



Belonging Begins Here.

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Chairman Bird, Ranking member Robinson, and members of the Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is Savannah Carlstrom Page and I use she/they pronouns. I am a Licensed Social Worker in the state of Ohio and received my Masters degree in Social Work from Ohio State University. I started my career in school-based community mental health services, and currently serve as the Director of Behavioral Health & Clinical Services at Kaleidoscope Youth Center. I am here today in strong opposition to House Bill 8, which is unnecessary at best, and dangerous at worst.

Should this bill pass, I am unaware of any new rights that will be established for parents or guardians; they will continue to be able to request that their student be exempt from certain lessons, to consent or withhold consent for certain services, and to communicate with their young person's service providers, as is already the case. What this bill will accomplish, if passed, is further marginalization and fear among our queer and trans young people. Already lacking representation in their schools and study materials, they will feel even less reflected in their learning and less seen by their teachers. Already afraid of the consequences of living fully as their authentic selves at home and at school, they will be even less likely to ask for help, to develop healthy relationships with trusted adults, and to have opportunities to safely explore their identities in their own ways and on their own timelines. Most disturbingly, some young people will still seek out help; they'll be struggling with their mental health, maybe having thoughts about self-harm or suicide; they'll have been victims of bullying at school or unaccepting and un-affirming environments at home; they'll find an adult at school who they believe to be caring and safe, and they'll trust them with their heaviest struggles, their most private concerns, and their most sacred ideas about who they are and how they want to present themselves to the world; and then that adult, due to the pressures of this and every other homophobic and transphobic bill being considered by this body, will tell that young person's parent every word. And that parent, empowered by far-right talking points like "don't say gay," by waves of legislation restricting queer and trans access to sports and life-saving healthcare, by neo-Nazis chanting "no transgenders on our streets" at drag events raising money for KYC's services for queer and trans young people, and by this legislative body and its "Parents' Bill of Rights," will have every right to dismiss, shame, harm, and abandon that young person. That is what this bill aligns itself with and stands for. As a social worker, I ask you to join me in standing instead on the side of safe, appropriate, and confidential care for all young people, including our queer and trans youth, in collaboration with, not under the rigid and sometimes harmful control of, the adults in their lives.

This bill attempts to solve a problem that does not exist, lauding itself as a new “Parents’ Bill of Rights;” but these rights are already well-established and protected under the law. As a social worker and mental health clinician in Ohio public schools, some of my responsibilities included obtaining parent or guardian consent for my services, gathering information from parents/guardians about their young person, communicating with parents/guardians at regular intervals about their young person’s progress, and collaborating with parents/guardians on plans for next steps when services ended. Since the Ohio Revised Code bars youth under the age of 14 from receiving mental health treatment without parent/guardian consent, and limits those between the ages of 14 and 17 to 6 sessions or 30 days of services without parent/guardian consent, this is standard practice. In the case that parents/guardians want or need more information about their young person’s care, they also already have the right to request treatment records.

Of course, communicating and collaborating with parents was not my only responsibility as a school-based clinician; I also had a legal and ethical obligation to respect and protect my clients’ rights to privacy and confidentiality. The National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics states that social workers “should respect clients’ right to privacy,” “may disclose confidential information when appropriate with valid consent from a client,” and “should protect confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service.” The Code of Ethics also notes that disclosure should include the least amount of confidential information necessary and should only include information that is directly relevant to the purpose for which the disclosure is made. Ethical disclosure can play out in a myriad of ways in our schools. In practice, I might inform a young person’s school counselor that they had been working with me on test anxiety so that the counselor could be appropriately supportive on test days, but not disclose to that counselor that the student had also been talking to me about personal family dynamics. I might summarize a session for a parent, clearly explaining all of the coping skills I had taught their child and how they could practice them at home, but not disclose that the young person had requested to work on anger management skills in order to better regulate their frustration with that same parent. I might also inform a parent in great detail about their young person’s mental health goals and the methods we were using to address those goals, but not disclose that their young person had come out to me as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and was working on deciding who in their life they would feel safe and comfortable coming out to next. Sometimes, this information was important to withhold because the young person was planning to come out to their family once they decided when and how they wanted to share; sometimes this information needed to be withheld because the young person was concerned that if their parent knew about their identity, they would be rejected, shamed, verbally and/or physically abused, or kicked out of their home.

One of the ethical principles of Social Work states that “social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.” Despite this bill’s focus on parental “rights,” or perhaps more aptly, parental control, youth are people. Queer and trans youth are people. As students in schools, as clients receiving healthcare services, as members of this community, they are inherently worthy people, deserving of the same rights to self-determination, privacy, and confidentiality as anyone else. Throughout the development and discussion of this bill, it has become increasingly apparent that their personhood is neither seen nor respected by this legislative body. The fact that protections against disclosure to parents that would result in abuse, abandonment, or neglect were recently removed from this bill makes this abundantly clear; this bill’s proponents would like to protect a parent’s “right” to harm their child,



particularly if that child identifies with the LGBTQIA+ community. I urge you to join me in opposing House Bill 8, and protecting the rights of all of our young people.

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