

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee:

My name is Joshua Culbertson. I've lived in Ohio all my life. There is a reason that today I live in Columbus, Ohio. Having been born and having lived most of my life in Zanesville, in rural Muskingum County, in southeast Ohio, I knew from a very young age that I was gay. That knowledge, in the cultural context of my surroundings, was terrifying to me as a young person. This led me to suppress who I was and to seek to change this aspect of myself through faith and prayer.

Finally, at the age of 33, I began to accept my full identity as both a gay man and a person of faith, but being employed by a small business owned by members of my former church, persons who made no secret of their view of homosexuality as an abomination, I knew that I could be fired at any time because of my sexuality. While I was not fired, my work environment became a hostile and unsafe place for me.

The owner of the business would regularly pull me into his office and speak to me about his biblical understanding of love and marriage, and he would tell me that no relationship that I ever shared with another man could meet this understanding. Fortunately, I was able to secure employment in Columbus, a long-time haven for many LGBTQ+ Ohioans. In recent years, more and more cities in our state have begun to enact non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ persons. This is a positive step forward, but these laws, limited to the borders of the municipalities that have voted them into law, leave the majority of our state open to the threat of legal discrimination.

No Ohioan should have to go to work every day fearing that they will be fired simply for being who they are. No Ohioan should have to feel that they need to tolerate blatant harassment or a hostile work environment because they fear that an aspect of their intrinsic identity will be used to put an even bigger target on them if they dare to stand up for themselves. Ohio needs to be a place where strong job performance is rewarded no matter who you are or who you go home to. Ohio needs to be a place where employers can attract and retain the best employees regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.

Please take action to bring House Bill 160 forward for a full vote. Vote to pass this legislation, which is vital to making sure that all in our state are protected from discrimination. Ohio needs to be a state where all persons have the opportunity to have their employment, housing, and public accommodations protected.

Thank you for listening. I hope that you will give HB160 the attention that it and those it protects deserve.