

My name is Darrell Lausche and I support the Ohio Fairness Act (SB11). I am a member of the Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT) and the chair of OFT's Human Rights Committee. But, more importantly, I submit my testimony as a citizen born and raised in Ohio. I live in Ohio House District 6/Ohio Senate District 24. I am also a gay man. In Ohio, that last statement takes an immense amount of bravery to say or document in such a public forum. By publicly stating that I am a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I risk losing my job, being denied access to public accommodations and services, and even losing housing.

Even though I meet Ohio's requirements as a highly qualified teacher, have a skilled rating according to the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System, and 22 years of experience teaching in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District, I could possibly be dismissed despite not breaking any school board policies, breaking any laws, and doing my best to work to the standards of my profession. I am very lucky, though, that my school district has included sexual orientation and gender identity to the non-discrimination policies enacted by our school board. That is not the case in all school districts in Ohio.

Teachers and administrators cannot be their best if they are always worried that there is a possibility of dismissal from their careers. They cannot build working relationships with their students and colleagues if they feel the need to conceal an important part of who they are. Again, I am lucky to be in one of the few districts that has included sexual orientation and gender identity in non-discrimination policies.

Before marriage equality, my husband and I had to maintain separate health insurance plans. In 2013, my school district agreed to allow domestic partners to be included on our insurance plans as family members. The first step was to make a public declaration of our commitment by registering with the Cleveland Heights Domestic Partner Registry or provide proof of marriage from another state. I was elated that my school district recognized my relationship as equal to my straight colleagues' relationships. Even with that elation, I had to quiet this nagging feeling that someone in the district could use this domestic partner registry and inclusion of my husband on our insurance against me. Without laws backing the non-discrimination policies of my school district, would I have the legal recourse to fight back if my sexuality was used against me in an effort to end my employment? To this day, I still have those concerns quietly murmuring in the back of my head every time I have a new administrator with which to work. I worry that their personal biases will cause issues that will prevent me from doing my best work for the benefit of my students.

Currently, there is no provision in Ohio law that forbids a business that provides products or services to the public from denying me access to their products or services. When my husband and I were planning our wedding in 2016, whether or not any of the various business we approached for services and products would turn us away always stayed in the back of my mind. We had to take extra steps by spending time doing further research, that no straight couple would have to take, to be sure the companies and individuals we approached were supporters of equality.

Just recently, I made a call to a Cleveland-based company so I could get an estimate on a home improvement project we were planning. The call went well, until the receptionist asked if there was a Mrs. Lausche. I had three choices. First, lie. I could tell her that there was no spouse and arrange for the estimate when my husband wasn't home. This would have been unfair to him. He has a right to weigh in on decisions that affect us both. It would also have been a major insult to him in denying our marriage publicly. Second, I could have said yes, there is a Mrs. Lausche. But, again, I would have made the appointment when my husband wasn't home and risked the same insults to him and our marriage. Third, I could tell my truth and state that there wasn't a Mrs. Lausche, I have a husband instead. The fear that comes with that is instantly being judged, without any attempt to know who I am as a human being, and being told that the company could not provide what I was looking for to make the improvements to my home. I chose to live my truth. Thankfully, the receptionist didn't seem to miss a beat when arranging my appointment.

When we travel throughout our state, I always wonder if we may be denied lodging or if we will be denied service at a restaurant or local business. I cannot help but to always think about whether we will be treated with the same respect that others receive just because of the commitment I have made to my husband. It makes me wonder if others feel welcomed to come to Ohio to conduct business or for pleasure. I believe my state needs to affirm that we are open for business to everyone, regardless of gender, age, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Please forgive me if I overlooked anyone.

By publicly stating my status as a member of Ohio's LGBTQ+ community, my husband and I could be forced out of our home to live on the streets. There are no provisions in Ohio law prohibiting management companies of apartment complexes or landlords from denying housing to LGBTQ+ individuals. My husband and I could have been denied a mortgage for the house we currently own. How welcoming is it to a potential Ohio resident to not know if secure housing will be available. Would you want to live or work somewhere in which that cannot be guaranteed?

Considering all the uncertainty there is for an LGBTQ+ individual regarding employment, access to public services, and housing, I wonder if Ohio is living up to its responsibility of being a welcoming place to live, work, and visit. With the inconsistent patchwork of municipalities and counties offering non-discrimination ordinances that include the LGBTQ+ community, I have a hard time believing that it is easy to conduct business in this state. Thankfully, I live and work in Cuyahoga County, a recent member of municipalities extending protections to the LGBTQ+ community. Ohio needs the Ohio Fairness Act to show that all people, regardless of who they are, are welcome to work in, live in, and visit Ohio. It is not about special treatment, it is about making sure every individual in Ohio has equal access to good jobs, public services, and reliable housing. Human rights are not a pie, just because an underrepresented group of people are afforded the same rights as the majority, it does not diminish, or lessen, the amount of rights the majority has afforded to them. This is about providing a level playing field for all Ohioans.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you and offer support for SB 11, the Ohio Fairness Act.