

## Written Testimony - Lisa McNeeley

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Lisa McNeeley. I am in support of HB 369 and here is my story.

I was born and raised in Cleveland, OH but left home to attend the University of Pennsylvania in 1999. With over 60,000 residents of Philadelphia identifying as LGBTQ, it was easy to feel at home. Philly is consistently recognized as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly cities in the country and passed local laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodations in the early 1980s. It's also where I met my wife, a native Philadelphian who had just graduated from the University of Villanova School of Law.

When it came to deciding where to raise our family and build our careers, Cleveland tugged at my heartstrings. It was important for us to be near my parents and siblings, despite the lack of legal protections that Ohio would afford us. Every major life event we've experienced in Ohio has raised subtle reminders that we are not "equal" in the eyes of the law.

In early 2015, our daughter Margaret Grace was born at the Cleveland Clinic. Most new parents worry about sleep routines, feeding schedules and diaper rashes. In addition to all that, I had the added pressure of knowing that the current laws treated me as a "legal stranger" to the child my wife had just given birth to, a child that we decided together to conceive, that we intended to raise and love together just like so many other married couples around us. I had so many unanswered questions after her birth: would this child be able to inherit from me? Would she be able to inherit from my parents? Would she be able to collect my future social security benefits? Would I be able to make medical decisions on her behalf? If my wife suffered complications during childbirth, would I get custody of my daughter? The answer to all of those questions, simply put, is: NO. As a result, our family has spent countless hours and hundreds of dollars working with an attorney to help us try to protect our family in the same way heterosexual families are already protected under the law. Gender-specific laws that define families as one mother and one father continue to discriminate against all families in Ohio, not just ours.

Shortly after our daughter was born we started house hunting for our first family home. We dreamed of a larger house, with a bigger yard, that was closer to my parents. It didn't take long to fall in love with the perfect house in Bay Village. Our realtor informed us that she'd heard the owners were expecting to get multiple offers alongside ours. We'd be competing against other families in a relatively conservative Catholic community. What if the current owners didn't want to sell their house to us because they didn't approve of our love for each other? Neither of us could afford to finance the house on our own, there was no way to hide the fact that we were both women in the formal offer prepared by our real estate agent. All we could do was hope that we'd be treated fairly, because the reality is that there is no law in Ohio to protect us or ensure equal housing. Instead of experiencing the joy of buying our first home together, we were nervous and fearful, knowing that Ohio fails to protect us from this kind of discrimination. No Ohioan should be denied housing because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

Like everyone else, we count on our jobs to provide financial stability for our family. I work as a manager in sales operations for Hyland Software. My wife works as an attorney at a law firm in downtown Cleveland. To be clear, our jobs are about more than a paycheck - our jobs are the building blocks of our careers, helping define who we are and allowing us to have an impact on our community. These jobs provide our families with healthcare, retirement accounts, life insurance, onsite daycare, and a

multitude of other benefits. Jobs are where we learn, develop and grow our skills to lead. Jobs help us build financial stability so that we can purchase homes in the community, invest in our neighborhoods and pay taxes. Too many Ohioans hide or pretend to be something they aren't, in fear that the truth about their personal life can ruin what they've worked so hard to achieve. These employees cannot focus on giving their best efforts when the law shows they aren't as worthy as their heterosexual counterparts. No hard working person should be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Every Ohioan deserves an equal opportunity to work and be judged on the merit of their work, not who they love.

When the Ohio legislature again debates and considers HB 369, our hope is that they will consider the families living all throughout the state that have been labeled as deserving "less than" the protections afforded to heterosexuals. The protections this bill seeks to provide to the LGBTQ community are far reaching and will help ensure individuals, couples and families are treated equally regardless of their sexual orientation. We aren't asking that you consider this because it is the right thing for the LGBTQ community, it is the right thing for all of us. Our laws reflect who we are as a community and when we protect some, but not all, we discriminate. It would be easy for us to simply move back to Pennsylvania where our family is afforded greater protection, but that would do a disservice to all of the other families in Ohio. Ohio is our home and we will continue to fight to make it a better place to live, work and raise our family. We hope that one day our children will be found to be equal and deserving of all of the protections afforded to the rest of the children in the State.