



New Connecticut parenting bill gives LGBTQ families a sigh of relief

By Julie Moreau
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When Stephanie Ocasio-Gonzalez heard that the [Connecticut Parentage Act](#) passed the state Senate in a late-night session on May 20 and was headed to the governor's desk, she congratulated her wife.

"I told Denise, 'You're now the owner of a 14-year-old boy,'" she said.

It was a joke shared between two people who have long struggled to have their family recognized. Despite being there for their teenage son, Jayvin, for over a decade, Denise Gonzalez is still not officially recognized as Jayvin's parent under Connecticut law.

"She bought his first bike. She was there for the first day of kindergarten and every first day of school since," Ocasio-Gonzalez said of her wife. "She was there for his surgery, taught him math, and so much more. She's his mom."

Soon the state of Connecticut will recognize her as such. On Tuesday, the first day of LGBTQ Pride Month, Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, signed a ceremonial copy of the Connecticut Parentage Act into law. The measure, which was officially signed last week and takes effect Jan. 1, will make it easier for those who don't share a biological connection with their child, like Gonzalez, to establish parentage.

"This is such an important day — what it says for our kids, what it says for Connecticut, what it says for respecting everybody and who they are," [Lamont said](#) at the signing ceremony.

Ocasio-Gonzalez and Gonzalez have been married since 2014, and they share a 2-year-old daughter, Destiny, in addition to their teenage son. Both women are on Destiny's birth certificate, but even though they were married at the time of her birth, Gonzalez is still not considered Destiny's legal parent outside of Connecticut.

Denise's parental rights are limited because she did not go through what is often referred to as a second-parent-adoption process. As a result, routine activities like taking her children to the doctor or picking Jayvin up from school have been anxiety-provoking events that require extra paperwork and preparation.

"It just took a lot more work," Ocasio-Gonzalez said.

But the adoption process seemed daunting, she said. In addition to the costs involved, the couple worried about interacting with Jayvin's birth father, according to Ocasio-Gonzalez.

"I read that in some cases, even though I have full custody, I would have to get the other parent to give permission, and just thinking about having to go through that was emotionally draining," she said. "I know he would not agree to it."

Once in effect, the Connecticut Parentage Act will allow the family, and others like them, to avoid a potentially lengthy and costly second-parent adoption.

This means starting Jan. 1, Gonzalez can declare her de facto parentage in court and be legally recognized as Jayvin's parent. The process to become Destiny's legal parent outside of Connecticut is even easier.

"The really great thing this bill does for those families is that it allows them to establish parentage through a simple administrative form," Douglas NeJaime, a professor at Yale Law School and the principal drafter of the bill, told NBC News. The new law changes the existing acknowledgement of paternity form to an acknowledgement of parentage form, making it gender-neutral. The form "has the effect of having a judgment from a court, and all other states have to treat it as valid," NeJaime said.

So if Ocasio-Gonzalez and her family move to another state — any other state, regardless of its parentage laws — they will both be recognized as the legal parents of their two children.

The newly enacted law makes it easier to establish parentage at birth regardless of the sexual orientation, gender or marital status of the parents and adds protections for children born using assisted reproductive technologies. The new measure also removes gender-specific language from the state's parentage law to make every path to parentage available on a gender-neutral basis. To be inclusive of transgender parents, for example, the new law makes references to the "person" who gives birth, rather than the woman who gives birth.

State Sen. Alex Kasser, one of the bill's lead sponsors, called its passage a "historic and long overdue moment for Connecticut."

"Finally all children will be given equal protection under the law, and all parents will be recognized when their child is born," Kasser, a Democrat, said in a statement. "This bill confirms that there is no place for discrimination in Connecticut."

Variation in state parentage laws

With Lamont's signature, Connecticut will join Maine, Washington, Vermont, California and Rhode Island in passing bills that update parentage laws to recognize the realities of LGBTQ families. However, many states continue to have gaps in their legislation that make the children of same-sex couples vulnerable.

For example, many states do not recognize the parental rights of nongestational parents who are not married. Only 14 states afford rights to these parents, according to the LGBTQ think tank Movement Advancement Project. The other states, according to the group, explicitly recognize the nongestational parent only if the couple is married and lack clear guidelines for unmarried couples, leaving them in a legal gray zone.

"We have a lot of states that do not treat LGBT families as full members of the community, and that is the problem," NeJaime said.

Connecticut's new law is a version of the Uniform Parentage Act of 2017. The model legislation is intended to help lawmakers update laws to include LGBTQ families and those who have used assisted reproductive technology. The act, originally promulgated in 1973, was drafted by members of the Uniform Law Commission, a group of experts, academics, practicing lawyers and judges, who work on model legislation for states.

What's next?

Advocates already have their eyes on upcoming legislation in other states, including Massachusetts. Like Connecticut's legislation, Massachusetts' bill is also based on the Uniform Parentage Act.

"People are not aware that some of these core protections are still not in place," said Polly Crozier, a senior staff attorney at GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders, or GLAD.

The bill, currently in committee, would provide protection for children born through assisted reproductive technologies and through surrogacy.

Ocasio-Gonzalez said she hopes Massachusetts follows Connecticut's lead so more families like hers can enjoy equal rights.

"We already know we are a family, and now with this bill passing, no one can tell us differently," she said.

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