Published on *Gay-Straight Alliance Network* (http://www.gsanetwork.org)

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Sep. 30, 2010
GSA Network

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SB 543 will increase access to mental health services for at-risk youth

SAN FRANCISCO, September 30, 2010 – Gay-Straight Alliance Network applauds Governor Schwarzenegger who last night signed The Mental Health Services for At-Risk Youth Act (SB 543) into law.

Student activists with Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a co-sponsor of the bill, played a key role in passing the bill, which will expand access to essential mental health services, especially prevention and early intervention programs for youth ages 12-17 by allowing them to obtain counseling without parental consent.

"GSA youth activists fought hard for this bill because for many of them it's a matter of life and death," said Carolyn Laub, Executive Director of GSA Network, an organization that empowers youth activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools through Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. "Every student deserves to be safe at school. Until then, youth who are bullied or rejected because of their sexual orientation or gender identity need access to life-saving mental health services. We are grateful that Governor Schwarzenegger signed this bill to give youth the access they need before it's too late."

GSA youth traveled to Sacramento in April 2009 and 2010 where they rallied at the State Capitol and met with their representatives, urging them to vote for the bill. Student activists kept the momentum going with regular calls to the Governor's office throughout the summer.

"I fought for SB 543 for two years. I have never felt so personally connected to a law. This bill is for me, for my friends, for every young person who called 911 at the last minute like I did," said 16-year-old GSA President Giuliana "G" PeBenito, a junior at Westlake High School in Ventura County. "I wish this had passed when I was in middle school. It would have saved me so much pain and heart ache."

SB 543 was introduced by Senator Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) and is co-sponsored by GSA Network, Equality California, the National Association of Social Workers California Chapter and Mental Health America of Northern California.

"We are incredibly grateful to Governor Schwarzenegger for signing this bill, which will help young people get the care they need before there is a crisis, and as a result, will help save many lives," said Geoff Kors, executive director of Equality California. "Just this week, four young people took their lives after experiencing anti-gay bullying and anti-gay bias. We must act now to provide youth, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, strong support systems, and this bill does just that. As a society, we can no longer tolerate young people living in terror because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity."

"I am pleased the governor signed this important legislation, which ensures all youth have better access to critical mental health services," said Senator Leno. "Recently, four young people in our nation, including one in California, have taken their lives due to bullying because they were either perceived to be or identified as gay. We simply must do more to support and protect our young people in order to prevent tragedies like these from happening in the future, and SB 543 is a step in that direction."

GSA Network empowers youth to fight homophobia and transphobia in school by training youth activists and supporting student-led Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in California and throughout the country. Since GSA Network began in 1998, the number of GSA clubs in California has skyrocketed from 40 to over 800.

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