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Members of the House Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing our testimony here today. My name is Lalitha Pamidigantam, I use she/they pronouns, and I am here on behalf of YWCA Columbus to oppose House Bill 6 on the grounds that it is an unnecessary legislation that does not advance the cause of women's or girls' rights, and in fact does the opposite. YWCA Columbus is on a mission to eliminate racism and empower women, and we have been serving women and girls in the Central Ohio region for over a century. We take this mission and our work seriously, rooting our stances in research and a deep understanding about women and their needs. It is with the emphasis on empowering women that we deliver this testimony against HB6 today. That is, YWCA Columbus is an agency that is the expert on womanhood, and we are trans inclusive, because trans women are women, and trans girls are girls.

While there are plenty of scientists, biologists, and experts who can explain why trans kids should be allowed to play in their gender-aligned sport and dispel any false understandings about biology, I want to discuss today the benefits of inclusivity. Including marginalized people in any setting, including sports and comradery, increases empathy, critical thinking, and understanding of one another's differences. The ability of children and young people to play on the sports team that aligns with their gender is a necessary element of socialization and belonging. At YWCA Columbus, we are increasingly concerned about the well-being of all young girls, and we are aware that report after report notes that queer youth are struggling.¹ Sports are an incredibly important part of a child's social life, teaching them valuable life lessons and overall improving their mental and physical health, leaving them better adjusted – and this is even truer for transgender youth. Research from the Center for American Progress cites that, “where transgender youth encounter accepting and affirming policies and peers, including transgender-affirming sports policies, their risk of poor mental health and suicidality decreases.”² To us, it is clear that the benefit of belonging to a sport team in an inclusive setting outweighs the *perceived* cost of being inclusive. We do not believe that this bill will “protect girls” because its outcome will actually target some of the most marginalized girls.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0213-yrbs.html>

² <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fair-play/>

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This bill targets only a handful of Ohio students currently playing, and would prevent trans youth from accessing spaces that would potentially support their mental and physical well-being – even though trans youth are among the most likely to suffer adverse impacts such as suicide, homelessness, trauma, and other adverse outcomes. This is legislation that may make the crisis of youth mental health worse; against the backdrop of a few traumatizing years, isolation, and reduced connection, this legislation targets marginalized children who just want to play sports in a way that makes them feel like they belong. YWCA Columbus believes in creating an atmosphere of belonging – like that of sports teams and comradery amongst athletes – and as discussed, knows such belonging can potentially mitigate those adverse outcomes.

Furthermore, I want to be very clear about our voice: not all women believe this legislation is about protecting and serving women's rights. Any women's movement that is exclusive of trans women and girls is one that cannot reach full equity. Because once again, trans women are women, and trans girls are girls, and it costs us nothing to include them in our mission to empower all women. In fact, YWCA Columbus serves trans women and girls – our programming across the board, is inclusive of trans women and girls, non-binary folks, and those who can identify with a girl-centered experience. We know the benefits of such spaces, as they empower young girls, giving them a space to grow into themselves and build networks and support systems with other young girls. Access to such precious spaces is important for *all* girls, especially those from more marginalized backgrounds, and we ensure that our programs serve all of those we serve with dignity. We speak as a historically women's agency: trans women are women, trans girls are girls, young trans people deserve to be treated with dignity, and as a state, we should let kids play and not restrict an outlet that can improve, if not save, their lives.

As experts in the experiences and needs of girlhood and womanhood, we strongly encourage this committee to not pass HB6 through.

Thank you. I'm happy to take questions.

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