

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

To put it simply, this bill is the right thing to do. In order to live the full and productive lives that we all deserve, Ohioans need equal access to employment, housing, and public accommodations. However, part of living a full and productive life is also the opportunity to live openly and authentically in one's personal identities. These identities, such as race, religion, and age, have already been partially protected under Ohio's legal code. It is time to add sexual orientation and gender identity or expression to this list.

We know that members of the LGBTQ community have been discriminated against. This is the reason that 26 localities throughout the state have found it necessary to enact legal protections. However, many Ohioans work and live in two different localities. A statewide ban on discrimination is the only way to ensure complete protection in every aspect of one citizen's life. This is a state issue.

Beyond right and wrong, this bill is also practically beneficial for Ohio's economy. I can tell you as a bisexual woman, being closeted about one's identity is exhausting. Asking Ohio's workers to constantly and carefully manage each conversation they have at their workplace makes these workers less productive. Workers with legal protections could take the time and energy that is spent covering up their identity and allocate it fully to their work. Fearful workers are not good workers.

About three fourths of Ohioans are in support of a bill like House Bill 369. Many of these Ohioans are young people like myself, making big decisions about where to permanently settle down. We want to live in a state that aligns with our values, and a state without protections for sexual orientation and gender identity or expression is a state that many of my friends do not want to live in. Fair legal protections will bring new residents to our state and keep our current residents, and their tax dollars, where they are.

I would also briefly like to address the fears often associated with gender identity and public restrooms. Many opponents of legal protections for gender identity believe that these protections would make room for the assault of cisgender women in public restrooms. I would like to be clear that, as a cisgender woman myself, this bill does not make me feel unsafe. I would ask kindly that this argument on behalf of my safety be left out of the discussion of this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge you to pass House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.