

# Say what? Tennessee tries to ban evolution-of words - AvvoStories

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POLITICS, LGBT, NEWS, RIGHTS

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BRIEF

It's hard to stand out amidst all the hand-waving in the current political climate, but a new law in Tennessee might make you do a double-take.

[House Bill 1111/Senate Bill 1085](#), passed into law on May 5, 2017, purports to be a simple case of housekeeping to avoid creative interpretation of state laws. Before the bill passed, Rep. Andrew Farmer, the House bill's Republican sponsor, [told NBC News](#) that it "would not be the first time the legislature has weighed in on statutory interpretation," and made assurances that "this has nothing to do with same sex marriage or gender."

But the Knoxville News Sentinel [reported that the bill's Senate sponsor, Republican John Stevens](#), said he proposed the measure partly to compel courts to side more closely with the dissenting opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized [same-sex marriage](#).

## What does the law say?

Ironically, the actual wording of law is vague, and lacks definitions for any of the words used.

"Undefined words shall be given their natural and ordinary meaning," the law reads. "Without forced or subtle construction that would limit or extend the meaning of the language, except when a contrary intention is clearly manifest."

The meaning of the legislation only becomes clear when one looks at its history. An earlier bill that failed, [Senate Bill 30](#), included this same language, but with specific examples defining the words *husband*, *wife*, *mother*, and *father* by biological sex.

The state's Republican attorney general, Herbert Slatery has written his [opinion](#) that S.B. 1085 could provoke a challenge to same-sex marriage. But Tennessee's Republican governor, Bill Haslam, dismissed that possibility and signed the bill into law, saying in a statement that "the Obergefell decision is the law of the land, and this legislation does not change a principle relied upon by the courts for more than a century, mitigating the substantive impact of this legislation."

## What will it do?

The approach is confusing, but the intent is clear: make sure words like *husband* and *wife* won't become gender neutral. Which, according to opponents of the new law, means they want to be able to [discriminate](#) against same-sex couples.

Activists are standing by, ready to challenge the law at its first application. But if this law doesn't stop our country's evolving concepts of marriage, there's more where it came from: some [100 bills](#) with the potential to curtail LGBTQ rights are currently making their way through state legislatures, and there are [ominous signs from the Trump Administration](#) as well.

Tagged [Donald Trump](#), [LGBT](#), [Marriage Equality](#), [same-sex marriage](#)

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