



Chair Wilkin, Vice-Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Ohio House Bill 55, which will allow committee meetings and general sessions of the House of Representatives to be conducted virtually.

My name is Siobhan Boyd-Nelson, and I am the acting Executive Director for Equality Ohio, our state's LGBTQ advocacy and education organization. Equality Ohio believes that having equitable access to the Ohio legislature for all Ohioans is an important part of the democratic process. The Ohio Statehouse, the people's house, should be open and accessible to all, especially during an ongoing public health crisis that has affected every part of Ohioans' daily lives. It is important to maintain the public's direct link to their legislature by allowing virtual involvement.

During the coronavirus pandemic, it is unsafe for the public to be directly involved in the lawmaking process in person due to the increased exposure to others that inherently exists in a committee hearing room. The virus presents a danger to lawmakers, their staff members, community advocates, and constituents alike.

Equality Ohio staff have had personal experiences at the Statehouse that put them at great risk of contracting COVID-19, risk that could have been prevented if the Ohio Legislature allowed virtual testimony. In November, our Executive Director, who at the time was pregnant and therefore at higher risk for contracting COVID-19, and our Public Policy Strategist made the difficult decision to attend a hearing on the Ohio Fairness Act, a bill that we have been advocating on behalf of for nearly 20 years and would finally make discrimination against LGBTQ Ohioans illegal.

As many of you will remember, there was an extensive outbreak of COVID-19 at the Statehouse. That outbreak may very well have started the day our staff were present to testify at the hearing. The hearing was scheduled for 9:00 in the morning the Thursday before Thanksgiving. *After* everyone planning on providing testimony that morning had arrived and was seated in the overflow room, they were notified that a staffer of a committee member had tested positive, but the hearing would proceed as planned. Despite knowing that many legislators in the room had been exposed to COVID-19, the hearing went on as planned, putting our staff, as well as the people there to provide opposition testimony on the Ohio Fairness Act, at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Our staff understood the risk and made the choice to stay and participate in the hearing, despite the fact that they knew people in the room had been exposed to COVID-19. They believed doing so was important to our work as an organization and put themselves at risk to serve LGBTQ Ohioans. The truth is, they never should have had to make that choice. If they had had access to a virtual means of providing testimony and answering the committee's questions, they would not have felt the need to put themselves and their families at risk in order to advocate for our community.

Virtual testimony increases access to the statehouse for populations that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic. High-risk, immunocompromised populations, like those living with HIV, who are at greater risk for contracting severe illness and disease, must still be allowed their constitutional right to involvement in the democratic process, while remaining healthy and safe.



The pandemic has also highlighted the significant health disparities in low income households and communities of color. These communities have both heightened potential exposure to the virus and a significant need to have their voices heard by the legislature.

As we near the end of the pandemic, it's important to keep in mind that the measures provided for in HB55 should also be available outside of emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, most Ohioans did not have easy access to the Statehouse. Ohio is a big state, and for those living multiple hours away, coming to Columbus to provide testimony means taking an entire day or more off from work, just to address their elected officials. This lack of access is exacerbated for those with disabilities and strict daytime work schedules. Equality Ohio strongly supports consideration of a continuing virtual testimony option for all Ohioans, regardless of state of emergency, to increase Statehouse access for those with disabilities and work schedules that don't allow them access to committee sessions.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB55. I urge support and am happy to answer any questions you may have via email.