

Chairwoman Roegner, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to HB68.

My name is Ember Zelch and I use she/they pronouns. I am a student, a sister, a daughter, an athlete, and I'm transgender. I intentionally leave that for last because it is the least important aspect of my identity. I am a full person who happens to be trans.

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 have spoken in support of this bill. Many people I know were shocked by a man last spring 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.

In addition to affirming medical care, playing softball has also helped me find my way. When I was younger, I played coed baseball. I loved it! When the teams became single sex I no longer fit in. I was teased and ostracized, though the most difficult part was not feeling like myself. So I quit. When I came out as trans at 13 I wanted to play softball, but I was not old enough yet to start hormones. So I waited for three years. During that time, I became self-conscious, uncomfortable with my body, and lost all of my confidence. I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety.

Then one day, during the spring of my sophomore year, my mom knocked on my door. I could see she was tearing up. I asked her what was wrong and she showed me the email saying that since I had been on estrogen for a year I had finally been approved to play girls' softball. We both burst into tears. My brother saw us and asked "What happened?" I looked at him from my mom's arms and said "The state agrees that I'm a girl!" This was, and still is, one of the most affirming moments I have experienced since coming out.

Unfortunately, my joy was short lived. Weeks after my approval, the Ohio House first introduced legislation that would ban transgender athletes from playing sports. I was devastated. I had waited for three years, had just been approved to play, and now risked losing everything again. How could the state take this away from me so soon?

I started researching the issue to find the best way to stop the ban. I learned that at that time I was the only trans female athlete approved to play on a girls' high school team in the entire state. I couldn't help but feel as though the legislation was a personal attack on me directly. I could not

figure out why my elected officials hated me so much that they were willing to pass a law preventing me, and a handful of people like me, from doing something every other kid gets to do.

Being a trans athlete isn't easy, especially when you have to try and prove that you deserve something as simple as the basic right to try out for a sport. People I've never met have suggested that I became trans just to do better in sports. Why would I "become" trans in order to have to fight every day for my right just to be perceived as who I am? Justifying my very existence to strangers is not something I enjoy or wish on anybody.

Others have said I should just play baseball with the boys. In many ways, this would be easier. I wouldn't have to go through the time consuming and embarrassing process of submitting intimate medical details to the state. Also, the boys at my school have two beautiful fields to play on. Most years our softball team has to cancel half our games because our old field has no drainage. But the fact is that for me playing on a boys' team would be a lie. I would have to pretend that I am not who I am. I would have to deny my truth to make other people feel comfortable. This is dehumanizing and unjust and no person, much less a child, should ever have to make this choice.

Playing on a girls' team has been an incredible experience for me. I have made so many friends and improved so much, despite starting so late. My teammates treat me just like anyone else on the team. So do my coaches. My teams are part of my family. We are all so different and come from different cliques, but when we're together on the field we are there for each other, no matter what. Every kid should be lucky enough to have this experience.

Please vote "no" on this harmful legislation. Thank you for your time.