



Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health



Episode 134: On the Defensive: How Policy Change Affects Queer Mental Health (Transcript)

Ike Evans:

Hello and welcome to Into the Fold, the mental health podcast. I am your host, Ike Evans. Today, we are delighted to bring you Episode 134 On the Defensive: How Policy Change Affects Queer Mental Health, but first some mental health headlines. Last month, the Hogg Foundation awarded 10 non-profit advocacy organizations, a total of 1.4 million in grants over two years to hire in-house policy fellows. And guess what, some of those organizations are hiring. If you would like to know which ones just visit our website, hogg.utexas.edu, scroll about halfway down the home page. You will see where it says Hogg Policy Fellows 2022, just click that link and it'll take you to the Policy Fellows landing page, and you'll be able to see for yourself, which policy fellows organizations have current open positions, and that's if you're interested in mental health policy work and would like to check those out.

Ike Evans:

In other news, the Hogg Foundation has just published a grantee story titled Playing for the Future. The featured grantee is the University of North Texas Center for Play Therapy, which recently closed a three year grant from the Hogg Foundation. Play is the natural language of children, the Center for Play Therapy has made a positive, sustainable impact with its Play for the Future initiative. Again, visit our website, hogg.utexas.edu, and in the top navigation under What We Do, you'll find a link that says Success Stories, go to that link, and you should be able to find your way to this story.

Ike Evans:

And then finally, the American Psychiatric Association has joined numerous organizations in denouncing attempts to link mental illness and gun violence, in a story that ran in psychiatric news just last week, the APA denounced the "false and harmful attempts to link mental illness and gun violence" in a statement that was issued in partnership with 59 other health, mental health, and youth services organizations. And that does it for mental health headlines. Don't be left out of the loop, subscribe to mental health headlines on the Hogg Foundation website, get the latest mental health news right in your inbox. June is Pride Month, we recognize the contributions that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+, or just queer individuals have made to society. Earlier this month, we talked about the current climate and its impact on LGBTQ mental health.

Eli Lawrence:

You know, this is life and death.

Andrea Segovia:

His fear was I'm going to be misgendered and they're going to let me die.

Eli Lawrence:

That the impact that it had-

Andrea Segovia:

Because like that is the fear in Texas.

Eli Lawrence:

When we refuse to acknowledge

Andrea Segovia:

This is adults bullying kids.

Eli Lawrence:

I'm looking at it as what's my next career, because I can't practice in Texas if that's a lie.

Andrea Segovia:

And when we have been up front and honest, and in their face, and calling them bullies, it really gets under their skin.

Ike Evans:

The voices you just heard belong to Eli Lawrence, Clinical Supervisor of Behavioral Health for Waterloo Counseling Center. And Andrea Segovia, Senior Policy and Field Advisor for Trans Education Network of Texas. And that was from Episode 133: Gender Affirming Care is Trauma-Informed Care, which you can find a link to in the notes for today's episode. This is basically part two of that conversation. The LGBTQ+ community in Texas is getting it from all sides, not just efforts to ban or sharply curtail gender affirming care, but bans on trans youth participation in sports, book bans, and just the general climate of fear-mongering that has cast a shadow over Pride Month this year. Joining us to help connect the dots between the issues, the rhetoric, and people's mental health, are state representative Celia Israel of Austin, and Brad Pritchett of Equality Texas. Welcome to you both.

Celia Israel:

Thank you.

Brad Pritchett:

Thank you.

Ike Evans:

How does your work tie into the theme for this episode?

Brad Pritchett:

I always defer to the elected official in the room.

Celia Israel:

Well, how does my work relate to the theme of this episode? Well, it should relate to the theme of this episode. The state of Texas has a lot of big issues to work on. I'm a state official, but because I'm also lesbian, I represent our community and because our state officials have spent time and the state government structure driving a wedge between us instead of healing us, I found that I've had to speak up on behalf of trans kids, their families, our community in general. And I've had to do that in different ways during my years, I'm finishing up my fourth term in the Texas House of Representatives, so the connection is there, the connection is strong and that's the short story. I'm a member of the LGBTQ Caucus in the Texas House of Representatives and in the legislative process, they sort of look to the Caucus for how we're going to speak up and speak out and work with our allies like Equality Texas on these issues.

Brad Pritchett:

Yeah, so for me it probably is 70% of what I spend my time working on, normally Equality Texas is the state's LGBTQ advocacy organization. We spend a lot of time, energy, and effort at the capital, working with folks like representative Israel and folks in the House LGBT Caucus and other allies to try to prevent bad legislation from passing, also to promote good legislation when we have it. Normally we spend a lot of energy during that legislative session for about 140 days. And then we get a little bit of time to take a breath between those sessions and we deal with things as they come in across the state. I would say given I think, the heightened tension that the LGBTQ community's feeling right now, we haven't had that type of break this time around.

