

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, my name is Wriply Bennet and I am testifying in support of House Bill 160.

I was raised and have lived most of my life here in Ohio. And as a transgender woman, I have experienced multiple instances of explicit workplace discrimination. I've chosen to share these experiences with you in the hopes that my story will demonstrate the crucial need for statewide LGBTQ non-discrimination protections here in Ohio.

About five years ago, I started working in a local grocery store as a clerk, greeting and assisting customers, stocking shelves, and processing transactions. Soon after my first couple of shifts, I began receiving negative comments from my coworkers and managers regarding my gender expression. At the time, I often wore wigs and stereotypically feminine clothing to work, which matched my female gender identity. On several occasions, I was reprimanded by my supervisors for the ways that I dressed. In particular, my bosses would use a selective enforcement of the store's dress code policy to justify their objections to my gender presentation. I was instructed to "tone down" my makeup and attire and to "dress more appropriate." Ultimately, management encouraged me to quit, explaining that the market was a "family establishment" and that parents shouldn't feel compelled to explain my existence to their children. Soon after leaving, I called the store's corporate headquarters to ask about their policies that might restrict gender expression. I was told that no such policies existed. My supervisors had made them up to justify their discrimination.

A year or so later, I worked for a local fast food restaurant. Although the management at my workplace claimed to be open to my gender identity, I was often reprimanded or even sent home early for no reason other than my appearance. When customers would react poorly or complain about my gender expression, my supervisors responded by sending me home early. Over time, as this continued, I lost a significant number of hours and, ultimately, had to find work elsewhere.

Most recently, just last summer, I worked as a home health aide for a local healthcare organization. For the most part, I enjoyed my work there. However, there was little training and education around LGBTQ issues. Because of this, my supervisors encouraged me to "pass," or appear as feminine as possible, while working with the clients we served. They explained that they didn't want me to make the customers uncomfortable, and that failing to present as a cisgender woman would reveal, in their words, that I'm "actually a man."

Workplace conditions like these make it incredibly difficult for transgender Ohioans to reach their full potential. They degrade morale, reduce productivity, and ultimately encourage us to take our skills and abilities elsewhere. HB160 is a step in the right direction toward achieving fairness, equity, and inclusion in the workplace and beyond.

Please, I urge you to pass House Bill 160.