

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

My name is Stephen Makovec and I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 11.

I am a retired gay man. I was raised on a Wisconsin dairy farm, and I used college achievement to land a professional marketing role with a company in Ohio. For more than 40 years I hid my sexuality in public and especially in the workplace, to ensure I remained safe and to allow my professional career advancement.

As a youth, I heard all the gay slurs. Politicians and religious leaders denounced what they called the perversion of homosexuality, long before I realized I was gay. I dated women until I could no longer deny my same-sex attraction.

As a young adult, I knew that if I were denied employment or housing because I was gay, I had no legal recourse. I knew that I had limited options if I were physically attacked for being gay; gay people who pursued assault charges against their attackers were often 'outed' in revenge. Police officers often harassed or abused gay people -- with impunity. And 'gay panic' has been used IN RECENT YEARS to acquit attackers who murdered gay people.

The constant prejudice and blatant discrimination against gay people, left a lot of residue. At first I loathed that I was gay, and initially disapproved of effeminate behavior adopted by some gay men. I struggled for years to fully accept my sexuality and embrace the full value and tremendous humanity of people who identify with any of the LGBTQI dimensions.

Despite all the negatives, I have been fortunate. I have great friendships, and in 2012 I married a man I truly love; in November we celebrated 22 years together.

I also enjoyed a rewarding career, largely because I hid my sexuality. I worked in several senior roles for my last employer, for nearly 11 years. While I worked there, they extended non-discrimination protections for LGBT staff. During my last 5 years there, I 'came out' to the other senior managers, to the teams I managed, and to my co-workers. Most supported me when I married my partner of then 16 years, and that was very affirming.

- In my last year, while the company hired for dozens of roles, my job was eliminated and re-created in another part of the company, but I was not considered for it. In exchange for severance pay, I agreed to leave the company and forego protest.
- I will never know if my sexuality was a factor in the decision to end my employment.

Ohio remains one of 28 states where I could celebrate my marriage one day and the next day be fired and evicted, simply because someone objected to my marriage or the fact that I am gay. And I realize that medical staff at any Ohio emergency room can deny me life-saving services if they object to the fact that my husband accompanies me to the ER.

We still suffer from centuries of prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQI people. Many religions still denounce homosexuality and laws allow discrimination against people simply because they identify as LGBTQI – unprovoked threats, homophobic slurs, psychological and physical abuse, and even hate crimes, including murder. Abuse and life-threatening discrimination make it clear that LGBTQI individuals need legal protections, just as people in other protected classes need and deserve them!

I'll quickly highlight several reasons why it's important for Ohio laws to reflect our values.

- Polls show Ohioans across the political spectrum strongly support laws to protect ALL Ohioans from discrimination. Ohio voters want our laws to prevent discrimination.
- As legislators, you want Ohio to recruit and retain more talent, correct? Then protect all Ohioans, including those who identify as LGBTQI. Today Ohio suffers a 'talent drain' that hurts us economically because we don't protect LGBTQI Ohioans; we lose many gifted workers and entrepreneurs to states that welcome and protect them.
- Affirming companies prefer to invest in states where they can recruit from a broad, diverse talent pool. Millennials also prefer to live in affirming, diverse communities.
- I challenge lawmakers to acknowledge that this issue touches each of us. Each of you knows someone who identifies as LGBTQI, whether family, friend or associate, and when they're hurt by discrimination, I hope you feel their sadness and outrage.

We know that bigotry runs deep after centuries of systemic prejudice and discrimination. The beliefs, hateful messages, prejudice and downright discrimination remain real threats in Ohio. Too many people still act on those prejudices, often quietly but occasionally with violence. Today, transgender Ohioans suffer the most discrimination, abuse and violence.

Ohioans who suffer injustice without legal protections, are reduced to second-class status – with fewer rights and protections that allow us to live and work openly or pursue happiness.

- And if Ohio lawmakers again fail to enact legal protections for LGBTQI Ohioans, you will send a cruel message that the lives of some fellow Ohioans don't really matter.
- And trust me, we've heard your earlier messages, year after year – loud and clear!

Now is the time for Ohio to add legal protections for LGBTQI people. Honestly, we should protect the civil rights of all Ohioans, regardless of our skin color, religion, gender, gender identity or gender expression, sexual orientation, or nation of origin.

- I include a reminder from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
- Coretta Scott King later urged everyone who claims to share her husband's dream, to "make room at the table of brother and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people."

It's time for you, our Ohio legislators, to heed the call of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and enact equal protections for LGBTQI Ohioans, to remove one remaining form of injustice.

I thank you for considering my comments, and I am happy to answer any questions.

- I conclude by strongly urging you to pass Senate Bill 11.