

**Ohio Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee
Opponent Testimony on HB 151
Ember Zelch
December 13, 2022**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking member Hicks-Hudson, and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to the amendment to House Bill 151 that would ban transgender girls from playing sports.

My name is Ember Zelch and I use she/they pronouns. I am a senior in high school, a sister, a daughter, an athlete, and I'm transgender. I intentionally leave that for last because it is the least important aspect of my identity. I am a full person who happens to be trans.

When I was younger, I played coed baseball. I loved it! When the teams became single sex I no longer fit in. I was teased and ostracized, though the most difficult part was not feeling like myself. So I quit. I came out as trans at 13 and wanted to play softball, but I was not old enough yet to start hormones. So I waited for three years. During that time, I became self-conscious, uncomfortable with my body, and lost all of my confidence. I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety.

Then one day, during the spring of my sophomore year, my mom knocked on my door. I could see she was tearing up. I asked her what was wrong and she showed me the email saying that since I had been on estrogen for a year I had finally been approved to play girls' softball. We both burst into tears. My brother saw us and asked "What happened?" I looked at him from my mom's arms and said "The state agrees that I'm a girl!" This was, and still is, one of the most affirming moments I have experienced since coming out.

Unfortunately, my joy was short lived. Weeks after my approval, the Ohio House first introduced legislation that would ban transgender athletes from playing sports. I was devastated. I had waited for three years, had just been approved to play, and now risked losing everything again. How could the state take this away from me so soon? I started researching the issue to find the best way to stop the ban. I found out that at that time I was the only trans female athlete approved to play on a girls' high school team in the entire state. I couldn't help but feel as though the legislation was a personal attack on me directly. I could not figure out why my state government hated me so much that they were willing to pass a law preventing me, and a handful of people like me, from doing something every other kid gets to do.

Being a trans athlete isn't easy, especially when you have to try and prove that you deserve something as simple as the basic right to try out for a sport, something that all your peers take for granted. People I've never met have suggested that I became trans just to do better in sports. Why would I "become" trans in order to have to fight every day for my right just to be perceived as who I am? Justifying my very existence to strangers is not something I enjoy or wish on anybody. Others have said I should just

play baseball with the boys. Playing on a boys' team would be a lie. I would have to pretend that I am not who I am. I would have to deny my truth to make other people feel comfortable. This is dehumanizing and unjust and no person, much less a child, should ever have to make this choice.

I'm here today trying to defend not just my right to play my senior year with my team, but the right of all trans athletes to participate in the sports they love. Playing on a girls' team has been an incredible experience for me. I have made so many friends and improved so much, despite starting so late. My teammates treat me just like anyone else on the team. So do my coaches. My teams are part of my family. We are all so different and come from different cliques but when we're together on the field we are there for each other, no matter what. Every kid should be lucky enough to have this experience.

To all the other trans kids in Ohio; I ask you not to give up. No matter what happens with this and other legislation that threatens to deny us our basic human rights, do not give up. Our rights matter. Our lives matter. You are all so brave and so beautiful. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Senators, I ask you to please consider my testimony and vote no on any legislation that prevents trans kids from playing sports. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions.