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Anita Somani, M.D.

State Representative, Ohio House District 11

HB 636 Sponsor Testimony

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chairman Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and all the members of the Civil Justice Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 636.

As my joint sponsor, Representative Whitted has just explained, this is a bill that will codify marriage equality in the state of Ohio. This would ensure that couples have the right to get married regardless of their gender, race, or sexual orientation. Currently, while this right is protected at the federal level based upon Supreme Court precedent, it is not protected within the Ohio Revised Code. We don't often think about biracial marriages being a problem because of the Supreme Court decision legalizing interracial marriages but a marriage like mine could be considered illegal if we don't have state protections. Think of all the people you know that are married to a brown or black person. Remember in the past even Catholics marrying Jews or Protestants was not supported by society. We've come a long way but we have so much more to do.

I believe that as state lawmakers, it is important to reiterate our support for marriage equality through the passage of this bill. The opportunity to legally marry provides couples with numerous significant advantages, including the ability to share insurance, access survivorship and military benefits, and, importantly, benefit from the tax deductions associated with filing taxes jointly.

Additionally, as a physician, I have seen the importance of couples having access to the benefit of medical decision-making for their spouse. Before marriage equality was guaranteed at the federal level, many same sex couples suffered when one of them went through a medical crisis and the other was shut out of the decision-making process because they were not legally married. Imagine your partner being in a life threatening accident and because your relationship isn't legally recognized you can't go into the ICU or have medical power of attorney. This bill would ensure that no couple will ever have to endure this hardship in the state of Ohio.

I also wanted to take this time to share some of my constituent's personal feelings and stories on the subject. One constituent stated "Ever since Obergefell I have noticed that my students have felt more liberated to live their lives more authentically. There was the belief that with marriage equality, LGBTQ+ people were being more accepted. To an extent I believe this to be true. My fear is as the new administration comes to power, that the security blanket will be eroded for my students and we will see a decline in their perceived safety and acceptance. This could be

catastrophic for our marginalized LGBTQ+ youth,”. Another raised concerns about his husband losing access to his military retirement benefits should their marriage no longer be legally recognized. Yet another told me they were frustrated that marriage equality was still even up for debate. By passing this legislation, we will be able to address any fears about the future of the right to marriage in Ohio.

I want end by reading this message from a constituent “I’ll never forget June 26, 2015 — “Decision Day” or “The Day Love Won.” It rained all day as my husband, Brian Smith, and I watched TV news, hoping to hear good news about marriage equality. YES! Love won!!! We hugged and kissed and cried - my dream of seeing our child walk down the aisle one day was not lost “just because” their orientation is gay. We felt the need to celebrate in community with others and so that evening we went to the First Congregational Church United Church of Christ on East Broad Street where a Community Service of Readings, Songs & Prayers” to commemorate and give thanks for the Decision would take place. We’d never been there before and when we arrived in the driving rain we were not sure which door to enter - there were three. We knew the front door facing Broad Street probably wasn’t it, so we sat in the car watching the side door to see if anyone went in. Soon, another car pulled in and three people ran toward the building - holding coats and umbrellas against the downpour. They entered! And, so we suited up and made a run for it. As soon as we were inside we saw that the three people we’d followed were our child’s former Youth Pastor from the United Methodist Church we left after we were shunned for supporting our child; the pastor’s wife; and a friend who had worked with the youth. That was both shocking and comforting. All through the service we remembered that when our child came out to us in 2013 they said, “People who are forced to live in the dark often wind up doing dark things. I want to live my life in the light.” That resonated with me then and continues to today. To me, Marriage Equality means that everyone can freely and openly live and love in the light. That’s where we all belong.”

As leaders in this state, we have to think about how our actions affect our constituents and what messages they send. I believe that the message we should be sending is that we believe all Ohioans deserve the right to marry whomever they love, without fear that their marriage might someday be void under the law. Most people support marriage equality, and we should honor that support by passing this bill. Thank you Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chairman Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and all the members of the Civil Justice Committee for listening to our testimony today, and we will gladly answer any questions at this time.