

Jim:

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, I am Rev. Jim Cunningham, my husband and I live in Brunswick, Ohio. We are here in support of HB 160. Born in Ohio, I have resided in Ohio most of my life. I am a semi-retired pastor/chaplain in the United Church of Christ and I am proud to introduce my husband of twenty-three years, Charlie Cunningham, who has always lived in Ohio and who realized he's a transgender man 4 ½ years ago.

Charlie:

Hi. I am Charlie Cunningham. I am a church organist, a music student, a minister's spouse, a parent and grandparent. I was born with a female body and a male brain. I lived 51 years of my life as the gender I was assigned at birth, female. All these years, I suffered from a grueling, pharmacologically-resistant depression and shame. My realization that I am indeed a male almost 5 years ago was the turning point of my life. The depression lifted immediately. My life had finally begun!

However, being transgender in a transphobic society has created problems for me, as it does for most transgender people. I have faced intimidating behavior. Because of my medical condition, I cannot take male hormones. Thus, many people still see me as female while others are not sure. Although I try to avoid eye contact, I am often met with questioning, judgmental, and humiliating stares and glares. More than once, I have been asked to prove my gender identity.

The Cuyahoga County Probate Court, the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the Social Security Administration, and Medicare all recognize me as male along with my medical providers.

People tell me that I am a brave person for living as the person I truly am. But the fact is that much of the time, I live in fear – fear of cruelty and hate and the absence of many of the legal protections that others often take for granted.

As a citizen of Ohio, I have no legal protection against discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations or protections against intimidation in many parts of this great state.

I am so grateful for the continued love and support of my husband of 23 years who never once flinched when I came to realize my true self.

Jim:

As one who loves his husband very much, I am very anxious when he is out in public, especially when he is by himself. We, along with other members of the LGBTQ community, need you to send a clear message that discrimination and intimidation will not be tolerated in Ohio.

We are grateful for the support we have received from our local church, my many clergy colleagues in the United Church of Christ, and other denominations.

We have loved growing up, being educated, and working in Ohio. For most of these years, we were among the privileged class... white, middle class, heterosexual. Now that Charlie is transgender and we are perceived as homosexual, we live a more anxious life. We have been blessed throughout our lives by the love and gifts of the members of the LGBTQ community. But now, being a member of that community, we experience a much different level of economic challenge, physical and mental risk, pain and suffering that prejudice and discrimination brings to our community.

We respectfully request you, our State Representatives, to take a stand for respect and human rights and protect us. This bill is not just good for LGBTQ Ohioans. It is good for all our citizens and good for our state. HB 160 will inform everyone that Ohio is a welcoming, safe and inclusive state.

Thank you for listening to our story. We are willing to answer any questions you may have.

Charlie B. Cunningham
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