



Belonging Begins Here.

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Chair Thomas and members of the Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity today to testify in opposition to House Bill 249. My name is Svetlana Harlan, and I serve as the Communications & Advocacy Manager at Kaleidoscope Youth Center (KYC), Ohio's largest and longest-standing organization dedicated to supporting LGBTQIA+ youth. Since 1994, KYC has provided a safe space for youth ages 12-24 to exist as their authentic selves.

As written, House Bill 249 classifies "exhibiting a gender identity that is different from the performer's or entertainer's biological sex" as one of five prohibited performance types in any space where minors may be present. The other categories listed are topless dancers, go-go dancers, exotic dancers, and strippers. So, drag is the only category where the performer is penalized for the clothing they put on rather than the clothing they take off.

This bill states that all five of these classifications "appeal to a prurient interest," meaning that they are inherently sexual. By grouping drag performance or gender-diverse expression alongside sexually explicit acts, this bill implies that all expressions of gender diversity are inherently sexual. They are not. There is nothing inherently sexual about wearing clothing that differs from what someone might assume based on your sex assigned at birth – whether on stage or in daily life.

As someone who works directly with LGBTQ+ youth, I see every day the harm caused by stigma and fear surrounding gender expression. For many young people, seeing drag performers and gender-diverse adults gives them hope and confidence to live authentically. Drag is an art form – one rooted in creativity, self-expression, and community joy. Criminalizing it sends a dangerous message to youth that their identity is something shameful.

As the Advocacy Manager at KYC, I spoke with some of our youth on the proposed ban on drag for those under 18, and here's what they had to say:



“As a trans person, I love theater and always have. It’s been my outlet for a long time. According to the wording of this Bill, I wouldn’t be able to do theater anymore. This bill would harm not just the drag community, but theater in general.” - KYC Youth, 17

“Obviously, if there’s overt sexuality or nudity in the performance, it should be 18+. But banning all drag and cross-dressing on stage? That’s clearly about something else.” - KYC Youth, 15

“A couple of weeks ago, we went and saw my younger sibling in their school play, where she was playing the role of a prince. So, according to this Bill, that’s somehow in the same category as exotic dancing? That doesn’t make sense.” - KYC Youth, 16

Young people have spoken out on House Bill 249, which claims to represent their best interests. And they are saying it clearly – the language of this Bill does not make sense. And besides, performances that are obscene or harmful to juveniles are already illegal under Ohio law.

Beyond youth spaces, drag performers across Ohio have long contributed to the social fabric and wellbeing of our communities. The West Family and the [Nina West Fund of The Columbus Foundation](#) have raised more than \$2 million to support nonprofit organizations serving vulnerable Ohioans. [The Rubi Girls](#) in Dayton, performing together since 1984, have raised over \$3 million for HIV/AIDS research, young people experiencing homelessness, college scholarships, and much more. These artists are community builders and philanthropists, not criminals.

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech and expression. HB 249 undermines that right by falsely framing LGBTQ+ artistic and cultural expression as obscene. Freedom of expression includes the freedom of gender expression for everyone.

Kaleidoscope Youth Center stands in strong opposition to House Bill 249. Drag is art. Drag is joy. Drag is freedom of expression — and censorship or criminalization of drag performance violates that freedom.

For the sake of our youth, our communities, and our shared constitutional rights, I urge you to vote no on House Bill 249. Thank you.

Respectfully,



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