

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

As a transgender woman, author and advocate for transgender communities nationwide, I am able to speak first-hand on why this legislation is vital to the State of Ohio.

Those who are transgender and living in Ohio do so unprotected by laws that afford protections to others. This exclusiveness is unfair and unjust. We are citizens of Ohio; we are citizens of America. No different than any other person. Yet we struggle daily to live and survive in Ohio, because we do not have statewide protections in employment, in healthcare, or from discrimination of any type, including the use of public restrooms.

In the villages, towns and cities of Ohio that do support equal rights for all, the LGBTQ communities thrive, along with the rest of the citizens. For example, Toledo recently ranked near the bottom of the list of cities in Ohio in terms of inclusion of the LGBTQ community. A few short years later, we ranked at the top of the list. Currently, we are ranked number 4 nationwide among communities that LGBTQ people choose to retire to. It is all due to having protections for all, including LGBTQ people, at the local level. Toledo has passed laws abolishing the use of conversion therapy within the county. They have passed laws providing protections within the workplace. Toledo has worked in conjunction with surrounding cities in assisting with passing similar if not identical laws in those communities.

When it comes to changing a person's name and gender marker, even by court order. The State of Ohio is one of the three remaining states that still discriminate against transgender people by refusing to change the gender marker on their birth certificates. This makes it difficult to prove who they are, legally, by a court order for identification. It is ironic that the State of Ohio sees me as female on my driver's license. However, my Ohio birth certificate still says "male". As a result, I cannot visit anywhere outside of the country without being in fear that I will be denied reentry on my return. While this policy would not be impacted by the Ohio Fairness Act, it is an additional example of the many challenges experienced by transgender Ohioans.

The Ohio Fairness Act would provide LGBTQ Ohioans with protection from discrimination. It would bring Ohio in line with other states that have chosen to protect their LGBTQ residents. This legislation improves the lives of thousands of Ohio Citizens, passing it harms no one in Ohio.

I strongly urge the Ohio Legislature to support these protections by passing, House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Thank you for your time and consideration