

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, our names are Jim and Charlie Cunningham and we are submitting this written testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Up until two years ago, we were lifetime residents of Ohio. (We moved to Phoenix to be closer to our aging parents.)

I, Charlie Cunningham, was born with a female body and a male brain. I lived 51 years of my life as the gender I was assigned at birth, female. All these years, I suffered from a grueling, pharmacologically-resistant depression and shame. My realization that I am indeed a male 7 years ago was the turning point of my life. The depression lifted immediately. My life had finally begun!

However, being transgender in a transphobic society has created problems for me, as it does for most transgender people. I have faced intimidating behavior. Because of my medical condition, I cannot take male hormones. Thus, many people still see me as female while others are not sure. Although I try to avoid eye contact, I am often met with questioning, judgmental, and humiliating stares and glares. More than once, I have been asked to prove my gender identity.

The Cuyahoga County Probate Court, the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the Social Security Administration, and Medicare all recognize me as male along with my medical providers.

People tell me that I am a brave person for living as the person I truly am. But the fact is that much of the time, I live in fear – fear of cruelty and hate and the absence of many of the legal protections that others often take for granted.

Planning to return to Ohio in 2020, I want to have and all LBGTQIA people in Ohio to have legal protection against discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations and protections against intimidation.

I am so grateful for the continued love and support of my husband of 24 years who never once flinched when I came to realize my true self.

I, Rev. Jim Cunningham, am a semi-retired pastor/chaplain in the United Church of Christ and proud of my spouse, Charlie. We, along with other members of the LGBTQ community, need you to send a clear message that discrimination and intimidation will not be tolerated in Ohio.

We have loved growing up, being educated, working and residing in Ohio. For most of these years, we were among the privileged class... white, middle class, heterosexual. Now that Charlie identifies as transgender we live a more anxious life. We have been blessed throughout our lives by the love and gifts of the members of the LGBTQ community. But now, being members of that community, we experience a much different level of economic challenge, physical and mental risk, pain and suffering that prejudice and discrimination brings to our community.

We respectfully request you, our State Representatives, to take a stand for respect and human rights and protect us. This bill is not just good for LGBTQ Ohioans. It is good for all our citizens and good for our state. We are grateful for the support of hundreds of corporations, universities, and businesses who have signed onto the Ohio Business Competes coalition in support of the Ohio Fairness Act. House Bill 369 will inform everyone that Ohio is a welcoming, safe and inclusive state.

Thank you for reading our testimony.