



Celebrating 25 years of serving and supporting LGBTQIA+ youth!

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Kaleidoscope Youth Center serves and supports LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults.

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Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Erin Upchurch and I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 11, the Ohio Fairness Act.

I am a Licensed Independent Social Worker in the State of Ohio, with Supervisory Designation. Having practiced for 20 years, my career has included work with youth, families, and communities in the areas of mental health, substance abuse, trauma recovery and wellness. I additionally provide training and education to mental health professionals, youth providers, and organizations; as well as social work students as Adjunct Faculty at The Ohio State University College of Social Work. I also proudly serve as the Executive Director of Kaleidoscope Youth Center (KYC), an organization celebrating 25 years of serving and supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) youth and young adults.

Kaleidoscope Youth Center is largest and longest standing organization serving LGBTQIA+ youth in the state of Ohio. Since 1994, we have been the leaders and experts in meeting the needs of and supporting LGBTQIA+ young people in our community through our drop in center, community education and training, advocacy and civic engagement; health and wellness; and housing opportunities. KYC works in partnership with young people to provide safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQIA+ youth, ages 12-24, through trauma informed and culturally responsive positive youth development programs that focus on building resiliency and reducing risk factors. We are the hub for the Ohio GSA (Gender & Sexuality Alliance) Network, that enlists the support of Ohio's LGBTQIA+ youth, allies, and school personnel to establish and increase protective factors to all youth in school communities throughout the state.

I have proudly called Ohio home for the past 40 years. I love the beauty of our landscapes, the diversity of all 88 counties, and of course our trademark Midwestern values of being kind and polite. I am the parent to two teenagers; both in high school and in the process of looking at options for college and transitioning to adult life. And although I'm excited for them to be independent, I'm secretly hoping that they will choose to stay in Ohio. This however, will be dependent upon available opportunities, and whether or not they feel safe and as if they belong in their home state.

Ohioans currently support anti-discrimination policies, with 75% being in favor of instituting employment and housing laws, making it illegal to discriminate based upon being LGBTQIA+. SB 11 will have the most impact on LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults who call Ohio home. Our young people not only desire a sense of safety and belonging; they understand that this basic need is also

the right of them and their peers. Navigating early adulthood can be a challenge in and of itself; without the added concerns of being denied housing, employment, or public accommodations simply because of who they are.

We are all interconnected, which means that discrimination is an issue that not only affects LGBTQIA+ persons living in Ohio, but our society as a whole. It is estimated that sixty-four billion dollars is lost annually due to Americans leaving the workforce in response to, or a result of discrimination. Statewide protections could mediate this economic loss and encourage workers to stay or move to Ohio, resulting in an enhanced economy, and continued to growth of our workforce.

The current lack of protections directly impacts how our young people envision their futures, realize their potential, and feelings of safety and belonging. LGBTQIA+ young people are 120% more likely to be homeless than their peers; and as a community represent 40% of the entire homeless population. Passing SB 11 could mean the difference between life and death for a LGBTQIA+ young person in need of housing and employment.

When asked, I always share that KYC is the perfect place to work, as my sole purpose for showing up each day is to ensure that our young people experience safety, belonging and community. It is indeed an honor and a mandate to provide space and create a world where our young people know they belong and can thrive. It is not enough, however, for our young people to only have this inside of our doors; they need to know that this exists for them in the state that they call home.

I urge you to pass Senate Bill 11, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Erin Upchurch, MSSA, LISW-S
Executive Director
Kaleidoscope Youth Center