

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Valerie Cumming and I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 11, the Ohio Fairness Act. I am a current member of the City Council of Westerville, Ohio, where we are beginning to undertake the process of drafting a municipal nondiscrimination ordinance to provide local protections for the LGBTQ community in housing, employment, and public accommodation.

Our Council chose to undertake this process for several reasons. First and foremost, the issue was brought to us by local community members, high school students, and members of the faith community, who all expressed concern that our LGBTQ residents were not currently enjoying the same rights and freedoms as the rest of our citizens. Further research indicated that, beyond this obvious ethical concern, there were also many practical and economic reasons for implementing a city-wide nondiscrimination ordinance. Such legislation is already supported by the Ohio Chamber of Commerce and Ohio's Small Business Majority, both of whom indicate their desire to be able to compete for business with other states by attracting and retaining the best and brightest employees. Discussions with business leaders in our own community indicated that most of our major employers already have similar protections in place for these same reasons. LGBTQ individuals are also more likely to purchase a home in a community where these nondiscrimination policies exist. Clearly, implementing these protections on a statewide level will give Ohio an economic advantage over neighboring states which do not currently have these policies in place.

Our Council is committed to moving forward with this legislation, but our process underscores the critical need for a statewide law such as the Ohio Fairness Act. Currently, Ohio is a patchwork of different levels of protection for the LGBTQ community: for example, it's possible for a same-sex couple to marry in Columbus and then be refused service in a restaurant in a suburb a short drive away. Municipal ordinances are important, but they don't go far enough. All Ohioans deserve equal rights and freedom from discrimination as they live, work, and play throughout our state – not just in a select few communities.

For all of these reasons, 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.

Valerie Cumming

Westerville City Council