Chairman Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, Ranking Member Thomas, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony on HB 36. My name is Bill Hardy and I am the President & CEO of Equitas Health. I am also an ordained minister.

Equitas Health is a nonprofit, community-based health care organization serving more than 67,000 individuals across Ohio through a diverse set of services, including primary and specialized medical care, behavioral health care, dental care, HIV and STI prevention, advocacy, and case management. We are a Federally Qualified Health Center, and also operate pharmacies in Columbus and Dayton. Our mission is to be the gateway to good health for those at risk of or affected by HIV/AIDS, for the LGBTQ community, and for those seeking a welcoming health care home. A great number of our patients, clients, and staff will be negatively affected by the Pastor Protection Act if it becomes law.

I am testifying on behalf of Equitas Health to share my strong opposition to HB 36, the so-called Pastor Protection Act. As a foundational principle, this title is a misnomer – pastors already have the protection of the most sacred of American legal texts – the Constitution. The First Amendment codifies a pastor’s right to refuse to do *anything* that violates their religious beliefs, including performing *any* marriage ceremony for *any* reason, including that the people to be married are not members of their parish or church, that they are divorced, or that they are gay. Proponents of the bill have argued that pastors do, in fact, need to be protected from litigious Ohioans. But the truth is, there exists no legal threat to pastors who exercise their First Amendment right to refuse to marry two people.

The bill also seeks to allow undefined “religious societies” to selectively refuse to make property available to host a marriage ceremony if the marriage does not conform to the minister's or society's sincerely held religious beliefs – even if those facilities are commercially open to the public. The effect of this bill will be to afford religious societies the option to deny people, like LGBTQ Ohioans, access to non-religious spaces like receptions halls. Simply stated, this bill will codify discrimination in Ohio under the guise of religious freedom and protection.

We at Equitas Health work daily to ensure the good health and wellbeing of our clients, patients, and community members. This bill seeks to do the opposite – to slam shut to certain people doors that are otherwise open to others. I urge you to stand up for Ohioans in the face of this blatant act of discrimination. Thank you.

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