

## Aaron Demlow

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee, thank you for this opportunity to voice my opposition to House Bill 454.

This bill will have devastating consequences if it passes. I was born and raised in Ohio, and I hope to continue living here. If this bill passes, I'm going to start looking into other states where my rights, and the rights of my future children, will be protected. This is not something I WANT to do; rather, it's something I have been forced to seriously consider. My entire family and all my friends live here in Ohio. I don't want to leave my entire life behind me, but I will if Ohio makes the lives of trans kids even harder than they already are.

I was a trans kid who grew up here, and I would not have survived if I wasn't able to access the gender-affirming health care I desperately needed. It really is that simple at the end of the day.

Contrary to the assumption that being transgender is a “social contagion,” I grew up not knowing that trans people even exist. I was not “made” or “led” to be this way—I was simply born this way. No childhood trauma or “comorbidity” made me trans. I had a fairly normal and uneventful childhood, but I have always known, in my heart of hearts, that I'm truly a boy. I've known this for as long as I can remember, yet I had no frame of reference that there were others like me in the world. This invisibility of trans people and lack of language for what I was experiencing had me feeling alone and confused. Why would God make me this way? As a young child, I asked myself that question all the time. For years I tried to shove these feelings down and just do what was expected of me—be a girl, be a daughter. Throughout elementary school, there were countless nights where I cried and prayed to God to just “make me normal.” From 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I tried to “desist” myself and I grew out my short, choppy hair (which I had always insisted on until this point). I came out as a lesbian. That's what I assumed I must be, at the time. Again, I didn't know trans people even existed. I'm telling you now: trying to “convert” myself from these trans feelings, even while under the assumption that I was the only one in the world to ever feel this way, did not work. As puberty progressed, the worse my mental health became. I felt increasingly trapped in my own body—like my body wasn't my own. The pain of my dysphoria was so great that I resorted to self-harm. I was starting to think there was no way out, that I would never be able to be myself, that I would never know true authenticity and happiness. I became suicidal.

I wasn't “manipulating” my parents, as proponents of this bill would like you to believe, when I told them how I was feeling and the dangerous ways I was coping with those

feelings. I was reaching out for help to the two adults in the world whose job is to love and care for me, no matter what. I came out to my parents as transgender around the age of 14. I'm lucky to have parents who did their due diligence, read books and did plenty of research on the topic. We worked together with therapists, psychiatrists, and a number of doctors to figure out the best plan for me. That plan included gender-affirming medical care, which was a decision that was not made lightly.

Gender-affirming care saved my life at 16. I'm now 24 years old, and I've been on HRT (hormone replacement therapy) for over 8 years. I'm still transgender, and I have zero regrets. Despite the ongoing waves of legislation across the country targeting LGBT people and bodily autonomy, I am happier now than I've ever been. I feel more at home in my body than ever before. I beg you not to take that opportunity away from other kids just like me.

This bill insinuates that it is inherently harmful to be trans, which is just not true. There is so much joy to be found within the trans experience, but that hardly gets talked about. What's harmful to not only trans people, but everyone, is gross government interference in trans health care—health care that's supported by every major medical association, including (but not limited to) the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Endocrine Society, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Psychiatric Association. Interfering with trans health care opens the door for rescinding other rights to bodily autonomy. These struggles are intersectional.

Proponents of this bill have cited outdated statistics of “desistance” in trans youth, turning to old studies which reference the DSM-4, which defines “trans children” as any child who shows variance in their gender expression. In layman's terms, these studies being cited by proponents of this bill mostly included children who were not transgender at all. Princeton University recently published a more accurate study, finding that 97% of trans youth persist in their transgender identity after 5 years of social transition. Gender-affirming health care has been statistically proven to be effective in dramatically reducing rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in trans people. I am a prime example of this. There is no moral or just reason to strip life-saving care away from these young people. That was ME once.

Growing up is hard enough as it is. Please don't make it harder for these kids. For the sake of young trans people in Ohio just like me, I beg you: please don't pass this dangerous, discriminatory bill. I urge you to oppose HB 454 to protect our state's youth.