

House Bill 3689 Proponent Testimony

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Josh Culbertson and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

I am a mental health professional, and I am a board member for Equality Ohio. I'm also a gay man. I live in Columbus, a city where my sexual orientation is listed as an enumerated class among the city's non-discrimination protections. I have lived in the city of Columbus since the fall of 2011. Prior to that, I was born and had lived my entire life in Zanesville, Ohio.

Throughout my 20s and early 30s, I attended a nondenominational church in Zanesville, Ohio, a church that taught that my sexuality as a gay man was a sin, a cross to bear, so to speak. I also worked at a number of jobs over those years, mostly in banking and insurance. My last job there was at a small independent insurance agency where I was employed by a family that attended the same church that I had been attending, at that point, for over a decade, engaged in a process that I believed, through faith and prayer, could heal my sexual brokenness, the language that I used at the time to describe my attractions to persons of the same gender.

In late 2009, my journey led me to a place where I realized that my homosexuality was not a defect, and I accepted myself for who I am. This did not sit well with the leadership of my church or with my employer. On a regular basis, the owner of the agency would call me into his office and, while promising not to fire me, he would tell me about how no relationship that I was ever in with another man would ever meet his definition of love or of a marriage. This led to me being incredibly anxious and distracted at work. I knew that I could be legally fired at any time for being gay; so, I set my sights on moving to Columbus where I knew there were laws that would protect me on the basis of my sexual orientation.

Once in Columbus, I decided to attend the Methodist Theological School in Ohio up in Delaware to pursue a Master's in Counseling. I wanted to enter the mental health field to help others navigate questions of identity in a healthier environment and manner than I had. It was also important to me, given that so much harm had been done to me by religion, that my education include a faith aspect so that I could walk into that space with clients in an intelligent way when they needed to share about the hopes and the harms that they have experienced within religious contexts. When deciding where to live while pursuing my degree, I opted to live in the narrow sliver which exists at the top of the city of Columbus that is actually in Delaware County. I was not willing to move outside of city limits. I vowed that I would never again live in an area where I did not have legal protections from discrimination.

I know that I am not alone in valuing these protections. In addition to other LGBTQ+ persons and our allies, hundreds of business, corporations, faith leaders, and religious communities have signed on to voice their support for this legislation that, if passed, would do nothing but make Ohio a stronger and more welcoming state for businesses and families of all configurations. I hope that this committee will see fit to move this legislation forward towards a vote. Ohio is a state that is built on the ideals of fairness and opportunity. That should be reflected in our laws.

Thank you for your time.