

Chair Lipps, Vice-Chair Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Public Health Policy Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in opposition to House Bill 68.

My name is Ember Zelch, I use she/they pronouns, and I'm a transgender woman. I have always felt different but I didn't have the vocabulary to explain how I felt or who I was to those around me. Even as a little child, I knew I wasn't like other people. I didn't fit in with the boys, who often made it clear I was not welcome to be part of their groups. My closest friends were almost always girls, but even some girls didn't accept me. I always felt on the fringe, desperately wanting to belong but never quite fitting in either group.

I was 10 when I first told someone that I thought I was really a girl. This friend said, "Well, you'll always be a boy to me." I took this to mean that something was wrong with me and became ashamed of how I felt. It was three more years before I finally told my family who I truly am. My parents immediately found me a therapist to help me work through my gender dysphoria.

While I had been thinking about presenting as a girl for many years, my parents and my therapist helped me find ways to slowly socially transition. I grew my hair out and cut it in a more feminine style, I wore more feminine types of clothing, and I asked close friends and family to start using feminine pronouns. I will never forget the first time a stranger in public called me "she." I was with my grandmother and she said my entire face lit up with pure joy.

The longer my hair grew and the more feminine I looked the happier I became. Then puberty hit faster than anyone expected. When my voice started to change I felt like my whole world turned upside down. I had passed as a girl for several years. Now, suddenly, it didn't matter what I wore or how I looked, people thought I was a boy. My parents spent almost a year petitioning our insurance company to cover puberty blockers without any luck. Eventually, we decided to let me start estrogen, a decision that was not made lightly. My parents and I had many conversations with multiple mental health and medical professionals from three different hospital systems before we decided on the types of treatment we thought would work best for me. All the doctors carefully laid out the risks and benefits, explained in depth what we could expect from every option, and

gave us numerous resources to help us make informed decisions. Not once were we pressured into anything. This is how gender affirming care works. You can't go into a doctor's office one day and come out with hormones and a surgery date the next. Just like any other medical situation it is a complicated process, often with second, third, and fourth opinions. When minors are involved, doctors are even more cautious, and no decisions are made without the consent of legal guardians.

Accessing gender affirming care has allowed me to become the person I was meant to be. It has helped me fit in, become comfortable in my own skin, and be excited about my future. Working together with my parents and my doctors to make informed medical decisions has given me dignity, empowered me to think critically and carefully about all the choices I make, and helped me feel like a full human being.

I've listened to the testimony of the few people who spoke in support of this bill. Many people I know were shocked by a particular speaker who stated that transgender people and those who support us are possessed by demons. I wasn't surprised. I've been called worse. To be honest, the idea of being possessed or controlled by someone or something other than myself is not new to me. I spent 13 years of my life pretending to be someone I wasn't. I felt like a stranger in my own body. Only when I was able to receive gender affirming care was I able to view my body as my own and truly be myself. If I had been forced to undergo male puberty I know that I would have reached a point in which my reflection would be of a stranger. I am truly grateful that I have had the ability to prevent my body from evolving into an unrecognizable being. No person, even a child, should have to feel as though their body is not their own. No government should dehumanize its citizens by destroying their autonomy and making medical decisions for them.

Please vote "no" on this harmful legislation. Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions.