

Chair Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and the members of the House Governmental Accountability and Oversight Committee, my name is MJ Eckhouse and I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 160.

Four years, four months and 10 days ago, I got sober from drugs and alcohol. About 15 years before that, I was a trans boy in an Ohio middle school. I was assigned female at birth but I knew I was male since I was 5 years old. I faced discrimination and daily harassment which made me feel inferior and made me look for an escape. Drugs were that escape, but it soon got out of control. When I first wanted to get sober, I considered going to an inpatient treatment program. However, since those facilities are nearly always sex-segregated, I didn't think it would be safe for a trans person like me. And of course, it would be legal for them to simply refuse to let me in.

If my legislators valued my contributions as a LGBTQ person equally to those of my non-LGBTQ peers, I might not have experienced the bullying which pushed me to turn to drugs.

I got sober anyway and I'm grateful every day for that. But my heart hurts for all the young LGBT people who are told, over and over, perhaps by their families, their classmates, and their government leaders, that they don't deserve equal opportunities. That it's okay for businesses, landlords, and healthcare providers to turn them away because of who they are.

Throughout my life, I've experienced ridicule, hostility, and discrimination because I'm a bisexual, transgender man. As such, I've had to learn how to navigate the antagonistic, sometimes dangerous situations I've encountered in my education, work, and healthcare. One example seems especially relevant to a major problem facing many Ohioans: the opioid epidemic.

After I got sober, I was lucky to find work and I was proud of myself for being able to hold down a job. Eventually, I started a new, better-paying job at a retail store. My coworkers there seemed to suspect that I was LGBT. They made disparaging comments about me and openly speculated about my sexual orientation. They started a running "joke" that I was having sex with our male newspaper courier, who was much older than me. They also pointedly asked me if I went to the gay bar in the nearest city. I felt that I had to stay closeted for fear of further harassment or discrimination. I also avoided using the restroom in my workplace, leading me to limit the amount of water I consumed over the course of my eight-hour shifts. I was dehydrated for much of my shift and frequently went home with headaches. All of this was extremely stressful and eventually drove me to quit.

To this day, discrimination against LGBT people persists. Every day, it's demoralizing to live in a state that considers me less than a full citizen. If we want our state to be successful in attracting the best business talent, ensuring safe and productive workplaces, and growing our economy, we need to clearly and thoroughly renounce discrimination. I implore you to vote yes on House Bill 160.

Thank you for your time and consideration.