Brad Pritchett:

The legislative session ended. And it's been one attack after another, after another, which feels a little bit different than it has in the past. We usually at least get something of a reprieve when we're out of the legislative session, so I'd say 70% of what I do at Equality Texas with our team is responding to situations as they arise across the state for LGBTQ Texans. Then the other 30% is the really fun stuff of just engaging with people and getting to mobilize folks for things that aren't necessarily depressing.

Ike Evans:

I recently did a very informal listener poll. I think the question was something about, what is the main thing that's impacting your mental health currently? And not that the sample size was very huge, but for a majority, it was in fact the political climate. And so just getting back to the theme for this episode, I really want to tackle that head on. How would each of you describe your mental health at this time? And not that this would ever be the only thing impacting that... And also how are you staying resilient?

Celia Israel:

Well, I feel like my mental health is strong, but I also feel like I needed some time away after the third legislative, the third special session. We had an attack on the capital to reject the outcome of the election. We had a winter storm, like none of us had ever seen before that revealed the underbelly of the energy capital of the world, which is Texas. And we had a legislative session in which we made it easier to get a gun and harder to vote. We put a ribbon on it by three special sessions and on the third special session, that was the one in which we said to trans kids, you can't put on a basketball uniform, sorry. And we tried very hard to kill that legislation. It was traumatic, I've talked to my colleagues about it and it was the worst legislative session we've ever seen. And by worst we mean trauma. We mean, we

all of us collectively who believed we should have been working on things that had a real value add to the people of Texas, like fixing the grid.

Celia Israel:

We felt as though we kept catering to an extreme part of the state. And that is, it's frustrating when you're an elected official and you want to do good things. And you're forced into a defensive posture all the time, all the time, all the time, so it was a good thing to have the holiday season to sort of recharge. But I will tell you, I think my mental health is good because that also, it's like it sharpens your edge too. And those of us who love Texas know that we have to fight for Texas, so with love and support of friends and family around me, I was able to recharge and also look back behind me and know that there's other people around me who are going to say, we've got to advocate and make our voices heard, even though sometimes it seems hard to do.

Brad Pritchett:

Yeah, for me. I mean, I would describe my current mental health as bruised but not broken. I just got back from a weekend where I went to the woods and camped and had no connection to work whatsoever, which is probably the first time I've done that since the last legislative session. And for the first 12 hours, I was just freaking out, because I was wanting to know what was going on everywhere else, so that was a nice recharge for me. I think that it is, like I said before, we normally get a little bit of a reprieve, but unfortunately we haven't really gotten that this time around there hasn't really been, I feel like a lot of folks in the community don't feel like we've had a collective opportunity to catch our breath after the last legislative session, because more and more stuff has just been coming.

Brad Pritchett:

And some of it's just really terrible. The last legislative session, one of the things that I've always as somebody who's done advocacy work at ledge, I've always encouraged people to be a part of the process as much as possible, like participate in those hearings, make your voice heard, go on the legislative record, help take up time to like slow these bills down. And one of the collective decisions that Equality Texas and our coalition partners made last session was to not ask people to do that, when we were in the Texas Senate side of things, we boycotted a lot of the Texas Senate hearings because they were just overly traumatic on people. It was hard for people to go in and tell their stories, they got asked really invasive questions by senators. Senators were fishing for information about people's personal details about their family, and their medical care, and their doctors.

Brad Pritchett:

And you could see kind of the nefarious wheels turning in the heads of some of these really anti-LGBTQ senators where they were on the spot thinking about, oh, I could file a bill that made it harder for somebody to do this, and I could file a bill that made it harder for somebody to do that, if I could just get a little more information out of these folks. We encourage people not to participate in a lot of those hearings because it was overly traumatic. And then as the legislative session ended, we saw this ramp up of the weaponization of state agencies against the families of transgender kids. The attorney general and the governor pushing the Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate families who had children who were transgender. And that was a real gut punch for a variety of reasons.

Brad Pritchett:

But for me as somebody who encourages people to make their voice heard in government, the first thing I thought about was all these families who spent regular and three special sessions advocating on behalf of their kids who are trans or non-binary whose names were now on witness lists, who had put themselves like at the forefront of this advocacy effort to kill these bad bills to protect their children, and who were now being targeted by the government for providing affirming homes for their kids. And that was just, I don't know why I felt surprised by it because some of the folks who are in power, who've been in power for a long time in our state. I feel like they don't really have a depth that they can hit, they just keep going lower and lower. The resilience for me comes from those same families.

Brad Pritchett:

We had moms last session who were at the capital literally every day, going and knocking on doors and doing office visits. We had kids who skipped like summer camp and came to testify on their own behalf because it was so important to them. And we've had two DPS hearings where we've encouraged people to go and read the testimonies of families who can't be there, because if they're there, they're putting their target on their backs. And just having people show up constantly for this community. Those DPS hearings have been really incredible from the perspective of, we have asked ourselves, how do we get more advocates to step into these positions and use their voices and use their perspectives?

