

Texas eyes 'women's privacy act' that critics say targets transgender people

By Jon Herskovitz | AUSTIN, TEXAS

Texas plans to introduce a measure next year aimed at protecting women in bathrooms and locker rooms, a move that has raised concerns of activists who say the legislation is really an attempt to discriminate against transgender people.

The office of Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick said on Tuesday that a state senator will file the so-called "Women's Privacy Act" for consideration in the session that starts in January.

Patrick's office did not have any details of the bill, but the Republican lieutenant governor has been a supporter of only allowing access to facilities such as bathrooms based on gender at birth rather than the gender with which a person identifies.

North Carolina in March became the first state to enact a law that restricts bathroom access for transgender people. The law prompted a federal civil rights lawsuit and has been blamed for hundreds of millions of dollars in economic losses and the relocation of major sporting events from the state.

Patrick, one of the most powerful forces in the Texas legislature and a supporter of President-elect Donald Trump, called the measure in Texas one of his top priorities.

"Starting in 2017, we will have a friend in the White House who was clearly elected because the people of this country believe in the conservative principles that have guided the way we govern in Texas," Patrick said in a statement on Monday.

Patrick has been an opponent of policies under President Barack Obama administration's allowing transgender students to use the bathrooms of their choice, saying the guidelines represented federal overreach and could allow for sexual predators to attack women.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advocacy groups say the current White House policies protect transgender students from discrimination and dismiss the safety concerns as rubbish.

"It is a total misnomer because the legislation has nothing to do protecting women's privacy," said Chuck Smith, executive director of Equality Texas, a leading LGBT civil rights group in the state. "The purpose of the legislation is to allow discrimination against transgender children and adults."

Texas business leaders, a base of support for the Republican party, in October warned lawmakers in the Republican-dominated statehouse that measures targeting the LGBT community would hurt the state's \$1.8 trillion-a-year economy and make it difficult for employers to attract talent for crucial industries.