

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

My name is Phyllis Harris. I am the executive director of The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center of Greater Cleveland (The LGBT Center). The LGBT Center has served the needs of the LGBT+ community here in Northeastern Ohio since 1975. Our mission is to enrich the lives of our diverse LGBTQ community through advocacy, support, education, and celebration.

I'm writing to give voice to the over 3,000 LGBTQ individuals we serve annually via programs, activities, partnerships, and events. The array of services The LGBT Center provides includes referrals for housing, counseling, and welcoming and affirming church communities, as well as training where family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors can learn how to be inclusive of LGBTQ people. We also offer a safe space where LGBTQ people, young and old, can be without judgement or fear of sanctioned discrimination.

It is unfathomable that in Ohio, it is legal to refuse to hire people, rent them an apartment, or serve them at a local business simply because they are LGBTQ. Including LGBTQ people in Ohio's civil rights laws is the right thing to do to promote fairness, equity, and inclusion across our state. Prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is both humane and just.

As a lesbian single mother of two beautiful children, I have personally felt the burden of navigating a marketplace in which non-discrimination protections don't exist. During the economic downturn of 2008, I suffered significant financial losses that forced me to make the difficult decision to sell my home. This meant that, for the first time in my life, I would have to rent property in order to put a roof over my family's head. Among the many other worries I struggled to contend with, one of my main concerns was the potential housing discrimination I might face while attempting to find a safe place to raise my children. I knew all too well that it was perfectly legal for a lessor to deny my housing application or even prematurely terminate my lease if he or she discovered and took issue with my sexual orientation. This, in turn, would put the wellbeing of my children in jeopardy.

For these reasons, before completing an application for the duplex in which I currently live, I felt compelled to disclose my sexual orientation to my future landlords. I was fortunate in that they did not take issue with or react negatively to my coming out. However, it seems patently unjust that LGBTQ Ohioans should feel forced to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity out of fear of future retribution. This requirement is certainly not extended to heterosexual and cisgender folks. And as an advocate for LGBTQ people in Cleveland, I can say without a doubt that not everyone is

as lucky as me. It is time for Ohio to be a state in which LGBTQ citizens are afforded the basic dignity of fair and reliable housing.

As members of our LGBTQ community visit and take advantage of the services we offer at The LGBT Center, I also hear many stories of workplace discrimination. Among our clients who are most impacted by such discrimination are young transgender folks. These young people, many of whom are incredibly bright, talented, and hardworking, are all too often denied work or terminated for no reason other than their gender identity and expression. Such discriminatory business practices not only place these young people at financial risk, but they also prevent these exceptionally capable individuals from contributing their skills and abilities to the marketplace and to our communities. By hindering the growth and realization of their full potential, our laws are doing a disservice to both these young folks and the communities in which they live and work.

I urge you to pass the Ohio Fairness Act. We need our lawmakers to step up and make the right decision for LGBTQ Ohioans across the state. The patchwork of local protections that currently exist are helpful, but certainly not enough. We need a strong mechanism of enforcement, such as the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, to ensure that instances of discrimination are addressed and resolved in a fair, reliable, and consistent way. We need the Ohio Legislature to make it clear that discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated. It's time to afford all Ohioans – including our LGBTQ brothers and sisters – the opportunity to actualize their full potential.

Thank you for your time and consideration.