Brad Pritchett:

Because like the representative said, it's just trauma. We've traumatized so many people because they had to go to the capital and now we want to give those people a rest. And it's been really encouraging to see brand new people stepping up and stepping into these roles, even if it's just to read somebody's testimony, who couldn't be there in person, so that's where I constantly just go back and think like, I can't stop. I can't give up because I know these families can't stop and can't give up, and we have to kind of stand shoulder to shoulder with them.

Ike Evans:

Representative, these next few questions are for you. You have the rather unique standpoint of someone who serves in the Texas House of Representatives. How challenging is it to translate the urgency of the issues that you care about into language that moves legislators? I mean, what tactics or techniques have you found to be successful either within one party or across parties?

Celia Israel:

Well, I've never known any other way than just to be Celia, and just be myself. And that's with my colleagues for whom they might represent another party, but they like me, I like them. We care for each other. We have a real embrace on the house floor, but they are put in a situation where they think from a political perspective, they cannot stand up for our LGBT community and stand up for just mainstream things. If you look at the pressing issues around the country, it's not about whether or not certain kids can play basketball. There's a lot of pressing issues around the country, and families are hurting, and it's not because a kid wants to be on a team.

Celia Israel:

That's the tool that I use is just be real, and just be Celia, and know that at some point in time, it's like sitting on a glacier and knowing that sooner or later it's going to melt. And we have to try, so it is to be personal, be connected. And I'm a big college football fan. We talk about college football. We talk about things that we have in common, and I talk about my wife, my recent marriage, just like they talk about

their kids and what's happening in their family, so it's an odd relationship that we have because then they go right back to their desk and they vote for what they think is political preservation, as opposed to what they know they should be doing to recalibrate the issues in Texas.

Ike Evans:

I have been thinking a lot about the attorney general opinion and the directive from the governor, that Department of Family and Protective Services should investigate for potential child abuse, parents who provide gender affirming care for their kids.

Celia Israel:

Yeah.

Ike Evans:

To be clear, this issue is still working its way through the courts, but I just can't help but wonder how it changes the climate to have such powerful executive officials be the face of this issue versus just kind of stepping back and letting the legislature hash it out?

Celia Israel:

Well, people ask me why do I keep doing this? And I say, because I'm old enough to know that what's happening right now is not normal. It is not normal for the governor to inject himself into what a state agencies rules are or are not. A governor appoints people to boards and commissions, I worked for governor Richards as a young woman, recent UT grad. And we put people on boards and commissions, and for the most part, we left them alone and said, you're an amazing engineer from El Paso, Texas, go and do good things on the Water Development Board. But you don't look over their shoulder and say, well, I didn't mean for you to do that grant, or that contract, or that rule, so what's happening right now is abnormal.

Celia Israel:

State employees are being put in a political situation and they do not feel comfortable with it. And in some cases they were put on their for political reasons and they do feel comfortable with it, they knew what they were getting into. But we will come out of this eventually, the fever will break and we will get back to this normal situation, I do believe. It's just going to take a few cycles for us to do that, so I suppose that's my big message and that this is not normal. And I have so many state employees that are in my district, who I know they just want to do their job to the best of their ability for the profession that they're in. They don't appreciate being second guessed and look over their shoulder.

Celia Israel:

I'll give you an example of a friend of mine retired from the state health services. And every year they put together a report about where their HIV/STD money is going. And the initial draft of a report had transgender community in the report, because that was a population that was being served. Well, the higher ups said to my contact there, you got to take that word out. And the response was, how do you take a word out for a special population that's being served? And I said, it is not going to fly by the governor's office, you've got to find a way to describe it that doesn't have the word transgender in it. And so we're at a really bad spot in the intersection between policy and politics. And it's something that we've got to break through.

Ike Evans:

With so much going on, what advice representative Israel, do you have for ordinary citizens who are just trying to, and we're kind of presuming that there's just so many things vying for our attention right now, but who just want to keep track of what's going on?

Celia Israel:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, I always shout out Equality Texas, because if you care about these topics Equality Texas is your lobbyist, is your advocate at the capital. You don't have to feel alone. You can work smarter, not harder and get their newsletter, get their calls to action. They have a team that Brad and his team will let you know what bill is moving or not moving, and when it's appropriate to speak up, so I would say regardless of what your issue is whether its general child welfare, public education, there's an organization that you can connect with, so number one is be an informed person in Texas.

Celia Israel:

And number two, this summer is the most important summer for all of us to make sure that we are registered to vote. And that we are talking to our friends who kind of, they might, I hate when people wake up in the middle of early voting and maybe they just moved to another city, like maybe they just moved to Houston from Dallas. And then they wake up in the middle of early voting and say, oh man, I didn't change my voter registration, so we still have very antiquated ways of registering people to vote. And I am worried about the politicization of voter registration processes, so just check and double check, stay engaged with the League of Women Voters, for example, and there's other organizations who are doing voter registration.

