

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Aaron Tax and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act, on behalf of SAGE: Advocacy and Services for LGBT Elders.

SAGE is the largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older adults. Since our inception in 1978, SAGE has pioneered many first-in-the-nation programs and services for low-income LGBT older adults who not only face the typical challenges of aging but also confront marginalization and discrimination around their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Aging is challenging. Older people face many challenges, including social isolation and diminished income. For LGBT elders, many of whom have experienced stigma, discrimination and victimization throughout their lives as a direct result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, the deck is stacked against them. As with other marginalized communities, LGBT older people face significant barriers and profound disparities that place them in great social need.

The available research shows that LGBT elders have fewer sources of support as compared to their heterosexual peers. They also face higher poverty rates and experience poor health and health access. A new AARP survey elevates statistics about the LGBT aging experience that are—and should be—alarming. According to the survey, half (52%) of LGBT people said they fear discrimination in health care as they age. A staggering 88% of LGBT older people want providers in long-term care facilities who are specifically trained to meet LGBT patient needs. Black and Latino LGBT people report the greatest concerns about future family support, social supports, and discrimination within long-term care facilities.

Many older people who move into a residential care facility may feel a bit hopeless or unmoored as they adjust to a new way of living. Imagine that in addition to those feelings, you are spat upon, yelled at, and physically attacked for whom you love. That's exactly what happened to Marsha Wetzel, the lead plaintiff in Lambda Legal's case, *Wetzel v. Glen St. Andrew Living Community*. With no family to turn to for help, Marsha suffered this harassment for more than 15 months.

Most Ohioans and Ohio businesses support protections against discrimination to help people like Marsha. Nearly three quarters of Ohioans favor employment and housing laws that make it illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Just like all other older people, we must ensure that LGBT older people have access to welcoming services in their communities. No one should have to worry about something as basic as being yourself in your own space—especially as you age. The ability to enjoy a home, live as your authentic self, and feel comfortable and safe is something that matters to all of us.

SAGE urges the committee members to pass HB369. Thank you for your time and consideration. We are happy to be a resource for any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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