

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is John Gatiss, I am a member of the Westerville Progressive Alliance, and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Last year, Westerville became the 27th local government in Ohio to pass an LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance. The Westerville Progressive Alliance was proud to advocate for adoption of the ordinance by our city council as a part of the Westerville Pride campaign. In concert with other local and statewide groups and other interested citizens, we packed city council meetings and community discussions to call for the passage of the ordinance. Our members and others provided numerous public and private comments to members of council in support of LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination protections in housing, employment, and public accommodations in our city.

At those meetings and public discussions, there was broad support from our members and others in Westerville for protecting the LGBTQ community from discrimination. Our members spoke in support of nondiscrimination protections as small business owners, as professionals, as people of faith, and as allies and members of the LGBTQ community. People who spoke out represented a spectrum of our community across age, sexuality, gender, and religion, but united in the belief that all should be protected from discrimination. Some of our friends and neighbors also related heart-wrenching stories of discrimination from their own lives, as well as stories of their triumphs over adversity despite these obstacles. People talked about the need to offer inclusive nondiscrimination protections from personal, religious, and economic perspectives, but no one viewpoint dominated the discussion. People in Westerville just knew that it was just the right thing to do.

Over the course of hearing the public testimony from the community, members of the city council had the opportunity to learn, ask questions, and grow. That dialogue was a critical part of building support for passage by a 6-1 vote. Members of council from different political backgrounds came together to pass the nondiscrimination ordinance. Ultimately, the ordinance they passed protects the LGBTQ community from discrimination, while also protecting religious freedoms for all, and represents an achievement for the entire community.

As important as it was to protect the LGBTQ community in Westerville, more still needs to be done. Our LGBTQ friends and neighbors still have no legal protections from discrimination when they travel outside of Westerville to surrounding townships and nearby communities. Our local nondiscrimination ordinance should be seen as a beginning rather than an ending. We have done our work in our community, but now it is up to the legislature to expand that work statewide. One of the reasons a local ordinance was necessary was because the legislature so far has not passed a statewide nondiscrimination law that includes the LGBTQ community. If Westerville could do this, so can Ohio. It's up to all of you now to work together to get it done—and get it done right.

On behalf of the Westerville Progressive Alliance, I encourage you to pass HB 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.