

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

Over the last several years, many of you have already heard a lot about this bill. Everyone who has come before you, as well as the countless others who have called, e-mailed, or written to your offices, has a stake in this legislation, and there's no reason to doubt the sincerity of the positions taken by all sides in this debate.

So often, one hears that, when there are passionate voices on both sides, "the truth lies somewhere in the middle." In many cases, that's true – or, at least, that's where compromises can be found. But, sometimes, you just have to do what's right, and that's the opportunity presented by the Ohio Fairness Act.

The objections to this bill have primarily centered on two arguments: 1) that this represents too much regulation, particularly for small businesses; and 2) that it is an infringement on the "religious freedom" of those for whose faith the extension of equality to the LGBTQ community is problematic.

Is it "too much regulation" to ask someone NOT to do something? Is it "too much regulation" to prohibit discrimination on the basis of one of the basic elements of who a person is? Is it "too much regulation" to ask Ohio businesses to let the best and brightest talent in this country know that Ohio is open for business and welcomes anyone who's willing to work hard and contribute? I think you know the answer. The Ohio Chamber of Commerce and the 600+ businesses that belong to Ohio Business Competes certainly do.

As to the "religious freedom" argument, this bill does nothing to change the religious exemptions that already exist under Ohio law. No one is being asked to change their beliefs or how they practice their faith, and certainly no one is being persecuted for their beliefs. The First Amendment acts as a shield for Americans' freedom to worship – or not – as they choose; it is not a sword to be used to discriminate and marginalize those with whom you disagree. It is said that the strongest faith is that which is affirmatively chosen, and not merely absorbed through one's upbringing. But, if faith is a choice, and if that choice is given the full protection of our laws, how do we justify telling ourselves that someone born gay is not worthy of at least as much protection?

This isn't a bill about imposing onerous government regulations, and it's certainly not a bill about restricting religious freedom. It's a bill about love. It's a bill about showing love to your fellow Ohioans. And I can't think of any place more appropriate for a bill about love than here in "the heart of it all."

For all these reasons, I strongly urge you to pass SB11. Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.