

Transitioning in Oregon: Changing Documentation and Obtaining Hormones

by Reid Vanderburgh, LMFT

For people who choose to transition physically via hormones and/or surgery, there are certain steps most take in order to live their lives in ways that make sense to them. Here is an outline of the general process many of my clients undertake. Some vary the order of the steps, depending on their individual circumstances; some undertake some steps and not others. The details of these steps differ from state to state. The processes I've outlined apply to Oregon.

1. Beginning hormones: Requires a referral letter from a therapist such as myself. The client takes that letter to the doctor of their choice, who will then write them a prescription for hormones, as long as there is no medical reason why this would be inadvisable. (Note: Doctors will often start with lower doses of hormones, gradually increasing the dosage as the body adjusts) Not all doctors have experience with transition processes, and may not feel comfortable working with someone through transition. I have business cards in my office for a number of doctors in the Portland area with experience helping people transition physically.

Some doctors will write a prescription without a therapist's referral letter if the person has been obtaining hormones via the internet, or from friends, and hasn't had their hormones medically monitored. However, these doctors will also advise seeing a knowledgeable therapist, as transition is an overwhelming process and such support can be beneficial.

I don't require clients to see me a specific number of sessions prior to writing a hormone referral letter. Some people feel ready for hormones before they ever call me; others call me because they need help clarifying their options and goals. Some know hormones are their next eventual step, but they don't feel ready to take that step yet. There is too much individual variation in process for a one-size-fits all approach.

2. Name change: It is not difficult to change your name in Oregon, though there are a few steps to the process. There is no right or wrong time to undertake this step; I encourage my clients to begin this process when it feels right. They may still feel awkward with their new name, and self-conscious asking old friends and family members to use it, but have reached a point where these feelings have become more bearable than how it feels to be called by their old name. There is no therapist's letter or other external documentation of your transition required to undertake this step. The process of name change in Oregon is:

(a) Go to the local county courthouse and fill out the name change paperwork. At this time, you will be required to pay whatever fees your county charges (around \$100). If you live near Portland, contact Outside In to see if the Identity Project can pay for your name change, should you need financial assistance: <http://www.resourcespdx.org/id/index.htm> Outside In applies for grants to fund the Identity Project, which is designed to help trans people obtain legal name changes and gender changes on their driver's license or state ID card. (If you don't need financial assistance, you might consider making a donation to the Identity Project, to help someone else obtain this crucial change);

(b) Once you have filled out the name change paperwork and paid the fee, your name change is posted for a few weeks. The state doesn't care why you're changing your name, as long as your reason isn't illegal (e.g. avoiding a warrant). All name change applications are posted long enough for officials to check that there is no legal reason to bar the name change, usually a few weeks. Transition is perfectly legal, so this is not a reason to bar anyone from changing their name (though there are names that aren't permissible, such as swear words);

(c) You can schedule your name change court date at the time you turn in your paperwork. This process involves coming to court on the assigned date and standing before a judge, stating that you do indeed want to change your name. Again, because transition is legal, the judge isn't going to bar your name change just because you're trans. This is a scary step for many people, but it's a formality for the judge.

3. *The first place to change your name should be through social security.* Your social security number appears in many places, and there are a number of agencies that won't change your name unless you show that you've already changed it through the Social Security Administration (SSA). In addition, you have to undertake this step prior to applying for student loans. From the SSA website, you can print out a form requesting a replacement social security card: <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10513.html> Mail this form, with a copy of your name change certificate from the state of Oregon, to the social security office nearest you. Don't mail a photocopy of your name change certificate, but one of the official copies with the notarized seal on it. About a week later, you should receive notification in the mail that the changes you've requested are in process. Your state of Oregon name change certificate will come back to you with this letter. About a week after that, you will receive your new social security card in the mail.

4. *Gender change on driver's license or state ID card:* This change requires a letter from a therapist such as myself. (Note: This is a different letter from your hormone letter – your hormone letter is worded differently and isn't sufficient for this purpose.) The DMV letter can be written by any therapist licensed in Oregon, but they do need to go through a process of getting on the DMV's list of "approved" therapists. This entails contacting the DMV and writing a letter saying the therapist abides by the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care in their work with trans clients. The DMV does not check up on this, though they do check to make sure the therapist is indeed licensed in Oregon. Most people wait to change the gender on their driver's license or ID card until after they have legally changed their name. They then take a copy of their name change certificate, with the therapist's letter, and their new social security card, to the DMV and do both steps at once. You will also need to bring your birth certificate, or passport, to prove citizenship. You don't have to have a new social security card before going to the DMV, but you do have to bring your social security card with you to the DMV, regardless of what name is on it. It doesn't matter that the name on these documents won't match your new name; your name change certificate from the state provides the paper trail linking your old name with your new one.

5. *If you are working with a therapist who is not yet licensed,* but who is receiving clinical supervision and working toward licensure, the DMV may accept your therapist's letter under the following conditions: (a) Their supervisor also signs the gender-change letter, and (b) The supervisor is already on the DMV's list of "approved" therapists. While I was accruing hours toward my own licensure here in Oregon, it was on this basis that the DMV accepted my gender-change letters.

6. Other documentation changes:

(a) Social security: At this time, proof of surgery is required to change gender through social security, or through any other federal agency. Your gender designation does not appear on your social security card, so some people don't realize there is a gender designation attached to their social security number. Surgeons provide "proof of surgery" letters at no extra charge. Many transmen have obtained a gender change at the federal level through having chest reconstruction surgery, regardless of their lower surgery status. Most surgeons who perform trans surgeries are savvy enough to word their letters in such a way that the type of surgery performed is not listed, usually saying something like, "This person has had irreversible sex reassignment surgery." Chest surgery is certainly irreversible, and if undertaken in the name of gender, does qualify as sex reassignment surgery;

(b) Passports: The requirements for changing gender on a passport are similar to the social security requirements, as passports are also issued at the federal level, not through the state in which you live. When you fill out the application, check the appropriate gender on the application ("M" if you are a transman, "F" if you are a transwoman). You will have to include your birth certificate with the passport application, to prove citizenship. If your birth certificate is still in your birth sex, include copies of all documentation of your transition with the application – hormone letter, name change certificate, and your proof-of-surgery letter. This is sufficient to receive a passport in your correct gender, with the correct name on it, despite what your birth certificate says.

The state department issues temporary passports, in the correct gender, for those trans people going overseas for sex reassignment surgery. For instance, a transwoman going to Thailand for lower surgery is still male (legally) when she leaves the U.S. for surgery, but will be legally female on her return, because she will have had lower surgery. Thus, she can travel to Thailand on a temporary female passport, and obtain a permanent female passport upon her return to the U.S. or at the U.S. embassy in Thailand. The temporary passport is good for one year. (Regular passports are good for ten years)

(c) Transcripts, resums, etc.: Those who transition later in life have some decision-making to do - do they contact former employers and people they use as references on their resumé, asking that their new name and gender role be respected, or do they drop all old references from the documents? Some of my clients have developed a form letter that they mail out to references and former employers, with a checklist and stamped self-addressed envelope. The checklist includes the options (1) Yes, I will refer to you by your new name and pronoun if a potential employer contacts me; (2) No, I can't support this change. My clients hope that the stamped self-addressed envelope will make the process simple enough, the recipient will take the time to drop the checklist in the mail. If they receive no reply from an individual, they generally drop the person from their resumé, to be on the safe side. If they had a personal relationship with the person in question, many prefer to make such a request by telephone rather than coming across as being too formal.

Many (but not all) colleges will issue new diplomas (for a fee), using the new name. Likewise, many (but not all) will respond to a legal name change by changing names on transcripts, though they may or may not change the gender;

(d) Once your name change is legal, the tedious process begins of making the rounds to banks, credit card companies, mortgage companies, etc. to change your name. Your old name is no longer yours once you've undertaken the legal process to change it, so this step should be carried out as quickly as possible once the change is legal. It usually takes a few months before all systems have incorporated the change.

Tips:

- It helps to make a checklist in advance of all the places you need to change your name, as it makes the process less overwhelming when the time comes;
- There is no right time to change one's driver's license or state ID card. Much depends on the circumstances under which you use it for identification. Most people go through a "gender limbo-land" period in which they are confusing people re their gender. During this time, some people may think you're using fake ID if it says "male" while others would see it as fake ID if it said "female." The time to make this change is when *you* are ready for it to say "male" or "female," rather than what it says originally;
- Several of my clients have had clerks at the DMV tell them, "You can't change the gender on your driver's license until you've had surgery." This is incorrect. As long as you have a letter from a therapist on the Oregon DMV's "approved" list, they can't legally deny you this change. Stand your ground if you receive this response; all DMV offices have a procedures manual, to guide clerks through processes they may not have encountered before. The procedure for gender change is in this manual, as is the list of "approved" therapists. The clerk may not approve personally of your transition, but they can't legally deny you this step as long as you have your gender change letter from a therapist on their "approved" list. (Note: As I said earlier, this is a different letter from your hormone letter.)