

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

Rebecca K Callahan, Executive Director of CANAPI (Community AIDS Network / Akron Pride Initiative)

I am in support of the legislation, HB 160, being considered. I live and work in Akron, Ohio where in March of 2017 Akron leadership passed into law a comprehensive non-discrimination ordinance to include sexual orientation and gender identity. The City of Akron now enforces the rights of equality in employment, housing, and public accommodations for all our residents. It is our hope in Akron that this equality in the law will translate into lived equality.

Research suggests that LGBTQ individuals face health disparities linked to societal stigma, discrimination, and the denial of civil and human rights. In 2018 we now know that various forms of discrimination, stacked up over a lifetime, can cause chronic stress. Chronic stress is very damaging to our physical and emotional health. We embody the societal and ecological conditions in which we grow up and live.

In cities that have not put into place non-discrimination protections, LGBTQ Ohioans will continue to face high rates of discrimination, poverty, and other quality of life factors. LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of suicide, substance misuse, and homelessness. Transgender people, especially transgender women of color, face unacceptable rates of violence and discrimination, from housing to the workplace to the community. If we are to continue, as individual cities and municipalities, to piecemeal equal protections under the law we have a lot of work to do before all of us can live our lives to our full potential, free from discrimination. And our open LGBTQ community members will be relegated to select few municipalities for fear that venturing outside protected cities could cost them their livelihood, happiness, or even their lives. You have the power to change this.

I work for Community AIDS Network Akron Pride Initiative known as CANAPI. The mission of CANAPI is to serve and promote the well-being of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) community and persons at risk and/or affected by HIV through education, support services, quality housing, and advocacy. Working with and for the well-being of LGBTQ individuals has allowed me to see the stark effects of discrimination first hand. A local drop in center for homeless youth reports up to 50% of the youth who seek services identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. CANAPI attempts to house as many of these youths as possible, but the need outweighs the available resources. Repeatedly, the housing barriers reported by our case managers relate not only to financial challenges, but to social determinants of health relating back to a lifetime of stigma, isolation, lack of support, and discrimination. Sometimes all it takes is recognition of an individual's struggles for them to feel valued as a person, and equal to their peers. You have the power to offer this.

The positive effect of living a life free from discrimination (in the workplace, in housing, in public accommodations) can be measured to be the opposite of the effects mentioned previously: mental health concerns, substance misuse, homelessness, and poor health outcomes. I implore you to consider the influence you can have on the health and vitality of all Ohio residents.

This legislation provides an opportunity for Ohio to be a state that cares about and values every resident. A state that allows its residents to embody what is the best part of a society, its humanity. Merriam-Webster defines Humanity as: compassionate, sympathetic, or generous behavior or disposition: the quality or state of being humane. To live in a humane society is to thrive.