



June 3, 2025 | Testimony in Opposition HB 96 Anti-LGBTQ+ Amendments | Senate Government Finance Committee

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony today. My name is Dwayne Steward, I use he/him pronouns and I am the new Executive Director of Equality Ohio. We are a 20-year strong organization providing advocacy and legal support to Ohio's LGBTQ+ community. Our mission is to create lived and legal equality for all Ohioians. **I submit this testimony on behalf of Equality Ohio in opposition to several anti-LGBTQ+ amendments that have been added to this year's budget bill, HB 96.**

These amendments, which include dangerously defunding homeless shelters that assist transgender youth, erasing LGBTQ+ youth through banning LGBTQ+ materials for minors in public libraries, inaccurately defining gender as only two sexes, and irresponsibly banning health insurance coverage for mental health care for transgender individuals. These amendments are not only discriminatory but they are also detrimental to the welfare of thousands of LGBTQ+ Ohioans, and legislates harm against some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Firstly, the amendment to defund homeless shelters that support transgender youth is a direct assault on the safety and well-being of Ohio's youth in crisis. Transgender youth are already at an increased risk of homelessness due to family rejection, discrimination, and violence. According to the Williams Institute at UCLA, 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+, with a significant portion being transgender.

Recently I got the opportunity to meet a 16-year-old transgender student in Troy, Ohio who told me, after coming out to their family, they were thrown out of their home with nowhere to turn. For months, they lived on the streets, facing constant harassment and danger. It was only when they found refuge in a youth shelter in Dayton that offered services to help LGBTQ+ youth that she began to feel safe and supported. The shelter provided not just a roof over her head but also access to counseling, healthcare, and educational opportunities. Stripping away funding



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from such shelters would leave countless young people without the support they desperately need.

Another alarming amendment in the HB 96 budget bill is the ban on LGBTQ+ books for minors. This is a direct attack on the freedom of information and the rights of LGBTQ+ youth to access supportive and affirming literature. Research shows that exposure to diverse narratives is crucial for the development of empathy and understanding in children. According to a study by the American Library Association, access to LGBTQ-themed books and resources can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and improve mental health outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

In my hometown of Delaware, Ohio, I recently met with a family who was supporting a 14-year-old struggling with their sexual orientation. They felt isolated in their school environment. It was only after discovering LGBTQ-themed books at the local library that Jamie found solace and realized they were not alone. These books provided Jamie with a sense of belonging and helped them navigate their identity. Banning such literature would deprive countless young people of the support and affirmation they need to thrive. Not allowing youth to see themselves in the stories they read in school and their local public library erases them and invalidates their lived experience.

The amendment that defines gender strictly as male and female is a denial of the lived experiences of thousands of transgender and intersex Ohioans. Science and medical research have shown that gender is a spectrum and is not limited to binary definitions. According to the American Psychological Association, gender identity can be different from the sex assigned at birth, and respecting this identity is crucial for the mental health and well-being of transgender and non-binary individuals. Passing legislation that invalidates these identities will only lead to increased mental health issues and stigmatization.

Take, for example, the story of a non-binary teenager I recently engaged with in Portsmouth, Ohio. They struggled with their identity for years, facing bullying and isolation at school. It was only when they found support from their community and acceptance of their true self that they



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began to thrive academically and socially. Legislating against gender diversity would strip away the progress made by individuals like Alex and push them back into the shadows.

The Human Rights Campaign reports that 42% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with rates being higher among transgender and non-binary youth. Furthermore, the Trevor Project's National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health found that LGBTQ+ youth who had access to supportive and affirming spaces were significantly less likely to attempt suicide. These statistics highlight the urgent need to support the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than enacting legislation that exacerbates their struggles.

There is another harmful amendment in the HB 96 budget bill that bans health insurance coverage for mental health care for transgender individuals. This amendment not only denies necessary care but also exacerbates the mental health crisis within the transgender community. As mentioned above, transgender individuals face higher rates of mental health issues due to stigma, discrimination, and lack of access to affirming care.

While working with Kent State University early this year I got the opportunity to meet a student who told me that he struggled with severe anxiety and depression related to gender dysphoria. With the help of a supportive healthcare provider and access to gender affirming mental health services, they were able to receive the necessary therapy and medication to manage their mental health. The improvement in their mental health had a profound impact on their overall well-being, allowing them to thrive in their personal and collegiate life. Denying health insurance coverage for such essential services would have devastating consequences for individuals to lead healthy, productive lives.

Other anti-LGBTQ+ amendments that should be removed include:

- **Pride flag ban at government buildings** - this is a direct violation of freedom of speech and erases the contributions of LGBTQ+ government employees and signals the erasure of LGBTQ+ communities



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- **Banning menstrual products in men's restrooms in public buildings** - this broad ban will have many unintended implications for all communities, and lack of access to menstrual products is already a concern for many Ohioans, this would simply exacerbate this concern

There is no body of research that proves the need for these harmful amendments or any other anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, for that matter. However, there is a large body of research that shows how anti-LGBTQ+ legislation hurts youth and families.

Recent surveys in Ohio have shown:

- The overwhelming majority (92%) of LGBTQ+ young people said their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics.
- Over half (52%) of LGBTQ+ young people said that they or their family considered moving to a different state because of anti-LGBTQ+ politics and laws.
- Anti-transgender state-level laws directly cause up to a 72% increase in suicide attempts among transgender and nonbinary young people.

In conclusion, the anti-LGBTQ+ amendments in HB 96 are discriminatory and pose a significant threat to the mental health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of Ohioans. Thank you for your time and consideration today. Equality Ohio strongly urges this committee to remove these harmful amendments for the safety of our youth and the communities we serve.