

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

I am providing testimony because I have personally and professionally experienced and witnessed the devastation that exists because Ohio does not currently have protections for its LGBTQ+ citizens in employment, housing or public accommodations.

At the beginning of my professional career, I was threatened with firing when my supervisor discovered my sexual orientation. The agency leadership misunderstood Ohio's state protections, so they did not fire me. However, they decided they didn't want an LGBTQ person as the media face for the agency, so they moved me to writing, literally hid me in a basement office, and I lost the position I had aspired to. Lacking legal protections, I could not fight back: so I decided to leave the public sector for higher education. After I earned my Ph.D., I left the state of Ohio. When a position opened at Kent State University, I was torn about applying: I wanted to be near my aging parents, but I didn't want to return to a state that did not extend citizen protections to me. It was only because state employees do have employment non-discrimination protections that I returned. In my 24 years at Kent State University, I have taught more than one thousand undergraduate and graduate students, created two academic concentrations that have educated thousands more and been the implementing director of three centers. I have led scholarly initiatives that extend beyond the United States. **And if Ohio did not have state employment protections for LGBTQ people, I would not be here.**

All of the faculty who also taught in our LGBTQ Studies programs in the first several years left Ohio for states more welcoming. Some left because they experienced housing discrimination; others left because they wanted to start a family and went to states where they would have better rights to do so. These were some of the most talented scholars I've worked with—gone because this state fails to recognize them (and me) as fully human and deserving the full protection of the law. There are also the many LGBTQ faculty who never come because of Ohio's failure to protect its citizens, and every year the LGBTQ graduates who go elsewhere for graduate school and careers. **This impact the quality of our programs, because sometimes the best and brightest also are LGBTQ.** This is why Ohio's leading corporations as well as small businesses and leading universities like mine have signed onto Ohio Business Competes.

I urge you to pass House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. I can be reached via email at: mmerryman@kent.edu or 330-257-5449 (work).