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Dear Chairman Jim Thomas, Vice Chair D.J. Swearingen, Ranking Member Eric Syneberg, and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

This bill would effectively criminalize drag performance and potentially subject transgender people to criminal penalties simply for expressing their gender identity in public spaces. I urge you to reject HB 249 because of its vague and unconstitutional language, its threat to fundamental freedoms, and the harm it would inflict on Ohio's communities and economy. There are 4 ways this bill would cause harmful effects on Ohio citizens:

1. The bill's broad language invites discrimination.

HB 249 targets individuals who "exhibit a gender identity different from their sex assigned at birth" through clothing, makeup, or other physical presentation. That definition is so sweeping it could apply to countless forms of artistic expression and everyday conduct. Theater actors, comedians, musicians, and even participants in costume events could fall under scrutiny if someone deems their performance "harmful to juveniles." Such vagueness invites selective enforcement and harassment—particularly of transgender, gender-nonconforming, and even cisgender people who do not conform to traditional gender expectations.

2. HB 249 threatens First Amendment rights.

Drag is a protected form of artistic and expressive performance under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Courts across the country have already struck down similar laws as unconstitutional violations of free speech and expression. Passing this bill would not only violate core constitutional principles but also waste taxpayer money defending a measure Ohio is unlikely to sustain in court.

3. The bill endangers Ohio's arts community and local economies.

Drag performance and other forms of gender-expression theater are integral to Ohio's vibrant performing arts landscape. These performances take place at community events, theaters, fundraisers, and festivals statewide—often enriching local culture and generating revenue. By restricting drag to venues labeled as adult cabarets, HB 249 falsely equates it with obscenity, stigmatizing artists and discouraging venues from hosting inclusive events that strengthen community life.

4. The bill sends a harmful message about transgender and gender-nonconforming Ohioans.

Instead of protecting people from harm, HB 249 risks criminalizing individuals for how they dress, perform, or express themselves. It sends the message that transgender and gender-nonconforming people's existence in public is inherently suspect. Laws should safeguard dignity and freedom—not promote fear or exclusion.

Ohio's lawmakers should focus on improving residents' lives by strengthening public services, investing in the arts, and upholding constitutional rights for all, including our LGBTQIA+ neighbors. I urge this committee to stand for equality and vote NO on House Bill 249.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Carissa Santangelo