

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

My name is Stephen Makovec and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 160.

I am a retired gay man. I was raised on a Wisconsin dairy farm, and I used college achievement to land a professional marketing role with a company in Ohio. For 35 years I hid my sexuality in public and especially in the workplace, to ensure I remained safe and kept my job, and to allow me to advance my career.

As a youth, I heard all the gay slurs. I heard politicians and religious leaders denounce what they called the perversion of homosexuality, long before I realized I was gay. I dated women until I could no longer deny my same-sex attraction.

As a young adult, I knew that if I were denied employment or housing because I was gay, I would have no legal recourse. I knew that I had limited options if I were physically attacked for being gay; gay people who pursued assault charges against their attackers were often 'outed' in revenge. Police officers also harassed or abused gay people with impunity. And 'gay panic' has been used in recent years to acquit attackers who murdered gay people.

The constant prejudice and blatant discrimination against gay people, left a lot of residue. I loathed the gay part of me, and initially disapproved of effeminate behavior adopted by some gay men. I struggled for years to fully accept my sexuality and finally embrace the cause of people who identify with any of the LGBTQI dimensions.

Despite all the negatives, I was fortunate. I have great friendships and I married a man I truly love; last year we celebrated 21 years together. I also enjoyed a rewarding career, largely because I hid my sexuality.

I was employed for nearly 11 years by my final employer. They extended non-discrimination protections for LGBT staff while I worked there, and during my last 5 years there, I quietly 'came out' to the other senior managers, to the teams I managed, and my co-workers. Most supported me when I married my partner of then 16 years, and that was very affirming.

- The next year, while the company hired for dozens of roles, my job was eliminated and re-created in another part of the company, but I was not considered for it. In exchange for severance pay, I agreed to leave the company and forego protest.
- I don't know if my sexuality was a factor in the decision to end my employment.

We see holdovers from centuries of prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQI people. Many religions denounce homosexuality and some states prevent adoption by same-sex couples. We read about unprovoked threats, homophobic slurs, psychological and physical abuse, and hate crimes committed against LGBTQI people. The abuse and life-threatening discrimination should make it clear that LGBTQI individuals need and deserve legal protections, as other minorities in our nation need and deserve them.

Ohio remains one of 28 states where I could celebrate my marriage one day and the next day be fired and evicted, simply because someone objected to my marriage or the fact that I am gay. And I realize that medical staff at any Ohio emergency room can deny me life-saving services if they object to the fact that I am gay.

Civil protections added to our State laws are intended to reflect our values.

- When you force people to suffer injustice without recourse, you show them that you consider them second-class citizens at best, with fewer rights to live, work, and pursue happiness. Your silence and inaction sent that sad message, and I received it – loud and clear!
- But Ohioans [who elected you], strongly support laws that protect all people against discrimination, including LGBTQI Ohioans.
- We also suffer economically because we do not protect LGBTQI Ohioans. Ohio suffers a ‘talent drain’ to other states and regions where the culture is welcoming. Affirming companies also prefer to locate where their values are reflected in state policies. States that welcome and protect LGBTQI citizens see more economic growth than Ohio does. Do we want Ohio to lose more talent, because we’re unwilling to overturn old prejudices?
- I challenge you to acknowledge that this issue touches each of us in a personal way. Thanks to a continued trend of openness, each of us knows a family member or a friend who identifies as LGBTQI. And when discrimination hurts or threatens someone we care about, we care a lot more about extending civil protections to them.

History and psychology reveal the insidious effects that remain after centuries of systemic prejudice and discrimination. The prejudices run very deep, and the hateful messages remain strongly engrained. Tragically, too many people still act on those old prejudices, in some cases quite violently. Today, transgender people suffer the greatest discrimination.

Now is the time for Ohio to add civil protections for LGBTQI people. And frankly we should protect the civil rights of all Ohioans, regardless of skin color, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, or nation of origin.

- I include a vivid reminder from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Rev. King wrote that 55 years ago to challenge all Americans to fight for their civil rights and justice.
- In a later speech, Rev. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, urged everyone who believed in her husband’s dream, to “make room at the table of brother and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people.”
- That call is one of the reasons I continue to work for racial justice, and why I advocate for equal civil rights for people who are LGBTQI.

It’s time that we heed the call.

- I urge you to pass House Bill 160.
- I thank you, and I hope you will carefully consider my comments.