Celia Israel:

If you want to do something therapeutic, go volunteer your time with one of these voter registration groups and go sit in front of a Walmart and get people registered to vote. This is the very important year, we've passed a very bad law that's going to restrict our ability to vote. And it does so quietly and with a scalpel. And people might go and vote and say, well, wait a minute, I'm not registered what happened? Well, we got to check and double check, so those are my tidbits. And I'm sure Brad might have some more feedback on that, but those are my two thoughts.

Ike Evans:

I'm glad you mentioned Equality Texas. Brad, let's get you back in this conversation, because I would love to hear from you. I want to focus on just one issue, youth sports. I mean, it just seems now that issue just, it ended up being sort of the thin end of the spear so to speak, when it comes to this larger assault on LGBTQ people. And as an issue, it evokes really strong emotions. Youth sports, conjuring feelings of nostalgia. And those who want to ban trans kids from youth sports would claim that they're defending its purity, defending its innocence. And so I just wonder if it can sometimes feel like you're on the back foot with issues like this, given the emotions that it evokes and how it is that you cope with that?

Brad Pritchett:

Well, I mean, every legislative session, I think we come into it with expectations about what the attacks on LGBTQ folks are going to look like. The Republican party in my caveat is that Equality Texas is a non-partisan organization, so we'll work with Democrats, Republicans, and independents, anybody who's interested in advancing equality. But what I will say is the Republican party that is currently in charge in

Texas, in all of our statewide offices, they have a pretty predictable habit and that is that they fabricate these moral emergencies, every few cycles. In 2017, the lieutenant governor spent 140 days plus I think one legislative session telling us that trans people using the bathroom was the most important thing that the state of Texas needed to be focused on, so much so that all the power of the legislature should be focused on banning trans people from using bathrooms. That bill failed to pass in the regular session. A variation of it failed to pass in that special session.

Brad Pritchett:

Come 2019, not a single bathroom bill was filed at all, so the question has to be if the emergency was so crucial in 2017, and they didn't pass anything, then why in 2019, weren't they still talking about it? They weren't talking about it anymore because that moral emergency kind of faded off, they used it for the legislative session and they made people terrified of people that they didn't understand, that was the whole point of it. If you're not somebody who knows you know a trans person it's easy to be misled by lies about trans people. It takes a lot of work to undo that type of misinformation, which we've done a lot of that work, and so have a lot of our partner organizations, so when we rolled into the legislative session this time around, we knew sports were going to be one of the things they talked about. We also knew medical care for trans youth was going to be one of the things they talked about.

Brad Pritchett:

In addition to all the attacks we always get. I mean, there are folks in the legislature who are still obsessed with the fact that representative Israel and I can legally get married, like get over it, it's been a long time. They're still filing legislation about marriage, they're still filing legislation trying to undo non-discrimination laws in big cities and small towns where they exist, because we don't have any protections statewide. I think it was a matter of, for us just trying to think through how do we have these conversations that are factual about trans folks playing sports. And I go back to the 2017 session a lot when I think about this and it was the idea that one or two stories that make headlines about trans athletes and not even trans athletes dominating their fields, just trans athletes doing well, which why shouldn't they do well? They're competing, that's what competition's about.

Brad Pritchett:

How one or two stories got blown up into this moral emergency where trans athletes are out dominating cisgender athletes across the state of Texas, something that's not happening. I mean the number of trans kids who are interested in playing sports in the state of Texas in a competitive way, it's like a small fraction of the total kids playing sports, right. But the reality of it is that when we're talking about gay people, when we're talking about lesbians, when we're talking about folks who identify as bisexual. A lot of times it feels like it's harder to attack those groups of folks because around marriage equality especially this long conversation about LGB folks are your neighbors, we're your friends, we're your families. And trans folks were largely left out of kind of that inclusive conversation around marriage equality in a lot of ways, so it's a lot easier to like focus on trans folks because it's easy to spread misinformation about them.

Brad Pritchett:

And that's exactly what they've done and continue to do. Not just in sports, but on medical care as well. Yeah, I feel like we always do start off in a way where we're playing defense, like representative Israel said when we'd rather be playing offense a lot of times. But the thing that we try to do when we talk about especially trans folks in sports is the same kind of like checklist that you were mentioning when

you're describing this issue. It's like sports is good for all of these reasons, and trans people should have access to sports because of all of these same reasons that you're saying that they shouldn't have access to sports. It builds character, it builds the ability to work in teams, it gives people something to do that's productive with their time instead of sitting at home watching television.

Brad Pritchett:

I mean, you could list all the benefits of being involved in sports and how it makes a small person grow up to be a great person, right? And the reality is that at some point we will break through on that messaging. And at some point the moral emergency of trans people playing sports will fade as these other moral emergencies have. And then it's really incumbent upon us to clean up the mess that Republicans made by passing these terrible bills. And just to point it out that we had 76 anti LGBTQ bills that were introduced in the last legislative session, in the regular and the three specials. Out of all of those bills, only one passed and representative Israel said it earlier, but that bill didn't pass until that third special session. That's how many times they had to keep bringing it up and keep trying to get it to pass.

