

Arkansas governor signs medical conscience objections law

by [Andrew DeMillo](#) in the [April 21, 2021](#) issue



Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson (Staci Vandagriff / Arkansas Democrat-Gazette via AP)

On March 26, Arkansas governor Asa Hutchinson signed into law legislation allowing doctors to refuse to treat someone because of religious or moral objections, a move opponents have said will give providers broad powers to turn away LGBTQ patients and others.

The measure says health-care workers and institutions have the right to not participate in nonemergency treatments that violate their conscience. The new law won't take effect until late this summer.

Opponents of the law, including the Human Rights Campaign and the American Civil Liberties Union, have said it will allow doctors to refuse to offer a host of services for LGBTQ patients. The state Chamber of Commerce also opposed the measure, saying it sends the wrong message about the state.

In a statement, Hutchinson emphasized that this “right of conscience” law does not allow health-care workers to deny anyone general health service because federal laws already prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, sex, gender, and national origin.

According to opponents, types of health care that could be cut off include maintaining hormone treatments for transgender patients needing inpatient care for an infection, as well as grief counseling for a same-sex couple. They’ve also said the law could be used to refuse to fill prescriptions for birth control or to override patient directives on end-of-life care.

“There is no sugarcoating this: this bill is another brazen attempt to make it easier to discriminate against people and deny Arkansans the health care services they need,” ACLU of Arkansas executive director Holly Dickson said in a statement. The ACLU did not say whether it planned any legal action to try to block the law before it takes effect.

The law is one of several measures targeting transgender people that have easily advanced through Arkansas’s majority-Republican legislature this year. On March 25, Hutchinson signed a law that will prohibit transgender women and girls from playing on sports teams consistent with their gender identity.

The bills are advancing as a hate crimes measure backed by Hutchinson has stalled in the legislature after facing resistance from conservatives. The bill would impose additional penalties for committing a crime against someone because of their identity, including their sexual orientation and gender identity. —Associated Press