

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

Sandy Varndell, OutSupport, Inc. (Medina, Ohio) and Parent

I support Legislation HB 160, being considered.

I thank you for your time today.

My husband Eric, and I, are the proud parents of 2 young adults, Ross, aged 24, and Clara, aged 19. Both are amazing young adults. Both of them are graduates of Medina High School, and Ross graduated in 2016 Magna Cum Laude from Kent State University's Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Clara is a current undergraduate in the School of Public Health. As you can tell, I am very proud of both of them.

However, it pains me to know that one of my children, Ross, does not enjoy the same civil protections that Clara does. You see, Ross is Transgender, and has made his transition during his college years. Ross reported to us that he never felt comfortable in his own skin. His school days were not pleasant, as he faced daily bullying, contemplated suicide, and was alone much of the time. When he came to realize that he is transgender, my husband and I did not understand what that meant at all. We had much to learn. But the most important thing that we learned was that we would rather love, support, and encourage our son, rather than attend our "daughter's" funeral. So we supported him through legal name change, surgery, counseling, and ongoing medical treatment. He is now a successful young adult, having worked after graduating as a floor nurse at MetroHealth in Cleveland, studied for and obtained his EMT and later, Wilderness EMT Certificates, and chose to leave MetroHealth to serve our country with Americorps. He is currently in training to be a team leader in Vinton, Iowa, where he will be given assignments of service wherever there is a need in the United States

When Ross came out to us, there was precious little support for transgender families. A family friend, who happened to be a lesbian, and I decided to attempt forming a support group in Medina where we live. The major cities had support, but those of us in smaller areas like Medina did not. In the 4.5 years of holding monthly support group meetings, we have provided information, understanding, and support for several hundred families like ours, and many adults in transition. Many of these families have teenagers who have, like my own child, contemplated suicide. OutSupport is now recognized as the "go-to" transgender family support group in NEOhio, and has assisted families from 13 northern Ohio counties. I am proud of the service we have been able to provide to families, and hope to continue for many years to come.

One thing that I've heard from virtually every family, every teen, every individual who comes through our doors is that they just want to be treated fairly. They do not want to fear losing their jobs or their homes because a family member is LGBTQ. They do not want to be afraid of going to the hospital or other medical facilities, only to be turned away as a result of discrimination. They want to be able to use the restroom that matches with the gender they live every day. In other words, LGBTQ folks just want to be treated fairly, like their non-LGBTQ family and friends are. Nothing more, nothing less.

I have known of many LGBTQ families, adult children, and even allies who have left, or plan to leave Ohio, and move to states that provide legal protections for themselves and their family and friends. I hope that Ross does move back to Ohio after his service with Americorps is over, but I understand if he chose to live in a non-discriminatory state to feel safer as a transgender man. I know many of the teens that I work with through OutSupport plan to leave Ohio because of this reason. Ohio is otherwise a wonderful state to live in. I encourage you to support this legislation to make it truly a wonderful state for All of her residents.

Again, I thank the committee, and I am willing to answer questions.