Brad Pritchett:

And the difference between a regular and a special session is the time is so condensed it's a lot harder to stop bad bills if you're only playing defense, but out of 76 bills, one passed. The governor signed it into law in January, it's technically in effect, but the UIL hasn't actually said how it's supposed to be enforced yet. They still haven't given guidelines for how you enforce this. And at the end of the day, these types of bills, the only way you're going to be able to enforce them is going to be in some kind of way that is going to be really traumatic for kids, and not just for trans kids for CIS kids. I mean, if you think about a cisgender girl who just may be too good at a sport and a mad parent from another team sees her and says, I don't think that's a "real girl", like what's going to happen to that CIS kid.

Brad Pritchett:

How is she going to have to prove who she is? I mean, these bills have unintended consequences that the people who write them and push them don't care about. They're really just trying to score points so they can come into a primary season and say, look, I banned trans people from playing sports, you should vote for me. But at the end of the day, we're going to continue to do everything we can to make sure that kids are getting access to what they need access to. And we'll continue to work with school districts who aren't necessarily gung-ho about enforcing this kind of stuff and figuring out what ways we can work together to make sure kids are getting what they need.

Ike Evans:

We're heading into another election season. And then after that, another session of the legislature. And I mean, if my own Twitter is anything to go by, there's just a lot of fear, a lot of dread, people fired up to be sure. I'm just wondering Brad, what plans that you and Equality Texas have for the next several months and how can people be involved?

Brad Pritchett:

This year Equality Texas has our... it's our Turn OUT for Texas campaign, so this is the first time Equality Texas has done it to this level. It's a multi-year investment in electoral work, so we have hired organizers in different parts of the state who are organizing in some strategic areas to make sure that folks are mobilized for the election. They're getting out and voting in that election in November. And they stay

involved post-election to be involved in that legislative session, so we are being really strategic about where those folks are going. We have an organizer in North Texas, we have an organizer here where I live in Harris county, we're hiring organizers down in the Rio Grande valley to do some general organizing work, and then some work specifically around races that we're watching. Our C4 organization and our political action committee will endorse candidates heading into November, so we'll be able to show folks comparatively, like who's good on LGBTQ equality and who isn't.

Brad Pritchett:

Helping folks make a better decision when they go to the polls and keeping LGBTQ rights at the forefront of the decisions you make when you vote. Because the reality is that the last legislative session was bad for LGBTQ folks because so many attempts were made to attack us, but bad for LGBTQ folks in a lot of other ways. The restrictions on voting rights affects all of us, we are an intersectional community. You pass bad bills for the ledge that attack voting rights, that's going to affect us. You make it easier for people to get guns, that's going to affect us. You make it harder to access abortion, that's going to affect us. Basically we want people to recognize that intersectionality of the community, and to keep LGBTQ rights at the forefront when they go and make their decisions at the polls.

Brad Pritchett:

I mean, that's really kind of how we're looking at it. We say this every election cycle, but it's true, every election cycle. Every election is the most important election of your lifetime, especially in a place like Texas, especially in a midterm election season when turnout tends to dip a little bit and we need to be even more responsive and even turning out at higher numbers during midterm elections if we hope to do anything in a place like Texas, that is so gerrymandered now that it becomes really difficult to win some of the district races. But the gerrymandering isn't necessarily, in and of itself going to affect how we respond to statewide races. The thing that will affect those statewide races is all the barriers that have been put in place by the legislature in the last session, making it harder to access our vote.

Brad Pritchett:

We're encouraging folks just to stay really vigilant about it and to help us by knocking on doors in specific parts of the state, turning out additional voters. And then we're just going to continue to harass people in the nicest way possible to make sure that they're recognizing the power of their vote. With so much going bad so often right now, we know that when you hear like go vote, it's the most powerful thing you can do that sometimes that can feel kind of like it falls flat in a place like Texas, but the reality is it's one of the tools we have in our toolbox, it's an effective tool if we use it in the right way. And if we can turn enough folks out, we know for a fact that more people in Texas support LGBTQ rights than oppose it. It's just a matter of getting them all energized enough to go out, push at the polls and actually get the vote that we need in order to make real change in the state.

Ike Evans:

Okay. This final question is for both of you, what stories do you hear from families and constituents about how this current climate affects them and what reassurance can you provide?

Celia Israel:

Well, I hear directly from kids and families, but it's usually more mutually supportive. Nothing happens inside the capital without pressure from outside the capital. And it's always reassuring and helpful for me as a state official to know that I'm doing good. And it's really cool to get handwritten cards from

people who say you made a difference. Thanks for speaking up for my family. And the reason it's important to continue to speak up as Brad was saying is because not everybody has that, and not everybody had that. And someone reminded me of my last speech on the house floor was a speech about the toxic stew, that is Texas politics.

Celia Israel:

And someone sent me a text and said, good job. And I said, yeah, I'm sorry I have to do that, but we will. And this friend of mine said, when you were a little girl, you didn't have anybody to speak up for you, so in the 1970s and eighties, when I was growing up, I didn't have anybody to speak up for me, so it's important that we stand up for the right thing, and we stand up for one another, and that we stand up with the state that we love.

