

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, ranking minority member Clyde and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee,

My name is Melanie Falls. I have lived in Ohio for 64 of my 67 years. I was raised by a school teacher mom and a stepfather who worked for J&L Steel for 40 years. My father was a career Marine who served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. I was married for 15 years and had four children, two boys and two girls. After an agonizing soul-searching process, I came to realize at 34 years old that I was a lesbian. I made the decision to be true to myself and honest with my husband and children and left the marriage. My children and I moved to Kent, Ohio so I could finish my degree. I then went on to Case Western Reserve University to get my Masters in Social Science Administration. With that degree, I went on to own a private practice, work in community mental health systems in three different counties, and serve as the Executive Director of a community mental health agency in Cleveland, Ohio known as Applewood Centers. That agency served 6,000 abused and neglected children every year in Cuyahoga and surrounding counties. I retired from Applewood Centers in 2015 and have since worked in a private practice providing counseling for traumatized adults and people trying to recover from alcohol and drug addictions.

I have been with my wife for 22 years. She has also dedicated her life to a career in medicine. She has served as a dedicated, compassionate physical therapist for over thirty-five years. As a stepmother, she has provided love and support for all of our children. Their father passed away in 1999 and was happy to know that she was in their lives. She considers them her own. Together, we have gone through the challenges of adolescence, walked our daughters down the aisle, sat in the hospital waiting rooms waiting for our grandchildren to be born. We have sat with our children when their children were sick. We have absorbed the news of our grandson's autism and seizure disorder and taken him to appointments when his school teacher parents had to be with their students.

My children provide me pride and bragging rights. All four of them have advanced degrees. My two sons are teachers who dedicate their lives to students in public education. My daughters both worked for the Cleveland Clinic, our state's internationally recognized health institution. All of my children are married. They and their spouses have contributed to Ohio through paying taxes, buying homes and raising their own children here. I have eight grandchildren ranging in age from 13 yr. to 18 mo. One of my precious grandchildren is autistic and our family knows the pain and the joy of loving and caring for a special needs child. We have done all of the things expected of good citizens and moral people. We are, by anyone's definition, good citizens.

Although I don't miss an opportunity to brag about our family, that is not why I am here today. I am here because with all that we do and have done, my wife and I are not considered full citizens. We can be fired from our jobs and, in fact, my wife has been fired from a job, simply because we are gay. We can be prevented from renting a place simply because we are gay. We can be legally treated as second citizens because we love each other. All of the tax money we have paid, all of the ballots we have cast, all of the good we have done as citizens of Ohio are irrelevant should someone decide to discriminate against us. My wife and I have considered moving to another, more friendly state. But Ohio is our home and where our children are. This is why I support HB 160.

I thank the committee for hearing my testimony and I am happy to answer any questions.