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

My name is Kris Keniray and I am writing in support of House Bill 160.

I work for the Housing Research & Advocacy Center in Cleveland, Ohio, a nonprofit fair housing organization. As an out, queer-identified person, I have experienced discrimination in the workplace. I know how personal a violation such an experience is and how painful it is that this discrimination remains legal. In my current role, I work with folks in Northeast Ohio who have experienced housing discrimination because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and see the impact it has on their lives and choices.

Because discrimination based upon sexual orientation and gender identity, which I will refer to as "LGBTQ discrimination" going forward, are not expressly prohibited by our federal or state fair housing laws, some communities, though relatively few throughout the state, have included such protections in local fair housing laws where they exist; however, even in the communities with local ordinances prohibiting LGBTQ housing discrimination, there is often very limited enforcement. This can result from limited staffing or resources to investigate complaints, limited training on fair housing law, limitations in the ordinance, judicial discretion, or a host of other reasons. The Housing Research & Advocacy Center has filed complaints in the past with cities prohibiting LGBTQ housing discrimination and gotten no reply, ever. Imagine being lucky enough to find out that the city where you experienced LGBTQ discrimination has a law prohibiting it, only to call and be told they do not know who handles those complaints, or to report discrimination and never hear anything back.

Laws such as these are only effective when there is language in the ordinance providing appropriate enforcement mechanisms and relief for victims, political will to investigate reported violations, and the knowledge, experience and capacity to do so. The Ohio Civil Rights Commission has the necessary experience, knowledge, and infrastructure to effectively investigate and enforce this law, if enacted. The Ohio Fairness Act will go a long way to making Ohio a more just and welcoming place to live, work, and play.

I urge you to consider passing HB160.

Respectfully,

Kris Keniray
Associate Director