Brad Pritchett:

Yeah. I mean, I think that last session, I mean was probably the session that I've had the most contact with families than any other session I've ever worked in. I'd say until this last session, I was able to keep kind of a distance from some folks, a professional distance. Like I would help provide trainings for folks and encourage them to go to the capital to be their own advocates. And this last session was much more extended family feeling to me, there were a lot of folks who kind of welcomed me into their families, and I kind of felt the same way about them. And unfortunately, some of those families aren't in Texas anymore, there were families who during the legislative session made plans to leave the state because they had a better sense of what was coming than I think a lot of us did. They knew it was going to get worse before it got better.

Brad Pritchett:

Some of the folks who fought the hardest during this last session had the ability, had the means to pack up and go someplace else that was safer for their kids, so they did the same thing they did during that legislative session, they prioritized the safety of their children first, and that's why they moved their families out of the state, so there are a lot of those families who fought so hard, who are not in Texas anymore. Which is heartbreaking in a way, but it's also kind of one of the most selfless things you can think of a parent doing is like uprooting your entire family to protect your child, right? I mean, we hear a lot right now from families who are under the FPS investigations, so we've worked with the ACLU of Texas, and Lambda Legal, and the Trans Education Network of Texas, and the Texas Freedom Network, and HRC to connect folks to legal resources, to help make sure they're not paying for legal help when they are under investigation by the FPS.

Brad Pritchett:

We've worked really hard just to continue to provide support to folks, by giving them spaces to kind of come together and connect and share what's going on and even meet each other in person. And a lot of what we hear is folks who want to do more, who are asking like, how can I do more than I'm doing right now? The DFPS meetings that we've done this month, and a couple months ago, back in March, we had tons of folks who showed up at those meetings who were parents, who didn't even have kids who identified as LGBTQ, but recognized the inherent, like wrongness of DFPS investigating families for loving their kids too much, right. Or for affirming their kids identities. And then putting themselves in the position of like, what would happen if DFPS came knocking on my door? Like how would that impact my family?

Brad Pritchett:

I think one of the things that all of this bad stuff has done is kind of unleashed this coalition of parents across the board who are willing to step in and advocate on behalf of everybody else's kids, so we hear folks who are really discouraged, but we also get folks who are just so mad that they want to do anything they can do and be involved. And we provide support across the board as we can. Because of the climate in Texas, Equality Texas is not a direct service provider, but we often have people come to us because they don't know who else to go to, so we'll try to connect them to resources as we can. And because it got so intense.

Brad Pritchett:

I mean, once upon a time we were getting one or two requests a month and it went up to like 15 or so a month during ledge. But we actually had to create a new staff position, it's our constituent services manager position to help handle that intake. And we have a staff member, their name is Chloe Goodman. They have a master's in social works, so we're treating all of these intakes as folks would treat regular case work to make sure we're providing the continuity of care for folks. And we are referring them to the proper agencies and resources as best we can, so what we're hearing from folks has been kind of a mixed bag, but at the end of the day, folks are looking for resources and us and our coalition partners are always working as best we can to provide resources for folks and support.

Ike Evans:

Brad and representative Israel, this was a wonderful conversation. And I really do appreciate you taking the time just to share with our listeners. There's a lot that's going on right now. And a lot of it pretty hard to stomach, but yeah, there's a lot that people could learn from the approach that you've taken, so thank you so much and good luck with everything.

Celia Israel:

Right. Thank you. And thank you to the Hogg Foundation, appreciate you guys.

Brad Pritchett:

Thank you.

Ike Evans:

Here now to give a reaction from the community is Austin's own Heath Collins of Waterloo Counseling. Heath, we are so glad that you could be with us today.

Heath Collins:

Thank you.

Ike Evans:

Why don't you tell our listeners about you and about the work that you do for Waterloo Counseling?

Heath Collins:

Sure. My name's Heath Collins, I'm a licensed clinical social worker and I've been with Waterloo for just about seven years. I'm a therapist, and at Waterloo we offer individual therapy, couples therapy, and

also groups. And we accept every major insurance and we also offer a sliding scale so we can try to make therapy accessible to everyone.

Ike Evans:

I've already interviewed four people for Pride Month, counting both episodes that we've done for June, right. And I try not to make it too much about how fricking jacked up things are right now, but I kind of feel like it just is what it is regarding the political climate here in Texas, here in the United States, the hell that LGBTQ+ people are catching, jacked up to put it mildly, if you ask me. How are you, how are things in your world? If it's mostly good don't let me reign on your parade, but mental health wise how are you holding up?

