

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Brooke Cartus. I am a member of Equality Ohio's Board of Directors, and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

In my day job, I work as a diversity and inclusion trainer at ImprovEdge, one of the top 1% women owned businesses in the nation and one that has been based in Ohio for over 20 years. I also regularly perform stand-up comedy in the Columbus area, but the truth is, the lack of non-discrimination protections in Ohio is no joke for the tens of thousands of LGBTQ people who call our beautiful state home. Today, I want to tell you a little bit two of those people, my partner and me, and how this important bill will impact our lives and the lives of those we care about.

My amazing partner is non-binary and recently went through the process of legally changing their name. They are the most dedicated Ohioan I have ever met. They were born and raised here and went to Ohio University to become the amazing social worker that they are today, where they work on the frontlines of our state's poverty crisis for one of Ohio's biggest non-profits. My partner gives so much to this state, and their drive and dedication to making it a better place is a huge asset to communities across the state.

I came to Columbus to go to Ohio State's Moritz College of Law, expecting to finish my degree and take the bar exam in another state, but I fell in love. I fell in love with the LGBTQ community and the acceptance I experienced in Columbus. My job is mobile, so there are a lot of other places I could have chosen to live. We could live in New York or Los Angeles, but we choose to live in Ohio because it is home.

We want to raise a family here, but we've been forced to have a lot of conversations about moving, which is truly heartbreaking for me. It is hard to consider starting a family here knowing that my kid would grow up with parents who don't have basic nondiscrimination protections and at the drop of a hat, could lose their job, be denied housing, or be turned away at a store or restaurant. These are real fears that LGBTQ Ohioans face every day, and these protections would provide at least some level of security and safety to alleviate some of that stress and anxiety. The bottom line is that I won't raise a family somewhere where my equality is being argued.

We are lucky to live in Columbus, a city that has these protections at the municipal level, which provides a basic legal mechanism to combat discrimination. These municipal protections are great, but there is a huge difference between legal and lived equality. These little dots of equality across the state don't add up to anything. We love this state, and we shouldn't be forced to stay within the limits of a few cities in order to feel safe. The only tenable solution is a statewide bill like this, which provides equal protections to all Ohioans, regardless of where they choose to live.

This committee has the opportunity to lead the way in doing the right thing for Ohio, and I am asking you today to take it. The business community overwhelmingly supports non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ Ohioans, and they are beginning to consider these policies when they decide where to do business. 20 states and the District of Columbia have secured these protections for their residents, and for Ohio to be competitive as a place to do business, we need to catch up to them. This bill is about providing the American dream to all Ohioans, regardless of who they are and who they love. LGBTQ Ohioans are relying on you, our elected officials, to stand up for what is right and protect them.

Please vote yes on House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Brooke Cartus