

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Sandra Kurt, I serve as the Summit County Clerk of Courts, and I am before you today to speak in favor of Senate Bill 11.

I am not here today with a dramatic story of discrimination. However, as someone who came out at the age of 19 in the small Iowa town in which I was raised, I can testify that I have lived my entire adult life under the threat of legal discrimination. I have always known that, regardless of my performance, if a manager held the belief that lesbians are evil or sick, that my career would be in jeopardy and there would be absolutely nothing I could do about it. As I worked in states such as Oklahoma and Alabama, I felt vulnerable. But here in Ohio, it was, and is, no better under the law. Every time I got a new manager, I had to wonder if my simply being who I am would result in loss of employment. I had to be careful with my pronouns, and answers to a simple questions like, "What did you do this weekend?" was anything but simple.

I was fortunate. I got through my 30-year career as an engineer unscathed.

But now, in my second career, as a public official, I hear from people who are not as lucky as I was.

Before becoming Clerk of Courts, I was elected to the Ward 8 seat on Akron City Council, and then I served 5 years on Summit County Council as an At-Large representative. As the first openly LGBTQ person to run for office in Summit County, I was visible as a public servant who understood and cared about issues of discrimination, especially those against members of our community. As such, people reached out to me when they experienced anti-LGBTQ discrimination.

There was the young woman who was harassed in the locker room at her place of employment. She would open her locker to find notes from co-workers harassing her and urging her to quit because they didn't think a dyke should be working with them and changing in the same locker room.

Then there was the officer who worked for a private security firm. She was the only woman in uniform on her team. She was allowed to do her job in peace until her coworkers discovered that she was in a relationship with another woman. Her manager then started a campaign of daily harassment, egging on her male peers to join in. He had to get in a dig at every lunch break, every single day. He even sent one of the clerical staff to her house, where she lived with her partner, encouraging her to quit.

She came to me with this story, asking what her options were. All I could tell her was the truth. That her only options were to continue under the current harassment, or look for another job. That there was nothing in federal, state, or local law that prohibited what her manager was doing to her. Absolutely nothing.

Most of Ohio's LGBTQ residents are in the exact same situation as that officer. No one should have to work under those conditions. If she was being harassed because she's a woman, she would have options. If she was being harassed because of her faith, or because of her race, she would have legal recourse. But I had to be the one to tell her that there was absolutely nothing that I, or anyone else, could do to help her resolve that horrible work situation.

But there is something that YOU can do. Please pass SB 11.

Thank you, Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, ranking minority member Clyde, and members of the Committee, for your public service, and for your time and your attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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(If publishing online or elsewhere publicly, please redact my email address and my phone number.)