

House Bill 363 Sponsor Testimony
House State & Local Government Committee
December 8, 2020
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9th House District

Good afternoon Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair Stephens, Ranking Member Kelly, and esteemed members of the State & Local Government Committee. It's my honor to share my testimony with you today for House Bill 363.

House Bill 363 will designate October 11th as "Coming out Day" to raise awareness of civil rights for the LGBTQ+ community. By designating this day in the Ohio Revised Code it shows that the General Assembly takes the position that coming out is one of the most courageous acts any LGBTQ+ person makes; that courage counters bigotry, ignorance and fear; and it is an integral part of our collective, continued progress towards full equality.

This legislation, like other recognition bills, is our opportunity to honor the lives of LGBTQ+ people in Ohio and tell them that their life matters and we welcome them with open arms. Straight or cisgender people do not have to "come out" as such because our culture assumes this is the "norm." National Coming Out Day continues to exist because, despite the tremendous progress that has occurred for LGBTQ recognition and rights, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities continue to be seen as the exception.

National Coming Out Day was founded in 1988 by Robert Eichberg, a psychologist from New Mexico and founder of the personal growth workshop, The Experience, and Jean O'Leary, an openly-gay political leader from Los Angeles and then head of the National Gay Rights Advocates. The hope was that if people came out it would create a safer world for future generations of LGBTQ youth by helping straight individuals understand that LGBTQ individuals were not some unknowable group of people, but

their friends and family. Today, many individuals chose to reveal their gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and/or queer identity to others on National Coming Out Day.

Coming out is a highly personal decision and can be a very emotional time in an individual's life. The process involves self-acceptance of one's identity, which given homophobia and transphobia, can take years for someone to develop. Developing self-acceptance and coming out to others are both acts of incredible bravery given that individuals may be rejected by their families, friends, or co-workers due to their sexual or gender minority status. For some, coming out can mean living openly and expressing their sexuality and gender so that it is visible for others to see. Unfortunately, openly acknowledging their identity can come with the risk of discrimination, harassment, and even violence.

There are many decisions, tasks, and daily exchanges that heterosexual individuals take for granted such as, holding hand with your partner- a simple expression of love and belonging. A study found that over two thirds of LGBT people avoid holding hands in public out of fear. Over the years, there have been many anti-LGBT bills introduced and enrolled throughout the country. According to the Advancement Movement Project, an independent non-profit think-tank, Ohio's LGBT equality score was an abysmal 2.75/38.5. This is because Ohio has discriminatory policies in place including in the areas of adoption and foster care, State Family Leave laws, credit and lending, housing and employment security, LGBTQ+ youth anti-bullying protections, and hate crime laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals- known as the 'Gay and Trans Panic Defense'.

The late great Harvey Milk firmly believed that the only way for us to break down homophobia and to gain equality was for the LGBT community, and straight allies to make themselves visible: to step out of the closet, and into the consciousness of the nation. Unless an individual makes the conscious decision to overtly express who

they are, LGBTQ+ people remain an invisible uncounted minority. This invisibility only perpetuates that which divides us.

We have a lot of work ahead of us to ensure all Ohioans can experience the opportunity and promise of our state, but HB 363 is a good small step in the right direction. Thank you Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair Stephens, Ranking member Kelly, and members of the State & Local Government Committee kindly, for your attention and support.