

Good morning. My name is Julia Applegate and I am the Director of the Equitas Health Institute for LGBTQ Health Equity. I want to thank Chair Blessing III, Vice-Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde, and the fellow members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee for the opportunity to share our support for House Bill 160, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Equitas Health is a nonprofit, community-based health care organization serving more than 60,000 individuals across Ohio through a diverse set of services, including primary and specialized medical care, behavioral health, dental care, HIV/STI prevention, advocacy, and case management. We also operate pharmacies in Columbus and Dayton. Our mission is to be the gateway to good health for those at risk of or affected by HIV/AIDS, for the LGBTQ community, and for those seeking a welcoming healthcare home. The Institute for LGBTQ Health Equity is the education, research, and community engagement arm of Equitas Health, focusing on reducing health disparities in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (“LGBTQ”) community. We do this by developing and delivering exceptional LGBTQ culturally competent healthcare education and training, engaging with LGBTQ and HIV-positive patients, working with community based organizations, and supporting LGBTQ health research efforts in our region.

Equitas Health supports House Bill 160 because adding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to Ohio’s list of protected classes would give LGBTQ Ohioans the civil rights protections they deserve as citizens of Ohio.

The protections afforded to the LGBTQ community by HB 160 are supported by a majority of Ohio voters and over 200 Ohio businesses. Polls have shown that nearly 70% of Ohio voters, including majorities in both political parties and every major religious group, support workplace nondiscrimination laws for LGBTQ people. In fact, a vast majority of Ohio voters, around 80%, already believe that it is illegal under Ohio law and federal law to fire or refuse to hire someone based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, because LGBTQ people do not in fact have this protection, they are subject to job insecurity and discrimination in housing and public accommodations every day. It should be clear based on these statistics that adding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as protected classes is not controversial and most Ohioans assume the protections already exist.

In addition to the more highly publicized workplace discrimination protections included in HB 160, the Ohio Fairness Act also protects LGBTQ people from discrimination by health insuring corporations, community addiction and mental health services, and nursing home care once admitted. It is an unfortunate truth that LGBTQ people suffer from higher rates of illnesses like cancer, depression, and substance abuse. These health issues are often the result of a lack of culturally competent providers, the denial of civil and human rights (such as those HB 160 seeks to address), and discrimination and shaming when accessing health care. HB 160 takes the first step towards addressing the health disparities facing LGBTQ people by ensuring that they will be able to receive health insurance from all health insuring corporations and that they will be able to receive community behavioral health services that could help them improve the quality of their lives.

The Ohio Fairness Act makes sense for Ohio; economically the Act will allow businesses already supportive of LGBTQ rights to continue to operate in our state, the Act gives job and home security to Ohio’s LGBTQ population that most Ohioans already support, and the Act allows LGBTQ

people the security to seek out community health services and health insurance without the burden of discrimination. Some argue that the legal protections offered by HB 160 are unnecessary because Ohio is already a tolerant state. However, though there are not constant news stories about LGBTQ discrimination and we are optimistic that Ohio is becoming a more a tolerant state, we also know that this discrimination, and the resulting health disparity, is a reality and Ohio's LGBTQ citizens need legal protection. Equitas Health implores you to give the LGBTQ community the civil rights that they deserve as fellow citizens of Ohio. Thank you for your consideration.

4830-2115-9511, v. 1