Heath Collins:

Sure. It's definitely been difficult. And something that I've talked about with my colleagues is over the last couple of years, especially since the beginning of the pandemic, more so than at any other point during my career, I feel like a lot of what my clients are bringing into therapy are things that I, and certainly my, my colleagues, we are all sort of dealing with. We're all a little bit in the same boat with all of this,. Especially now with the way things are going politically. But I guess the positive side of that is it's something that it makes it so that I can really empathize on a really intimate level with my clients over, because I get it. When they bring in their concerns, their anxieties, I get it and I can really genuinely validate that because I'm feeling the same things that they are, and I can completely understand their perspectives.

Ike Evans:

Full disclosure. I have had a therapist for a number of years and particularly after election day 2016, I'm not going to fricking say his name, that became a somewhat frequent element in the therapy room. There's only so much that she could assuage me about. How was that for you? How does that feel for you when that kind of outside stuff comes into the therapy room? I mean, do you generally feel like, like if I were ever a therapist, I would wonder if I'm really up to the task of speaking to the big stuff.

Heath Collins:

Sure. And I think that it gets difficult because as a therapist, you want to have answers and you want to have practical steps that people can take to make things better. And that's not always the case, there's not always a direct path for how to make the world around you better, especially with some of the challenges that we're facing. But it takes a little bit of reorienting and I think at the very least you can at least be a safe place where people can go and express these emotions and express their thoughts and their feelings. And I very much believe in helping people to confront the reality of their situation.

Heath Collins:

I don't believe in sugarcoating over some of the things that we're facing and what people are experiencing, but if I can at least be a support, and if we can at least talk about things that you can do on just the micro level, how do you take care of yourself? How do you make sure you're not overdoing it with the doom scrolling? How can you build with and connect with your community? And how can find those sorts of supports? I think those are things that are within your power, so I very often try to sort of redirect the conversation in that way to what are the things that are within your control?

Ike Evans:

I'm used to my therapist telling me that this is my time, this is about you. I'm not always satisfied by that because sometimes I suspect that this is a fairly typical thing. I kind of want to try to draw out my therapist on some things like, where are you at as far as like showing vulnerability to clients, kind of putting some of your own stuff, your own struggles out there, how do you find the right balance between wanting to show a measure of solidarity, but without overshadowing what it is that a client needs?

Heath Collins:

Right, and there's a concept of your use of self in therapy, and it can't be really powerful. And I think that the response I've gotten from clients is if I'm upfront about really connecting over the fact that, Hey, I get it. I'm anxious about this too. I think that's really humanizing and gets people to see that I am on the same level with them and that I am going to be genuine in our interactions, the litmus test that I use anytime I'm thinking about doing any kind of self disclosure or anything like that is just asking myself is this for the client? Or is this for me? I don't want to turn this the session into being my therapy session necessarily, but if it's going to help the client feel like their concerns are normalized and validated then absolutely, I'm willing to bring that up.

Ike Evans:

Turning to the conversation that I had with representative Celia Israel, Brad Pritchett of Equality Texas. What did you think of that dialogue? I mean, and did it cover what you hoped that it would cover?

Heath Collins:

It did. Those were the biggest sort of current political issues that I'm hearing about every day in my therapy practice. In particular with the issue around CPS reporting, that's devastating for clients and for their families. And it's also putting mental health professionals in a bad spot where as mandated reporters by our license and by the law, if that's what's being dictated to us, then there is that requirement of having to report. And that puts you in a really significant ethical dilemma, so there's lots of conversations going on about how do we, as professionals respond to that. And it's getting to the point where some therapists are wondering if they can even feel like they can practice safely in this state, or if they need to start considering other things. And that would be a huge loss if people feel like they need to leave the state in order to be able to practice effectively.

Ike Evans:

Another somewhat loaded question, trying to draw you out a bit. Have you really enjoyed this pride month and why or why not?

Heath Collins:

Sure. And going to be a little bit of a weird answer, because most of the month I was out with COVID, so I wasn't able to get out there and do a lot of the things that I wish I could.

Ike Evans:

Right.

Heath Collins:

But it's always really fulfilling for me to hear from my clients, the things that they're doing and people being able to go out to Queerbomb, for example, or just connect over other events. It's a really fun and validating time for people. And especially as things are hopefully changing somewhat, with the pandemic people have been isolated for so long and for people to really get out there and in whatever way they're comfortable with, physically be around their community, it's been really helpful for people.

Ike Evans:

And I'm going to give you a glimpse into my sort of weird reality. I think back to 2020, when George Floyd and the subsequent protests erupted and the guilt that I felt, because all that shit kind of erupted while I was on a short vacation and was kind of in a state of withdrawal, if you want to call it anything. I sat it out, because I just, and what I say to myself, not just for that, is that I've been black for a long time. If other people are waking up to what's going on, that's great for them. I'm in a place of really needing to conserve my attentional energy right now.

Ike Evans:

I still think it kind of sucks that the timing was what it was. And I'm sure looking back, there was more that I could be doing. I could have been going to this, going to that, seemed like it had largely blown over by the time that I was ready to do any of that. And so that's why I feel like I should just ask. Does it ever get burdensome doing the pride thing, whatever that looks like for you or for any other queer person? And I just feel like that there's an opening for some frank exchange about that, but it sounds like that's been mostly gravy for you.

