

Equality Ohio House Bill 160 Testimony

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, ranking minority member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, I am Jerry R Rhodes, President of BBI Accounting, located here in Columbus, Ohio.

I am grateful for the opportunity today to speak in support of HB 160, specifically from my perspective as a small business owner operating in Ohio.

To give you a glimpse into my life, I was born and raised in suburban Akron, Ohio until the age of 18. I spent the summer of my Junior/Senior year as an exchange student in Germany. I spent the summers of 1994 and 1995 with my mother in South Carolina, and maintain strong bonds with friends there to this day. I came to Columbus in 1994 to attend Ohio State University on a full scholarship, and I have remained in this beautiful town ever since. Most of my family still reside in Northeast Ohio.

As a college graduate in the late 1990's, I found myself facing the uncertainty of whether or not to come out to my coworkers and employers as a gay person. Hiding this aspect of one's life is difficult, and it becomes nearly impossible after a certain amount of time, as you find you can no longer make up stories about how you spent your evenings, your weekends and your holidays. Coming out becomes a matter of personal integrity.

Fortunately, I found myself in good work environments with supportive employers from the beginning of my career. I became a diversity and inclusion facilitator for my first employer as something additional to my work as an accounting analyst. The job required me to come out, over and over again, to small groups of employees across the corporation, both in Ohio and elsewhere. It got to be pretty easy and routine, and I learned to be proud of myself and honest with others.

My second major career change happened when I began a 5 year stint as an employee of the Ohio Department of Administrative Services, which you all know as DAS. As I began working at DAS, employees of the state were protected from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Only a few months in to my tenure, Governor Bob Taft deleted the words "sexual orientation" from the state government policy banning employment bias. I suddenly found myself vulnerable for being out in the workplace. It was an uncomfortable, scary time for those of us affected. We weren't sure if we were safe in the workplace any longer.

Today, I am no longer anyone's employee, but am an employer in a seasonal business. I can protect people who work for me at their job, but I can't protect them in their community, in housing or other accommodations.

I require employees to not feel the need to compromise their integrity by lying about or concealing who they are, either with their coworkers or me, their employer. They need to interact with our clients, free from fear of discrimination. Likewise, it is my deeply held, religious belief that all people should be treated with respect and dignity, and my business is open to Everyone. This is an issue that affects ALL employers and ALL Ohioans. Given that over 80 of the state's top 98 employers already have nondiscrimination polices that include sexual orientation, it's clear that adopting this measure at a statewide level is nothing but good for business. Ohio needs to compete and retain talent. Ohio doesn't need to send its creative class to more progressive states. Ohio needs to do the right thing, and adopt House Bill 160.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the committee for their time and consideration, and am willing to answer any questions at this time.