

Massachusetts GOP governor signs transgender rights bill

By STEVE LeBLANC AP,
July 8, 2016

BOSTON (AP) — Republican Gov. Charlie Baker signed a bill into law Friday guaranteeing that transgender people can use restrooms and locker rooms that correspond with their gender identities.

Baker said no one should be discriminated against in Massachusetts because of their identity. Massachusetts becomes the first state this year to enact such a transgender rights bill.

Baker said the new law also includes language to address public safety concerns that were raised by critics of the measure.

The law instructs the state attorney general to advise law enforcement on how to deal with anyone who claims gender identity for an “improper purpose.” It also requires the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination to create guidelines to help businesses comply with the law.

The Democrat-controlled House and Senate both easily approved a final version of the bill Thursday.

In signing the bill, Baker came full circle from his previous opposition to the proposal, which he derided as the “bathroom bill” during his unsuccessful 2010 campaign against then- Gov. Deval Patrick, a Democrat.

He said the shift in position grew out of numerous discussions in the intervening years.

“A lot of dialogue and a lot of conversations with a lot of people on both sides of the issue,” Baker told reporters at the Statehouse. “I’ve been talking about it with people for four or five years now.”

The adoption of the new law in Massachusetts comes against a backdrop of legislative setbacks for transgender activists in other states — notably North Carolina, which enacted a law earlier this year that requires people to use restrooms that correspond to the sex on their birth certificates.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Joe Kennedy, a grandson of Bobby Kennedy who had testified at the Statehouse in favor of the bill, said the new law will help lift “the cloud of discrimination that our transgender family members, friends and neighbors have lived under in Massachusetts.”

Attorney General Maura Healey also championed the bill. She called the new law “a huge victory for civil rights and for our transgender friends, family and neighbors.”

“Today, regardless of gender identity, people have a legal right to be free from discrimination no matter where they go in Massachusetts,” the Democrat said.

Critics of the new law — including the Massachusetts Family Institute — had warned that it could put women and children at risk. They said by signing the law, Baker “has opened the door for predators to enter public bathrooms, locker rooms and showers and to abuse this vague legislation.”

“Thousands of concerned citizens have contacted the governor’s office over the past month, urging him to do the right thing and veto the bill,” the group said in a written statement. “Instead, Gov. Baker ignored them and gave in to a radical and aggressive agenda of sexual expression and a denial of basic biological truth.”

The new law expands on a 2011 state law that prohibits discrimination against transgender people in the workplace and housing. It expands that law to include public accommodations, such as restrooms and locker rooms.

Associated Press writer Bob Salsberg contributed to this report.