

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, my name is Susan Russell, I'm a native Ohioan, and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 160.

Since 2004, I have served many communities across Ohio in a number of psychiatric hospitals, private residential facilities, and through community mental health services. Prior to being licensed, I volunteered with domestic violence agencies, soup kitchens, and hospice care centers. In my opinion, equal protection under the law should include all Ohioans.

While working in a psychiatric hospital, one of my transgender patients reported being sexually assaulted by another patient. Following procedure, I reported the incident to the charge nurse on the unit. She responded that she didn't believe the assault had occurred and advised against reporting it to the hospital police. I then relayed the incident to my supervisor, who confirmed that my intent to call the campus police was the correct procedure. After making the call, hospital police investigated.

Our patient was ultimately discharged and committed suicide within 24 hours. At the time, I had been off on leave, but I learned during a follow-up meeting that she had written a suicide note 24-36 hours prior to discharge. I don't know how her treatment may have impacted her decision, but I assume she was aware of being treated differently due to her status.

This experience motivated me to learn as much as possible about transgender issues and to become a better ally. As a social worker, it is a shame to report how little we learned about these issues in our social work education and training. Even today, there are not many continuing education programs that cover this topic.

Passage of HB160 will help cultivate an inclusive and safe environment for all people in Ohio. In particular, transgender Ohioans, who are among the most marginalized in our society, ought to be afforded the same legal protections as everyone else. We should not turn a blind eye to our most vulnerable neighbors.

I urge you to pass House Bill 160.