

Joni Christian

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.

My name is Joni Christian. I am strongly opposed to House Bill 454, preventing transgender youth from receiving proper medical care. When she was growing up Catholic as an altar boy, Joni Christian used to pray that God would change her into a girl. At the age of 26, Joni's prayers came true and with the help of hormone therapy and surgery, she became the woman she always knew she was. At the time of her surgery, Christian was an assembly line worker at the General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio. She also was a member of the UAW. Leading up to her surgery, Christian was undergoing hormone treatment, but she had kept the transition quiet at work and people had no idea that she was about to come out. When she returned, she dropped her birth name and introduced herself as Joni Christian. The reaction was not positive. Her workplace became hostile and supervisors were transphobic. She was met with ridicule and sarcasm, and people shunned her. Women at the plant circulated a petition to keep her out of women's restrooms. Men stared at her and subjected her to cruel remarks. She responded by going to her UAW local and using legal services to sue GM for invasion of privacy. The company settled with her, and her workplace improved significantly. The president of the local, Gary Bryner, was very supportive. About Christian's experience, Bryner said: We had only started having women working on the line in 1971, and we had to get tough then with how some of the men were acting. So, women alone were a scarcity, let alone what Joni was doing. Some of the workers were acting like animals. But there were other brothers who were pretty embarrassed. She was paying dues, she had the right to become the person she wanted. After winning the lawsuit, Christian remained at GM for 30 more years, and she retired in 1999 with a pension. Since then, she has been active in trans causes and in her church. She said that the union was vital in the happy outcome: Returning to work after undergoing gender reassignment surgery was challenging. I would've been fired, if not for the union. The union respected me as a person, even if some of the members didn't approve of me. I learned that an injury to one was an injury to all.... Christian said that both her job at GM and her membership in UAW gave her the opportunity to become who she truly was: The company provided the paycheck that enabled me to pay for medical treatment, and the union protected me from being fired or discriminated against on the job. Christian's activism was driven by a simple idea: Not everyone has a union, but everyone deserves to have confidence that whatever their gender expression is, they should be able to get up and go to work without fearing that their livelihood will be taken from them. The situation at the time was a lonely one. No one in her plant was openly LGBTQ 46 years ago. Since then, GM has evolved and now offers diversity

programs and sensitivity training. The UAW has done even more to promote equality, but there is still work to be done.

Christian has a message about the future aimed at LGBTQ youth: The world is coming to an understanding that God's beautiful humanity is very diverse. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are telling the world that we are part of all societies and will settle for nothing less than respect. When we tell the next generation that it really does get better, we have to stand up and tell our stories so that their stories will be respected as well. Joni Christian stood up for herself and her gender identity at a time when the country was openly hostile to LGBTQ Americans. Not only did she use the tools at her disposal—her union and the legal system—to improve her own life, but Christian set a precedent and served as an example for those who now follow in her footsteps. Her story in brief: Joni will share her experience of finding inclusion in the United Church of Christ as a transgender person; then, turning that story into a passion for welcoming ALL to God's love. Through music, especially a song titled "God of Love," she has arrived at a new and different place. It has given me a connection that I pass on whenever I am given the opportunity. It has become a prayer, a mantra and a personal connection to the God of my understanding, in a way that keeps me focused. The message is as powerful today as when I first heard it. God is a God of Love and not a god of hate. It has become my life's work. It is my prayer to become the change I wish to see in the world. I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this [harmful / dangerous bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.