Heath Collins:

Yeah. I think that something that burns me out a little bit, and I very much get the sense that this is for a lot of queer people in general, just how it's moved from being a grassroots sort of experience to being kind of corporate driven and dominated at this point. There's the cliché about all of the different companies and corporations changing their Twitter logos to rainbow flags. And it's almost a little bit commodified at this point, but that's why I love things that are still out there, like for example Queerbomb, that is grassroots and is outside of that sort of a world.

Heath Collins:

And to the point of burnout when it comes to working on these kinds of issues, something that I come back to for myself and something that I bring up in therapy a lot is this kind of a cliché, but this idea that you can't serve from an empty cup. And it's great, we all want to get out there and be involved in every issue that we're passionate about, but you do have to take care of yourself first too, in order to be effective in those areas. And so that you can have the energy to get out there and do the work that needs to be done.

Ike Evans:

Even an organization like mine, though not exactly corporate, we're not as grassroots as I think what comes to many people's mind when that term is used. We kind of operate within our own space. We're at let's say wrist length from not fully arms length, but wrist length from the true grassroots stuff going on at least with respect to the space in which we operate, I would say. Apologies to my friends at the Hogg Foundation, if they have a different point of view on that. Speaking just for myself, by the way, to our listeners. And so even for us to be like wanting to chase you down, stick a microphone in your face, it's for you to tell us about your experience for pride month. I'm very sensitive to the possibility of us

kind of being a part of the problem in the ways that kind of liberal minded well meaning people can do that. And so this is your chance to kind of tell us what it is that you need, or what Waterloo Counseling needs, that maybe the Hogg Foundation or even just our audience listening can help out with?

Heath Collins:

Sure. And I think what we need right now is for people to get involved in whatever way they can to help make this political situation better. In the previous segment there was a lot of talk about registering to vote and making sure you follow through with voting, and that's absolutely important, but you only get that opportunity every two years or so to use that power. In the meantime, finding other ways to get involved in different organizations, whether that's getting on the mailing list for Equality Texas, and following up with some of their events that they do pretty frequently, and seeing what ways you can volunteer. If you've got the money for it, think about donating to something like The Trevor Project, or the Trans Lifeline, or any of those kinds of organizations, but really finding ways to get out there and try to help us improve this situation.

Ike Evans:

All right, Heath, thank you. And on behalf of whoever needs to hear it, or doesn't already know. We're really lucky to have you kind of in the struggle alongside all of those who are struggling, and we really appreciate you and good luck with everything.

Heath Collins:

Thank you.

Ike Evans:

The month of July, which will soon be upon us is Minority Mental Health Awareness Month. And we're seeking listener testimonials for a segment that I've just started to call Mental Health and You. You provide a testimonial written or audio on how you're doing, this can be in reaction to what we are talking about on the podcast or anything else that's on your mind. If you have a testimonial to share, shoot me an email at intothefold@austin.utexas.edu. And I will be happy to help you with it in whatever way that you need help. Before we close, I just want to congratulate our two newest Moore Fellowship awardees. The Moore Fellowships award \$20,000 to support dissertation research that shines a light on some aspect of the human experience of crises. This year's two fellows, Jaylen Wright and Yvonne Taylor will be featured in a Q&A interview blog post that you'll be able to find on our website at hogg.utexas.edu next month, so check those out.

Ike Evans:

Now, some closing thoughts, this year's Pride Month has felt bittersweet. I don't mean to speak for anyone but myself, but I would be shocked if I were the only person who felt this way. It's not for nothing that we are calling this podcast on the defensive, because more than ever before, LGBTQ+ people have to defend themselves, their families, their children. They have to defend their very claim to sanity, their right to move through space, their moral worthiness. I've already said that LGBTQ+ people amid everything have pioneered forms of community that everyone who cares about mental health and wellbeing can learn from. They've shown their resilience and will continue to, but we need to add something. I can understand if LGBTQ+ people are a little bit sick and tired of people praising their resilience when it should go without saying that they shouldn't have to be resilient like this, your own

political community should not be an omnipresent threat to your wellbeing. Mental health entails resilience, sure.

Ike Evans:

But it also entails not staying silent, stepping up and sharing the burden, standing up, finding your voice. And at times using that voice to say forcefully, no, and stop. Coming up for July is Minority Mental Health Awareness Month, we're excited about it. And so should you be, so check back in a couple of weeks. And that does it for this episode, we're so glad that you could join us. If you have comments on anything regarding the podcast, feel free to reach out to us at intothefold@austin.utexas.edu. Thoughtful comments will be acknowledged during a future episode. Production assistance by Anna Harris, Darrell Wiggins, and Kate Rooni. Thanks as ever to the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. We stand in solidarity with our LGBTQ+ family, friends, and neighbors. Please leave us a review. Subscribe to us on the podcast app of your choice. Look for us on iTunes, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, or tune in. Thanks for joining us.