in the fundraising appeal, adding they wanted to “escape Missouri when our lease is up at the end of May.”

Dempsey said they also got a prescription for a three-month supply of hormone therapy from their doctor in Springfield to tide them over until the move.

Bailey withdrew his rule after the state legislature in May restricted new access to such treatments for minors, but not adults like Dempsey and their partners. Still, Dempsey said

their futures in Missouri didn't look promising.

Neighboring Illinois was an obvious place to move; the legislature there passed a law in January that requires state-regulated insurance plans to cover gender-affirming health care at no extra cost. Where exactly was a bigger question. Chicago and its suburbs seemed too expensive. The partners wanted a progressive community similar in size and cost of living to the city they were leaving. They were looking for a Springfield in Illinois.

“But not Springfield, Illinois,” Dempsey quipped.

Gwendolyn Schwarz, 23, had also hoped to stay in Springfield, Missouri, her hometown, where she had recently graduated from Missouri State University with a degree in film and media studies. She had planned to continue her education in a graduate program at the university and, within the next year, get transition-related surgery, which can take a few months of recovery.

But her plans changed as Bailey's rule stirred fear and confusion.

“I don't want to be stuck and temporarily disabled in a state that doesn't see my humanity,” Schwarz said.

She and a group of friends are planning to move west to Nevada, where state lawmakers have approved a measure that requires Medicaid to cover gender-affirming treatment for trans patients.

Schwarz said she hopes moving from Missouri to Nevada's capital, Carson City, will allow her to continue living her life without fear and eventually get the surgery she wants.

'But most of all I'm human' These 3 transgender teens prove identity stretches beyond one label

Dempsey and their partners settled on Moline, Illinois, as the place to move. All three had to quit their jobs to relocate, but they have raised \$3,000 on GoFundMe, more than enough to put a deposit down on an apartment.

On May 31, the partners packed the belongings they hadn't sold and made the 400-mile drive to their new home.

Since then, Dempsey has already been able to see a medical provider at a clinic in Moline that caters to the LGBTQ+ community — and has gotten a new prescription for hormone therapy.

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