

I want to thank the Committee for hearing our testimony today—Chair Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde, and the entire Government Accountability and Oversight Committee.

My name is Alana Jochum, and I am the executive director of Equality Ohio, our statewide LGBTQ education and advocacy organization. I have little to add that has not already been shared here today by the powerful speakers who have come before and will follow after me.

What I do hope to give voice to are those who are *not* here today—and why they cannot be here.

Indeed, *many* are not here who have much to tell because they cannot be their full selves in society.

In my role with Equality Ohio, I'm all over the state. I speak, I sit in meetings, I work on policy with local advocates—we do all the things you'd expect from an organization that seeks to make things a little better for LGBTQ people in Ohio.

And after every meeting, every panel presentation, every gathering, I always hang out near the exit for a while.

I've learned to do this because once most people make their way out, there's always a person or two waiting—without fail—who want to confide that they resonated with what we just presented. That they, too, have experienced being othered simply because they are LGBTQ, and for most, that they hide out of fear of it happening again.

I'm talking about the people who use their initials on their return envelopes in order to disguise that they are in a same-gender relationship from their post office delivery person and third parties to whom they send mail;

The person who tells me that the interview for the job went great until he let the pronoun of his spouse slip in conversation;

The couple for whom apartments are suddenly not available once the agent suspects they are more than roommates;

That person turned away from the convenience store when the clerk believes they are transgender, because “we don't serve your kind;”

The couple who had horrible explicatives spray painted across their garage door and fence outside their house in their quiet town.

Because we work to prevent discrimination, people often call us for help when these things happen. Because 19 cities in Ohio have adopted local protections, sometimes we have good news to share for folks experiencing this kind of harassment. But most of

the time, we don't. Those 19 cities only cover about 20% of Ohioans—meaning, 80% of LGBTQ Ohioans just have to deal with legalized discrimination.

And it's not fair. It's not fair for the kid from Lima who doesn't want to leave his friends and family just because he thinks he has to move to the "big city" to live his life and be accepted. It doesn't match our values—Ohio is a state with vibrant rural communities, thriving metros, and active suburbs and exurbs.

It's not good for Ohio's economy and our future, which is why Ohio Business Competes—a nonpartisan coalition of businesses that support our legislature acting to protect LGBTQ people in housing, employment, and public accommodations—has formed. Just take a *look* at the many household names that are part of this group, many of whom you've heard from today or in the days leading up to this hearing.

I believe there are elements of this bill that we can all agree on.

Faith. We all ought to be free to practice our faith how we see fit. This bill protects religious freedom—both as an expressly protected category and through the same religious exemptions that have been applied for decades across all protected categories.

The golden rule. We should treat people how we believe we should be treated. This bill says you can't treat someone differently just because of who they are or whom they love.

Personal responsibility. This bill says that you should be judged by the quality of your work—nothing more.

What you are doing here is deeply important, and you are in good company in considering HB-160. Twenty-two (22) states have a version of the law being proposed here in place already. The states closest to Ohio are Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois.

Other states are currently considering it, with New Hampshire as the most likely to modernize its nondiscrimination codes this year, in part because the New Hampshire's Governor created a task force to investigate methods to prevent discrimination, including against LGBTQ people. I'll note that, although this need not be a partisan issue, both chambers of the New Hampshire legislature are majority Republican, and New Hampshire's governor is also Republican.

Ohio can catch up to the 20 some states that have done this already. I believe this will add weight to our claim that we are "open for business," because we will also be saying we are open to all *talent*.

When businesses and organizations are looking for the best of the best, they aren't posting jobs on Craigslist. They are performing national searches—and top candidates

will be judging whether to relocate to Ohio based on Google searches like “lgbt rights ohio.” We don’t want to lose people to other states in the midwest for what could be a simple fix.

It comes down to this: *everyone*, no matter where they live, should feel safe and that they can provide for their family if they work hard. That’s the essence of all of this, the common chord among the diverse voices I seek to bring into this room because they cannot otherwise be here—out in public about who they are—absent the very protections we seek today.

Thank you for listening to the chorus of voices here today urging you to pass HB 160. Thank you for also listening to the great number of voices who are *not* here today, which collectively speaks volumes.