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Member of the House Higher Education and Workforce Committee, thank you for hearing our testimony today. My name is Lalitha Pamidigantam, and I represent YWCA Columbus as the Advocacy Manager. With me today, I have brought my colleague, Phyl Flanagan, who represents the social enterprise segment of our agency, the Justice, Equity, and Belonging training program. In a minute, you will hear from them about their work, because I believe it will give you a chance to hear from trainers themselves on how DEI trainings benefit the groups with whom we work, but I want to first call your attention to YWCA Columbus' stake in this matter. As an agency on a mission to eliminate racism and empower women – we believe that HB151 is directly oppositional to our vision for a liberated future.

Our mission at YWCA Columbus comes in three parts: we educate the community through advocacy and the justice, equity, and belonging programming. We engage our community through our housing and childcare services and social justice related work. And we empower young girls and women through our leadership and social change programming. Our intention is to help create the foundations for social change, through which all people might experience inclusion and equity. In fact, while our trainers were called “DEI trainers” at first, the program rebrand to “Justice, Equity, and Belonging” was done so intentionally – DEI values are only the first step. What our agency seeks is much deeper, systemic change. We hold that oppression against marginalized communities is not only real, but pervasive. We see it embedded in our housing systems, making poverty intractable from our community. We see it in the inability of parents to afford quality childcare. We see it reflected in the mental health crisis faced by young girls and women. We do not espouse pure values – our trainers provide education to the community that is rooted in data-driven solutions to society-driven problems. By educating and engaging our community partners, YWCA Columbus empowers all of us to be better neighbors, and build a world where we all thrive. And we believe that prohibiting mandatory DEI practices at the university level is a direct threat to what we see is truly promoting equity.

I'll turn it over to my colleague.

My name is Phyl Flanagan, and I am a Justice, Equity, and Belonging Program Manager with YWCA Columbus. In my job, I am tasked with facilitating conversations during trainings that range from learning the foundations of oppression in society, to restorative practices and conflict reparation. Our work sprang out of the desperate need for antiracist education in the summer of 2020, but over the years we have experienced

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a consistent craving for this education from our community. The need is evident, and the desire is as clear as ever: last year, we provided training to 29 organizations and in just two years, we have trained 3,335 individuals. We are constantly being sought out for more. This is because our trainings work:

- 100% of *Racial Equity Foundations & Applications* respondents reported gaining a greater understanding of the timeline of American history as it relates to institutionalized oppression
- 97% reported gaining a greater understanding of the definitions and differences between inequality, equality, equity, and justice; and gaining more tools and resources to continue their equity journey toward anti-racism.
- 91% reported gaining more ideas for steps their organization can take toward becoming an equitable and multi-cultural community of belonging.
- 92% of respondents who participated in our *Restorative Practices 101 workshop* reported gaining a better understanding of how restorative practices can be used to advance equity and justice; and
- 82% reported being better prepared to center individuals who have experienced harm and support their healing.

These stats show that we are contributing to healthy workplaces where people can feel a sense of belonging, and thus, remain in their jobs longer. DEI practices in businesses show better outcomes of profitability – “organizations with inclusive cultures are twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets as those without, three times as likely to be high-performing, six times more likely to be innovative and agile, and eight times more likely to achieve better business outcomes.”<sup>1</sup> The work we do not only supports justice for marginalized groups, but all employees, all business leaders, and all of our community.

We root our trainings in history, the lived experience of Black and Indigenous people, and other people of color, and the academic data behind the concepts we teach. These trainings are not created to make anyone feel bad. We take measures to ensure participants are not bullied, othered, or made to feel wrong for their existence. Too, accountability is not harm. In fact, here is some feedback from a participant on how we handle hard questions: “The facilitators were adept at targeting systems and structures, rather than individuals, which really facilitated critical

<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/cio-insider-business-insights/perspectives-on-gender-diversity-and-inclusion.html/#endnote-8>

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reflection. A mirror was truly held up to our agency... [and] questions were handled with great intellect and care, but were also addressed in ways that de-centered whiteness.” We understand that exposure to history, critical self-reflection and accountability do not equal harm, but rather opportunities to grow and prevent future harm from occurring. These are hard conversations to have, which is why as facilitators, we are trauma-informed and equipped to bring the conversation back to our shared goal and vision: to instill equity for all.

Justice, equity, and belonging practices are actually evidenced to reduce workplace conflict, increase trust amongst employees, and better retain workers. Employee wellbeing and sense of belonging leads to lowered turnover rates and higher profits – as the business people in the room should know, losing and replacing employees is an expensive and time consuming prospect. But being able to work through and repair conflict is a net positive for all people, saving time and money. Mandatory DEI trainings can look a number of ways, but we believe when they are rooted in research-driven trainings like ours, with evidence of success, that we are building stronger community relationships. We believe that mandating DEI or similar practices in social spaces like universities helps to cultivate *more* ideological diversity and innovation, not less.

In our sessions, we have heard stories from historically silenced people, like Black women, disabled people, and people with care-taking responsibilities and others who do not feel safe enough to speak up in the workplace, especially after harm has occurred. These workshops allow community members to process their experiences and their relationships in workplace communities constructively; and make space for non-dominant stories to be heard, and for all of us to benefit from hearing from voices historically left out of the conversation. I will turn it back over to my colleague to wrap this up.

We bring our trainer to you because in these conversations, I have yet to hear from trainers themselves who do their jobs day in and day out, often putting their own emotional safety at risk, all to build a more equitable and just environment. If you desire to prohibit mandatory DEI programming at the higher education level, we thought it would be best for you to hear from trainers themselves before you make the assertion that these mandatory trainings are unnecessary for both the workplace, and the students. The trainings we provide as absolutely essential to build stronger workplaces, create a culture of belonging, and to support people as whole, entire people in their place of employment.

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We believe in our mission, and we believe in our social enterprise. We hope that hearing from actual trainers helps clarify what these workshops really are, and how they help our community. We have more testimonials that we could share, if we had more time, or we can share with your offices if you're eager to see what kind of impact we really have. We urge a no vote on HB151, so that universities can benefit from enjoying workshops that educate, engage, and empower their students and staff.

We'd love to take any questions. Thank you.

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