

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee. My name is Jessica Wilkins and I am here today to tell you my story.

As a transwoman living in the Cleveland area, I have experienced discrimination firsthand in two of my previous places of work. I'd like to share my experiences with you in the hopes that the need for non-discrimination legislation here in Ohio will be made clear. In my early twenties, I worked two jobs to support the cost of my education at Cleveland State University. Between sitting in classes and studying course material, I served as the kitchen manager in an English pub and worked as a kitchen staff member in a local bakery. Around this same time, I began to undergo hormone replacement therapy under the supervision of my doctor so that my external self could better reflect my true internal self.

Unfortunately, the climate around LGBTQ people in the pub at which I worked was hostile and felt unsafe. One of my coworkers expressed open and unrestrained disgust towards the gay community. He unflinchingly recounted the revulsion he experienced when he saw two men kissing in a park just west of Cleveland. He expressed the furious disbelief he felt in response to witnessing what we described as a vulgar public display. In his view, it was his responsibility to tell these two men that they needed to leave. When they refused to heed his warning, he punched one of the men in the face, breaking his nose. He recited the details of his assault with absolute pride and without an ounce of remorse. I knew at that moment that I could never safely transition in this establishment. Within two weeks, I handed in my resignation, explaining that I was scared to continue working there.

At the bakery, I was met with similar, but more overt, hostility in response to my transition. Around the same time that I was starting to grow out my hair and externally present in more visibly feminine ways, my employer informed my coworkers and me of a new policy that restricted male employees to having shorter hairstyles. Women, of course, were exempt from this rule. I explained to my boss that I was transgender and would soon be living and presenting fully as a woman. In response, my manager explained that our company does not hire my "kind" of people. He then asked me to quit. I was shocked. And in my anger I called the company's corporate office, only to be met with the same response. I was told that the business had an unwritten policy of refusing to hire transgender applicants and denying work to employees transitioning on the job.

I was distraught. In just a few weeks' time, the harsh realities of transphobia right here in Ohio became all too apparent. My experiences in each of my workplaces is a reflection of the culture of hostility against LGBTQ people that needs to be addressed. It is also illustrative of our urgent need for legal protections in all aspects of our lives.

Discrimination does, indeed, happen in Ohio. No one ought to be treated harshly or unfairly because of who they are. As Ohioans, we are better than that. Please, I urge you pass the Ohio Fairness Act.