

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee:

My name is Rev. Beth Long-Higgins, Executive Director, Ruth Frost Parker Center for Abundant Aging, a program of United Church Homes, a faith-based nonprofit founded in 1916, whose national headquarters are located in downtown Marion, Ohio.

I am writing in support of HB 369, The Ohio Fairness Act, which is currently being considered on behalf of our 1,200 employees who work in Ohio and who care for the 2,500 older adults who live in our 20 healthcare and rehab, retirement and affordable housing communities here in this state. This legislation aligns with our own historic commitment to advocate for elders who face a multitude of healthcare and other social challenges, including the discrimination especially against the LGBTQ community.

The Board of Directors voted that United Church Homes become an Open and Affirming organization in 2012. This is a program of our founding denomination, the United Church of Christ, headquartered in Cleveland. It is a public declaration of the organization's commitment to provide a safe place of employment for our valued workforce and a safe place for the residents who choose to make their home in our communities, especially those of the LGBTQ community. Continuing extensive training for our staff across all of the UCH communities was completed in 2017 through the national organization, SAGE who advocates for the particular needs of older members of the LGBT community. We are the fourth multi-site organization in the nation to complete SAGECare certification and are recognized for 80% of our employees having completed a program of formal sensitivity training. I am proud to say that our organization's commitment to ensuring the rights of the LGBT community are a priority woven through every component of our workplace, healthcare and residential operations.

It is gratifying to me just how many people look to UCH for employment because they want to work for an organization that supports the rights of the LGBT community. One executive level employee shared that our organization's commitment to the rights of the LGBT community was one of the key factors that led him to seek employment with us. He has a nephew who is gay, and he is proud to work for an organization where he can talk about his nephew openly. In two recent search processes, we have entertained the resumes of candidates from California and Idaho. When asked why they are interested in moving to Ohio, they point to our organization's commitment to being Open and Affirming of the LGBT community, a social justice concern that is important to them personally.

More importantly, we have residents who have moved into our communities who are LGBT and have expressed their appreciation for a living environment that is safe, friendly and affirming of them. Additionally, other residents have chosen UCH, not because they are themselves are LGBT, but because they have children who are. They appreciate that their family members can come and visit them without fear of ridicule or shame from staff. One of the fears of LGBTQ elders is that they feel compelled to "go back into the closet" to access housing, healthcare and support services. After a hard-won freedom to be who they are and live in the wider community, senior LGBTQ people should feel equally safe when accessing long term supportive services without fear or discrimination.

The protection and safety that we can provide as an organization, however, is not enough. It is important that once our employees leave work that they have the same rights and be treated equally to every other Ohioan. All should have the right to worship in the faith community of their choice respecting the differences between us. All should be able to conduct business in establishments that are open to the public with respect and dignity. All Ohioans must be covered equally under the laws that govern us. It is a matter of justice guaranteed by the Constitution and grounded in the Bible.

As a faith-inspired ministry, UCH was founded to provide safe housing for "aged" persons who were some of the most vulnerable individuals during those early years of the Industrial Revolution. Elders were often facing insecurity about access to housing and healthcare and the other benefits of living in communities where families were separated by changing economic and social forces. Back then as now, UCH continues to provide the means for elders to overcome problems of access and insecurity, elder poverty and isolation that still plague our state today. We continue to ground the vision of our organization in that same faithfulness to provide safe housing and health care for those who find themselves to be vulnerable as they age in the 21st Century. Members of the LGBT community are some of those who need such safety in our time.

We urge your support of this legislation that will help to ensure that all Ohioans, especially the most vulnerable to discrimination and social insecurity, are treated equally. We want our employees to take pride in their work as they care for our state's older adults. We want them to know that their professional skills and empathy are valued not just by our organization, but that they are contributing to the health and success of our larger society and in turn, they are productive citizens living beside us with equal protections under the law and in fulfillment of the Bible's call to create a just, loving society.

Thank you for your consideration in receiving this testimony.