

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Steward, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Ohio House Public Health Policy Committee. My name is Cole-Finley Nelson, my pronouns are he/him/his, and I am requesting that you open your eyes and soften your hearts so you can come to recognize the intrinsic human value of transgender lives and oppose HB68.

Our stories as trans people are quite often traumatic and full of fear, abuse, and pain. This is not because we are trans, but because of the hateful views and rhetoric society targets against us. You are taking advantage of the stigma applied to minority groups and forcing people to expose themselves in a way that puts them in danger, because you know we will not be silent. You know we will not stop fighting for our equality. I sat in HB6 to give testimony, shaking on the verge of panic because of the danger I know providing my story could incite for me.

Just because we won't give up and are willing to sacrifice our safety, does not mean we should have to convince someone of our humanity and value by offering up our stories of suffering that are then weaponized against us.

And yet here we are, with me standing before you to share my story so you may see the humanity that exists within the trans people who these bills are targeting.

You aim to pass these bills, making us come and be seen in the spotlight cast by those who hate us and then leaving other people to do the dirty work of killing us after they go into effect.

Just because the physical blood is not on your hands does not mean you are exempt from blame and responsibility for these deaths. Even those who do nothing, who attempt to claim neutrality, you are still guilty.

I have read the proponent testimonies, and have found that they are made up of mostly parents who feel angry that their children do not fit the mold they are trying to force them into.

They are grasping for power that was not theirs to begin with. Of these stories told, many of the children described are revealed to still be pursuing support and transition - still identifying as trans - but the parents continue to be unsupportive.

From first hand experience, I can tell you that no amount of forced change will work to effectively alter a person. What it can do is make us feel unsafe to be honest with the very people we are supposed to believe will love and support us.

Control and safety are not intrinsically connected, not when the control comes from people who are trying to snuff out your existence.

At 9 years old I had turned to taking blades against my skin multiple times a day, learning to express my own fears and instilled shame around my identity through self-destruction to hide it from others.

However, when I started Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), there was a profound shift in my mental state that has been wild to experience. It is the feeling of finally finding the correct key within a sea of keys you have been picking through one by one. I have described it to a friend of mine to be like finally feeling as though my thoughts are my own.

Among cisgender individuals, it is taken for granted that your body and thoughts align with who you are - even if there are parts of yourself you wish were different. There is a tremendous separation between simple dislike of some part of yourself and dysphoria. Dysphoria is an intense recognition that there are parts of you that feel like antagonistic imposters rallying against who you really are.

For someone who is not trans, it is nearly impossible to be able to fully articulate what the experience of being trapped in a body that doesn't represent you is like. Imprisoned in skin and bones that dictate to the world the labels society has created.

Part of my draw to self-harm when I was younger was to be able to feel connected to my own body. I felt like I was breathing as I cut holes in my skin, flaying myself open to show my inner humanity that exists regardless of the interpretation of my outside presentation.

Those of you who sit here, blindly standing behind this bill, your perspective is one of privilege and power. You will not hold the wailing youth who no longer have access to hormone blockers and so are now experiencing the trauma of a puberty that doesn't align with their gender. You will not clean or stitch up the self-inflicted gashes of youth who took blades against themselves to escape feeling trapped in their skin because they are not seen for who they are. You will not stand with us at the graves of the ones who felt it better to leave the earth than fake an existence rooted in denial of who they are. You not bearing witness to the tragic results of bills like this does not mean they don't exist. It highlights that you should not be the ones with the power to pass them.

As I previously mentioned, the overwhelming narrative I see in proponent testimonies are parents who are seeking ways to control and manage their children, to "save" them from living their truth. These are not scientific facts that prove youth should not have access to gender affirming healthcare, these are the words of parents, scared of losing control over the individualism of their children.

If this bill is permitted to pass, it WILL result in death. That is not a dramatic statement, it is simply a fact.

The people this bill will impact the most cannot be here because they are the LGBTQ+ youth who are silenced by societal and parental forces. I am here to be their voice, to urge you to see the harm that will come from this bill and to demonstrate that you care about the youth of Ohio by opposing HB68.