

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

Thank you for giving us all a chance to speak in favor of this bill. I am a political activist and advocate; I moved to Columbus in 2007 to marry my husband, Tom Grote, and to raise our two daughters. In 2018, I ran for Congress in Ohio's 15th district, and I remain politically active – especially when it comes to civil rights and freedom. The 15th district covers a large swathe of south-central Ohio, from Columbus down to Wilmington and over to Athens. Running proudly as an openly gay man gave me the opportunity to meet and hear from many Ohio residents who are also lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender – many of them far from the diverse, welcoming environment of Columbus.

And it is those fellow citizens I'd like you to keep in mind today. Maybe one is a public school teacher in Logan or Chillicothe, with a boyfriend at home that he hopes no one at his school knows about. Maybe one is a student in Hilliard or Grove City who plans to leave Ohio as fast she can after graduation so that she can get a job and live her life without worrying about not being able to rent an apartment because someone assumes she's a lesbian.

The problem here is not being gay – which is in our very nature, the very essence of who we are as human beings – but how we are able to live our lives: in fear, or in freedom? Do we have the protection of the state to live as equals, or not? The place where we live in fear is called the closet – and living in the closet is still the norm for too many LGBT people, and coming out of the closet is still not an option for too many who must guard their jobs and their well-being over their personal freedom. What a choice.

And it is a choice that I, too, have made. I first came out in 1986 when I was a student at Miami University of Ohio. After graduating, I answered the call to service and became a Peace Corps volunteer, and then a relief worker providing humanitarian assistance to refugees in Asia and Africa. Some places I worked were not welcoming to LGBT people – and I was careful to hide my sexual orientation and my dating life from my colleagues. I did this in the interest of a greater good – to be able to help people in dire need. Here in Ohio, without the protections that this bill would provide, we ask the same of our fellow citizens – to hide who they are and who they love, to avoid the possibility of getting fired or not having a place to live. But to what greater good? So that their supervisor doesn't have to deal with the conflict caused by the hysteria he hears on Fox News about the gay agenda versus the reality of the person standing before him? Or so a landlord doesn't have her religious sensibilities offended when someone she assumes is transgender wants to rent an apartment?

In fact, there is no greater good – and no compelling state interest – served by forcing people to hide who they are when they look for work or a place to live. It is unacceptable

that we can be fired or kicked out of our home or denied a seat at the lunch counter because we live our lives openly, normally, just like any of you – an assumption of freedom that is so widespread that it is difficult to explain, much less promote. To live freely, as equals – that is the promise of this country and this state, and this bill advances that freedom.

Thank you for your consideration, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.