

YWCA IS ON A MISSION

Leah Merritt
YWCA Mahoning Valley
Ohio State & Local Government Committee
H.B. 327 – Opponent Testimony
September 22, 2021

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Leah Merritt and I am the President and CEO of YWCA Mahoning Valley. YWCA Mahoning Valley is a member of the Ohio Council of YWCAs, a coalition of 14 sister YWs across the state. We strongly oppose House Bill 327.

YWCA Mahoning Valley is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. We provide programming that helps participants overcome inequitable barriers and we fight to eradicate any form of discrimination that would prohibit our participants from being successful.

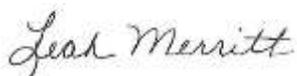
It is because of our mission work such as providing these programs that lead to our opposition of H.B. 327. A priority of YWCA is to educate and empower our communities. In service of that goal, we take on discussion around controversial but necessary elements of American society, ranging from Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) services to direct services in housing and childcare. All such programs demand from us an understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and class. We echo the educational concerns discussed in our testimony on H.B. 322. This bill also would negatively impact the ability of students, teachers, and communities to learn from one another and grow in their understanding. In addition, this bill utilizes vague language that would impact the ability of state agencies to examine biases and integrate a variety of experiences and needs when making decisions.

This is dangerous, considering that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) face considerable challenges in these spaces due to systematic racism. People do not have to be racist to make choices that fuel racism in institutions. People who have racial biases (even unconscious ones) cannot create unbiased systems and laws. We must allow state agencies to examine where issues exist and what the consequences of biases can mean for communities of color in order to do better.

It is important to acknowledge that despite our individual best efforts, we do not know the world from the perspective of others. This self-reflection can serve to better and improve ourselves for a better Ohio, but H.B. 327 would directly impact the ability of state agencies and schools to do so. For this reason, we repeat our opposition to the passage.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on H.B. 327.

Thank you,



Leah Merritt