

Written Testimony - Lisa McNeeley

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, ranking minority member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, Lisa McNeeley. I am in support of HB 160 and here is my story.

I was born and raised in Cleveland, OH but moved to Philadelphia to attend the University of Pennsylvania in 1999. With over 60,000 residents identifying as LGBTQ, it was easy to feel right at home. Philly is consistently recognized as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly cities in the country and passed local laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodations in the early 1980s. Philly is also where I met my wife, a native Philadelphian who had just graduated from the University of Villanova School of Law.

When it came to deciding where to raise our family and build our careers, Cleveland tugged at my heartstrings. It was important for us to be near my parents and siblings, despite the lack of legal protections that Ohio would afford us. Every life event we've experienced in Ohio has raised subtle reminders that we are not "equal" in the eyes of the law.

In early 2015, our daughter Margaret Grace was born at the Cleveland Clinic. Typical parents worry about sleep routines, feeding schedules and diaper rashes. Instead, I worried about all those things plus the fact that I was a "legal stranger" to the child my wife had just given birth to. Could our daughter inherit from me? Could she inherit from my parents? Could she collect my future social security benefits? Could I make medical decisions on her behalf? The answer to all of these questions is: no. As a result, our family has spent countless hours and hundreds of dollars working with an attorney to help us try to protect our family in the same way heterosexual families are under the law. Ohio law continues to discriminate against our family simply because laws were written in gender-specific terms where families are comprised of one mother and one father.

Shortly after our daughter was born we began house hunting for our first family home. We wanted a larger house closer to my parents and it didn't take long to fall in love with a house in Bay Village. Our hearts sunk when our realtor informed us that they expected to get multiple offers alongside ours. This meant we'd be competing against heterosexual families in a relatively conservative Catholic community. Neither of us could afford to finance the house on our own and there was no way to hide the fact that we were both women in the offer prepared by our real estate agent. We had no choice but to put in an offer and hope for the best. The joy of buying our first home together was overcast by the fear that we could legally be discriminated against under Ohio law. No Ohioan deserves to be discriminated against or denied housing because of their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.

Like everyone else, we count on our jobs to provide financial stability for our family. I work as a manager in sales operations for Hyland Software. My wife works as IT General Counsel advising county government on ways to use technology to enhance the lives and services provided to the 1.25 million residents. To be clear, our jobs are about more than a paycheck - our jobs are the building blocks of our careers, helping define who we are and allowing us to have an impact on our community. These jobs provide our families with healthcare, pensions, retirement accounts, life insurance, onsite daycare, and a multitude of other benefits. Jobs are where we learn, develop and grow our skills to lead. Jobs help us build financial stability so that we can purchase homes in the community, invest in our neighborhoods and pay taxes. All Ohioans can't bring their "whole self" to work knowing their personal life can ruin what they've worked so hard to achieve. They can't focus on giving their best efforts when the law says they aren't as worthy as their heterosexual counterparts. No hard working Ohioan should be discriminated against because of their sexual identity or gender identity or expression. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to work, be judged on the merit of that work, and provide for their families.

When the Ohio legislature again debates and considers HB160, our hope is that they will consider the families living all throughout the state that have been labeled as deserving "less than" the protections afforded to heterosexuals. The protections this bill seeks to provide to the LGBT community are far reaching and will help ensure individuals, couples and families are treated equally regardless of their sexual orientation. We aren't asking that you consider this because it is the right thing for the LGBTQ community, it is the right thing for all of us. Our laws reflect who we are as a community and when we protect some but not all, we discriminate. It would be easy for us to simply move back to Pennsylvania where our family is afforded greater protection, but that would do a disservice to all of the other families around us. Ohio is our home and we will continue to fight to make it a better place to live, work and raise our family. And when we welcome our second child this summer, we hope that the state will see him/her the same way we do - equal and deserving of all the protections afforded to the rest of the children in the State.