

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, ranking minority member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, my name is Giovanni Santiago and I represent META Center Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to motivating, inspiring and empowering transgender youth to be their authentic selves. I am also a disabled U.S. military veteran. I am sharing my testimony in support of legislation, HB 160.

I have lived in the state of Ohio for the majority of my life but I was born in California. I spent only a few short weeks in California before moving back to Ohio with my mother but 20+ years later, my birthplace had a major impact on my life. The year was 2013 and I was working as a teacher. I decided that I was going to begin the process of transitioning from female to male. My employer supported me through my transition by transferring me to a different school and giving time me off to have surgery. While some companies have provisions for supporting transgender employees, it is still legal to discriminate against transgender Ohioans like myself.

In this process, I encountered a privilege that no born Ohioan is lucky to have. As a person with a California birth certificate, I was able to change my complete birth certificate including my name and gender with ease – a task that remains illegal for my fellow Ohioans. No one looks at me and says “ma’am” and yet, if I wasn’t born in California, I might still be fighting a legal battle to have my birth certificate reflect my male gender and my correct name.

If I didn’t have a job, obtaining one without a birth certificate, driver’s license and social security card that matches my gender would be an even greater challenge. And this is just one of the challenges that transgender Ohioans face during what can already be a very taxing time as they advocate for fair treatment in healthcare and seek understanding from family.

As the founder of META Center Inc., I assist transgender youth and their families in not only understanding some of the current legal limitations but also the lack of protections that exist to keep these children safe. HB 160 isn’t about changing the lives of non-LGBTQ Ohioans; in fact, their lives will remain the same. They will still have the right to marry, work in the community and live as they always have. HB 160 isn’t about taking anyone’s freedom away – it’s about leveling the playing field so everyone has the right to live the life they want. Transgender folks are already attending schools, working in offices and using public restrooms, HB 160 just makes it safer for them to do so.

When people feel more comfortable and safe, they are more likely to engage positively in the community. When people see laws directly impact their ability to live and work safely, it’s disheartening at best and potentially violent at worst. HB 160 gives LGBTQ Ohioans the protections that everyone else in the community is granted without question thus increasing the state’s economic viability. This law has the potential to not only impact individuals’ livelihood and keep wealth within the state but it also helps leverage the state as a place where major companies can put roots down and know their employees will be protected under the law. I know that I want to live in a state where someone’s right to live as their authentic self isn’t left up to luck, it’s a right granted to everyone. As a member of the military, I served my country to fight for the rights of *all* Americans, not just some. I believe that’s what this country stands for.

Transitioning is a rewarding process for transgender individuals but it comes with enough challenges on its own. Asking the state to enact laws that provide basic human rights should not be one of those challenges.