

May 20, 2019

Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
Equitas Health Testimony on Senate Bill 11

Good morning, Chairman Eklund, Vice Chairman Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and other members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Julia Applegate and I am the Director of the Equitas Health Institute. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the importance of extending legal protections to members of the LGBTQ+ community through the passage of Senate Bill 11, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Equitas Health is a nonprofit, community-based health care organization serving nearly 67,000 individuals across Ohio through a diverse set of services, including primary and specialized medical care, behavioral health, dental care, HIV/STI prevention, advocacy, and case management. We are a federally qualified health center and 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 healthcare home.

The Institute is the education, research, and community engagement arm of Equitas Health, focusing on reducing health disparities in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (“LGBTQ+”) community. We do this by developing and delivering exceptional LGBTQ+ culturally competent healthcare education and training, engaging with LGBTQ+ and HIV-positive patients, working with corporate entities and community-based organizations, and supporting LGBTQ+ health research efforts in our region.

Put simply, discrimination does not belong in our state’s laws. Unfortunately, Ohio remains one of 29 states that exclude members of the LGBTQ+ community from its nondiscrimination law.

Equitas Health unequivocally supports the passage of Senate Bill 11 because it would provide essential civil rights protections to LGBTQ+ Ohioans by adding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to Ohio’s list of protected classes. We are here today voicing our support for the passage of Senate Bill 11 both as an organization that serves and defends the rights of the LGBTQ+ community on a daily basis and as a proud member of Ohio Business Competes—a nonpartisan coalition of more than 600 Ohio businesses committed to achieving statewide nondiscrimination policies.

The Ohio Fairness Act makes sense for Ohio—it’s supported by a majority of Ohioans, it’s supported by Ohio’s business community, and it’s the right thing to do. On the local level, there are more than twenty Ohio cities and one county (Cuyahoga) that have enacted inclusive nondiscrimination ordinances. And just a couple of months ago, Governor DeWine issued an Executive Order that maintained nondiscrimination legal protections for LGBTQ+ state employees.

These are incredibly important strides in progress, but they are not enough.

LGBTQ+ Ohioans still face unbelievable discrimination, particularly in some of the most important areas of people's lives: at their jobs, in their homes, and in spaces otherwise open to the public.

According to a recent Human Rights Campaign report, 50% of LGBTQ+ workers remain closeted at work for fear of being discriminated against, missing out on promotions, or being fired. One in five LGBTQ+ workers reports having heard crude sexual orientation-related jokes at the workplace, or being told to dress differently to accommodate what others perceive as appropriate gender presentation. But you won't hear many of these workers talking about it to HR or to their supervisors. The biggest reason for this is that they don't think anything would improve. Imagine feeling uncomfortable or even frightened *every day* at work, but being resigned to discrimination.

LGBTQ+ Ohioans also face a tremendous amount of discrimination in their access to healthcare, which results in worse health outcomes for members of the community. It is an unfortunate truth that LGBTQ+ people suffer from higher rates of illnesses like cancer, depression, and substance abuse. These health issues are often the result of a lack of culturally competent providers, the denial of civil and human rights (such as those Senate Bill 11 seeks to address), and discrimination and shaming when accessing healthcare and other services.

The Ohio Fairness Act would prohibit these sorts of insidious discrimination against all members of the LGBTQ+ community. The passage of this bill is imperative to help ensure that all Ohioans, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, can live their lives free from discrimination in these important spaces.

We support the Ohio Fairness Act because we believe that Ohio should embrace its diverse workforce because doing so is what makes our employees healthier and our economy stronger. We believe that no one should be turned away from housing because of who they are. And we believe that Ohio's public spaces and services should be open to anyone who wants or needs access to them.

Part of our mission at Equitas Health is to serve as a voice for the LGBTQ+ community; we work daily to ensure that members of the LGBTQ+ community have equitable access to nondiscriminatory healthcare and we work to guarantee equality and dignity for the LGBTQ+ community. The passage of the Ohio Fairness Act is an important step towards achieving this goal; without it, LGBTQ+ employees remain resigned to having no legal recourse when faced with discrimination and Ohio's reputation as a welcoming place to live and work remains tarnished.

We hope you'll join us in our combined efforts to make Ohio a more equitable place to live for everyone who calls this great state home. Pass the Ohio Fairness Act; it's the right thing to do.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am available to answer any questions the committee may have.

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