



first community

where everyone is accepted

November 14, 2022

House Bill 454 Opposition  
Attn: Chair Susan Manchester  
Vice Chair Alessandro Cutrona  
Ranking Member Sedrick Denson  
House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee

Dear Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the Committee,

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My name is Rev. Sarah Kientz, and I am the Minister to Youth at First Community Church in Columbus. First Community owns Camp Akita, a summer camp in Logan, Ohio, and my clergy role includes serving as the Camp Director. Camp Akita invites campers to play, reflect, and develop genuine relationships with God, self, and others.

1,500 campers call Camp Akita home each summer, and a few years ago, a camper named Ash stood out. Ash was a painfully shy middle schooler who struggled making friends and sat to the side during capture the flag and campfire songs. Ash felt too anxious inside the dining hall, so staff would take turns eating with Ash at a picnic table outside. During these meals, Ash barely spoke.

The next year, Ash's parents called to tell us that Ash was a boy, and could we please place him in a boys' cabin. We made the arrangements so that he could live with fellow boys.

The behavior shift we saw in Ash that summer was overwhelmingly positive. He fully participated in activities. He slid down the soap slide, made friends with cabin mates, and sang along to the campfire songs. He even ate in the noisy dining hall. It was difficult to believe that this happy, healthy camper was the child we were the most concerned about just 12 months prior.

I admit I worried about how other campers might treat Ash, especially those who knew he was trans. But not a single child brought forth concerns. Not a single camper expressed discomfort or confusion. Ash was treated exactly the same as a typical Camp Akita camper: with love, compassion, and acceptance, just as Jesus taught us to treat one another.

I didn't want families to have to ask whether Camp Akita would accept their child, as Ash's parents had so bravely done. So last March, we published Camp Akita's Gender Diversity and Inclusion policy. It invites campers and their parents to decide which cabin fits them best. If a trans camper wants to stay in a cabin that corresponds with their sex assigned at birth, that is fine; if, like Ash, they are ready to live with fellow members of their gender, that is fine, too.



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Our policy received overwhelming support. Only a handful of parents—just 40 out of 1,500—unenrolled their campers from our programs. We assured them that Camp Akita would be here if they ever chose to return.

The problem came when right-wing extremist social media got wind of our policy. Mid-summer, we received hateful calls from individuals across the country who had no affiliation to our church or camp. These calls included hate speech, slurs, and threats of violence toward the trans community and our summer camp. Taking no risks, we informed the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and local law enforcement of these threats.

I thank God that no violence came to Camp Akita last summer, but I'm also aware that I will never know if those individuals simply decided not to act, or if local or federal law enforcement had to get involved.

What I do know is that legislation like HB454 fuels an extremist, hateful ideology that seeks to wage a deadly war against children. It's legislation like this that creates the false narrative that trans kids are dangerous, when really, this kind of state-sanctioned bullying is dangerous. To "other" these children is to say that it's ok to threaten and vilify them as well as the institutions that provide them with the same opportunities for health and wellbeing that other children receive. This legislation threatens safety—not just the safety of gender diverse children, but the safety of all children.

I believe that God's dream is for each of us to thrive and flourish. God's dream is for all children to eat together, to laugh, to sing, and to play. I have seen firsthand the ways that gender-affirming care allows a child to feel fully human, worthy, and loved—just as God intended. May we make God's dream possible.

I urge you to treat trans kids as their cabin mates do: with love, compassion, and acceptance. Please vote no on HB454.

In faith,

**Rev. Sarah C. Kientz**

Minister to Youth and Camp Akita

**First Community Church**

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