



## Marriage and Bigamy Amendment- Our Position

Cherish Families is the largest organization focused on serving people from polygamous communities and is dedicated to empowering people from polygamous backgrounds. Our staff of fourteen consists of advocates, a housing coordinator, a Family Resource Facilitator, a clinical coordinator and a facilities manager. Some staff are from a polygamous background and some are not, but all are highly trained in cultural competence, trauma informed care and strengths-based practices.

In 2019 alone, our organization provided over 750 people with the following services: housing services, family resource facilitation, therapy, basic needs, legal help, protective orders, court accompaniment, and other crime victim related services. In addition, we offered financial literacy classes, a women's support group, suicide prevention training, and help with finishing high school or getting into higher education.

One of the keys to our growing success in the community has been trust. We follow the domestic violence model of 'taking a victim where they are at.' Through a nonjudgmental stance of their culture and heritage, along with victim confidentiality, people are empowered to make their own choices.

Supportive agencies like the Utah Office for Victims of Crime, the Utah Domestic Violence Coalition, the Utah Crime Victims Council, Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Southwest Behavioral Health, Washington County Attorney's office, Colorado City Marshal's office have stepped up to help us make a difference. But there is more to do.

**Challenges victims face under current law-**Because of the long history of entanglement with government agencies and law enforcement raids, bad actors like Warren Jeffs have weaponized the law against his own people to commit his crimes.

**Fear of law enforcement-**Many of our clients have expressed fear of reporting a perpetrator because they didn't want the rest of the family to get in trouble or have their children taken away. Often when officers were gathering information to help, a victim thought they were collecting information to prosecute their family.

**Reduced Opportunity-** Many have worried about accessing resources for fear of 'outing their families' or having it 'come back on them.' Some victims we help really need to access resources while they get on their feet but often do not want to for fear of repercussions to themselves, family, or friends. A client of ours had dreams of going to college and becoming a nurse but was afraid to fill out financial help paperwork for fear of it 'coming back' on her polygamous parents.

**Fear of not being treated fairly-**Because they are considered 'felons' under the law, many victims are afraid they will not be treated fairly when they seek services. This is especially acute with those who are *visually identifiable* by traditional conservative clothing.



**Victimized from within and without-** Not only does this law provide a shield of fear for abusers living polygamy, perpetrators know that would be victims from polygamous communities are extremely vulnerable. We worked on a case that a neighbor abused daughters from a polygamous family and told them he knew they 'would never dare report him.'

**Societal Stigma-** Polygamy is punishable by up to 5 years in prison for 'purporting to marry.' People living polygamy have been afraid to speak out. The result has been an entire culture stereotyped by a few bad actors. This stigma gets carried into every interaction whether at school, with a health care provider, or a government agency.

Cherish Families recognizes the need to protect the innocent. Our advocates sit with victims in their suffering daily. We want policies that will hold abusers to account. We also want policy that will not unintentionally harm victims. The current laws on the books addressing polygamy have clearly failed. For the first time in over 100 years, SB102 looks to try a different approach.

The rationale of SB102 is sound and will put victims from polygamous communities on equal footing by removing punitive labels like 'felon' or 'criminal'; yet it still allows perpetrators to be held accountable to the full extent of the law.

We applaud Senator Henderson and Representative Snow for their efforts to take a big picture look at a complex issue.

