

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Giovonni Santiago and I represent META Center Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to motivating, inspiring and empowering transgender youth to be their authentic selves. I am sharing my testimony in support of Senate Bill 11.

I have lived in the state of Ohio for the majority of my life but I was born in California. I spent only a few short weeks in California before moving back to Ohio with my mother but 20+ years later, my birthplace had a major impact on my life. The year was 2013 and I was working as a teacher. I decided that I was going to begin the process of transitioning from female to male. My employer supported me through my transition by transferring me to a different school and giving me time off to have surgery. While some companies have provisions for supporting transgender employees, it is still legal to discriminate against transgender Ohioans like myself.

In this process, I encountered a privilege that no native Ohioan is fortunate enough to have. As a person with a California birth certificate, I was able to change my complete birth certificate including my name and gender with ease – a task that remains illegal for my fellow Ohioans. No one looks at me and says “ma’am” and yet, if I wasn’t born in California, I might still be fighting a legal battle to have my birth certificate reflect my male gender and my correct name.

If I didn’t have a job, obtaining one without a birth certificate, driver’s license and social security card that matches my gender would be an even greater challenge. And this is just one of the challenges that transgender Ohioans face during what can already be a very taxing time as they advocate for fair treatment in healthcare and seek understanding from family.

As the founder of META Center Inc., I assist transgender youth and their families in not only understanding some of the current legal limitations they face, but also the lack of protections that exist to keep these children safe. SB 11 isn’t about changing the lives of non-LGBTQ Ohioans; in fact, their lives will remain the same. They will still have the right to marry, work in the community, and live as they always have. SB 11 isn’t about taking anyone’s freedom away – it’s about leveling the playing field so everyone has the right to live the life they want. Transgender folks are already attending schools, working in offices and using public restrooms. SB 11 just makes it safer for them to do so.

When people feel more comfortable and safe, they are more likely to engage positively in the community. When people see laws directly impact their ability to live and work safely, it’s disheartening at best and potentially violent at worst. SB 11 gives LGBTQ

Ohioans the protections that everyone else in the community is already afforded without question, thus increasing the state's economic viability. This law has the potential to not only impact individuals' livelihoods and keep wealth within our communities, but it also helps leverage the state as a place where major companies can put roots down and know their employees will be protected under the law. I know that I want to live in a state where someone's right to live as their authentic self isn't left up to luck, but is rather a right granted to everyone.

Transitioning is a rewarding process for transgender individuals but it comes with enough challenges on its own. Asking the state to enact laws that provide basic human rights should not be one of those challenges.