

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Reginald Harris and I am a member of the Board of Directors of Equality Ohio.

I am here to express my support for House Bill 369, also known as the Ohio Fairness Act, which is being considered.

In August of 2015, my husband, Dr. Aaron Shield, and I moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, from Cambridge, Massachusetts. We moved to Ohio because my husband was hired as an associate professor at Miami University. We were both excited and nervous to move to this state. We were also relieved when marriage equality became the law of the land in June, 2015, as a result of the landmark Obergefell v. Hodges case. We had been married in Massachusetts in August of 2009, and had only lived in states that recognized our marriage. Before marriage equality, we were quite concerned about living in a place that would not legally recognize our marriage. Though it may seem like a small detail, the idea of going from filing our state taxes jointly as a couple, to filing them in Ohio as single individuals, felt like a slap in the face, essentially rendering the public commitment we made to each other null and void.

Unfortunately, I am here before you today in a similar situation. I am worried for our future in Ohio. I am worried about potentially being fired from my job because of who I am. I am worried about not being able to access goods or programs that may be beneficial to our quality of life due to discrimination that is legal against LGBTQ people in Ohio.

When we moved to Cincinnati, we made a significant and deep investment in this state. We bought a home, a new luxury car, invested in our neighborhood's grocery coop, and immersed ourselves in the city's newly revitalized neighborhoods, supporting local restaurants and shops. And yet this new life that we have built could come crashing down in an instant if one of our employers were allowed to fire us from our jobs because we are gay.

We love our life in Ohio. This state, and specifically the city of Cincinnati, have afforded us many opportunities. And I am left wondering why we should stay and continue to build a life here if the place we love won't commit to protecting our livelihoods and wellbeing.

I am not asking for special treatment. I am not asking for a special status. I am asking that I be able to continue to work hard and invest in my community without fear of losing my job or being denied services.

In fact, most Ohioans and Ohio businesses support protections against discrimination. A 2013 poll conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research revealed that 79% of Ohio

registered voters believe that laws should be passed banning discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations based on both sexual orientation and gender identity. Twenty-six Ohio cities already offer these protections. However, a person in this state can live in one city, work in another, and lose their rights during their daily commute to work. We need our state's leaders to step in and help close the gaps in these protections.

JobsOhio has identified that 80 of the top 98 employers in our state have nondiscrimination policies. And over 600 businesses have signed on to the Ohio Business Competes coalition in support of statewide legislation protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination.

Many of my friends who live on the coasts ask me what it's like to live in Ohio. What are Ohioans like? What is the culture of my state? My response is that Ohioans value decency and civility, and that they make the right decisions when the going gets tough.

It is my hope that I can report back to my friends that Ohio made the decent and civil choice of protecting all of its citizens from discrimination, including LGBTQ Ohioans.

I would like to thank the committee for its time, and I am willing to answer any questions you may have.