

Chairman Thomas, Vice-Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and Members of the Ohio House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify as an opponent of HB 249, the Indecent Exposure Modernization Act.

My name is Shawn Belt, and I am the President of the Board for the North Coast Men's Chorus, a nonprofit arts organization that for more than three decades has presented uplifting, high-quality musical entertainment to audiences across Northeast Ohio.

Our mission is simple but vital: to bring people together through song, to promote understanding, joy, and inclusion through the power of performance, and to support our singing membership. We are proud to be one of the largest and most visible LGBTQ+ arts organizations in the state, and to count among our singers cisgender and transgender men, as well as nonbinary people, who all share a love of music and community.

Every performance we give — whether a holiday concert, a Broadway revue, or a community outreach program — is built on the freedom to express ourselves authentically and artistically. We use humor, storytelling, costume, movement, and emotion to bring music to life. That is what the performing arts *are*: an act of expression, imagination, and truth.

HB 249 would threaten that freedom. The bill's vague and sweeping language creates a chilling effect for any performer who challenges gender expectations — even in family-friendly, mainstream artistic spaces. Under this bill, a chorus member wearing makeup, a costume that crosses traditional gender norms, or embodying a character different from their own gender identity could be accused of “recklessly” performing as an “adult cabaret entertainer.” That is not just unconstitutional — it's absurd.

North Coast Men's Chorus concerts often celebrate themes of pride, self-acceptance, and love. We have performed pieces honoring transgender lives and experiences. We've used theatrical storytelling to explore how society sees gender and identity — because art helps us understand one another.

This bill would cast a shadow over that work. It invites fear and self-censorship. It tells artists and arts organizations to second-guess every creative choice — not because it's obscene or harmful, but because someone might *perceive* it as gender-nonconforming.

That is not how a free society treats its artists. It's not how Ohio should treat its citizens.

We are also deeply concerned for the safety of our transgender and gender-nonconforming chorus members and audience members. The vague and discriminatory language of HB 249 doesn't just threaten performers in drag shows — it threatens trans people simply existing in public.

Someone “perceived” to exhibit a gender identity different from that assigned at birth could be accused of violating this law simply for living authentically, or for performing in a church, theater, school, or park concert. That’s not public safety — that’s targeting.

Ohio’s trans and queer residents already face increased harassment and violence. HB 249 would compound that harm, sending the dangerous message that their very existence is “obscene” or “harmful.” It would legitimize discrimination under the guise of morality.

If the true intent of HB 249 is to protect minors from obscenity, that protection already exists. Ohio has long-standing laws regulating obscene materials and performances. HB 249 goes far beyond that - it equates queerness, gender diversity, and drag performance with obscenity itself.

Beyond the moral and constitutional concerns, the arts are a major economic engine in Ohio. Arts and culture attract tourism, drive local business, and create community vibrancy. Drag performance, musical theater, and choral arts all contribute to that ecosystem.

Bills like HB 249 threaten to silence or drive away performers, audiences, and entire events. At a time when our communities need more joy, creativity, and connection, this bill offers fear, censorship, and division instead.

The North Coast Men’s Chorus stands firmly for artistic freedom, for community inclusion, and for the dignity of every performer — regardless of gender identity or expression.

We urge you to reject HB 249. It is vague, unnecessary, and unconstitutional. It does not protect children — it only endangers artists and community members who already face misunderstanding and prejudice.

Let Ohio be known **not** for silencing voices, but for celebrating the music and communities that make us who we are — diverse, expressive, and free.

Thank you for your service to our state and for your time and consideration.

Peace,

Shawn Belt