

Aaron Demlow

Chair Lipps, Vice Chair Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Public Health Policy Committee, thank you for this opportunity to voice my opposition to House Bill 68.

My name is Aaron Demlow, and I'm a 25 year old trans man. This bill will have devastating consequences if it passes. I was born and raised in Ohio, and I hope to continue living here. If this bill passes, I'm going to start looking into other states where my rights, and the rights of my future children, will be protected. This is not something I WANT to do; rather, it's something I have been forced to seriously consider. My entire family and all my friends live here in Ohio. I don't want to leave my entire life behind me, but I will feel forced to flee to a safe state if Ohio makes the lives of trans kids even harder than they already are.

I was a trans kid who grew up here, and I would not have survived if I wasn't able to access the gender-affirming health care I desperately needed. It really is that simple at the end of the day.

Contrary to the assumption that being transgender is a "social contagion," I grew up not knowing that trans people even exist. I was not "made" or "led" to be this way—I was simply born this way. No childhood trauma or "comorbidity" made me trans. I had a fairly normal and uneventful childhood, but I have always known, in my heart of hearts, that I'm truly a boy. I've known this for as long as I can remember, yet I had no frame of reference that there were others like me in the world. This invisibility of trans people and lack of language for what I was experiencing had me feeling alone and confused. Why would God make me this way? As a young child, I asked myself that question all the time. For years I tried to shove these feelings down and just do what was expected of me—be a girl, be a daughter. Throughout elementary school, there were countless nights where I cried and prayed to God to just "make me normal." From 5th to 7th grade, I tried to "desist" myself and I grew out my short, choppy hair. I came out as a lesbian. That's what I assumed I must be, at the time. Again, I didn't know trans people even existed. I'm telling you now: trying to "convert" myself from these trans feelings, even while under the assumption that I was the only one in the world to ever feel this way, did not work. Trying to "desist" only served as a breeding ground for disappointment and self-hatred. As puberty progressed, the worse my mental health became. I felt increasingly trapped in, yet disconnected from, my own body. I started to subconsciously dissociate from myself just to make it through the day. The pain of my dysphoria, and the loneliness from believing that I was the "only one," was so intense that I resorted to self-harm. I was starting to think there was no way out, that I would never be able to be myself, that I would never know true authenticity and happiness. I became suicidal.

I wasn't "manipulating" my parents, as proponents of this bill claim, when I told them how I was feeling and the dangerous ways I was coping with those feelings. I was reaching out for help to the two adults in the world whose job is to love and care for me, no matter what. I came out to my parents as transgender around the age of 14. I'm lucky to have parents who did their due diligence, read books, and did plenty of research on the topic. We took our time while working together with a team of therapists, psychiatrists, and several doctors to figure out the best plan for me. That plan included gender-affirming medical care, which was a decision that was not made lightly.

Gender-affirming care saved my life at 16. I'm now 25 years old, and I've been on HRT for over 9 years. I'm still transgender, and I have zero regrets. Despite the ongoing waves of legislation across the country targeting LGBT people and bodily autonomy, and the fear and uncertainty

that comes from these attacks, I am happier now than I've ever been. I feel more at home in my body than ever before. I beg you not to take that opportunity away from other kids just like me.

Proponents of this bill have cited outdated statistics of “desistance” in trans youth, turning to old studies which reference the DSM-4, which defines “trans children” as any child who shows variance in their gender expression. In layman’s terms, these studies mostly included children who were not transgender at all. The AAP recently published a more accurate study in May 2022, finding that 97% of trans youth persist in their trans identity after 5 years of social transition. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/150/2/e2021056082/186992/Gender-Identity-5-Years-After-Social-Transition?autologincheck=redirected>

This bill insinuates that it is inherently harmful to be trans, which is just not true. There is so much joy to be found within the trans experience. What’s harmful to not only trans people, but everyone, is gross government interference with personal health care decisions. Trans health care is supported by every major medical association, including (but not limited to) the American Academy of Pediatricians, the Endocrine Society, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Psychiatric Association. Gender-affirming health care has been statistically proven to be effective in dramatically reducing rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in trans people. I am a prime example of this. There is no moral or just reason to strip life-saving care away from these young people. That was ME once. Preventing trans youth from accessing this life-saving care is harmful and cruel—not “safe.” If I was forced to wait another 2 years before starting hormones, that would have been another 2 years of agonizing depression, self-harm tendencies, and suicidal feelings. The “harmful” part about being trans is the misinformation being spread, which leads to dangerous bills like this one, and stokes violence against hospitals, individuals, and families. The “harmful” part about being trans is living in a world that is increasingly more unpredictable and scary to venture out into. Because of bills like this one, I feel more and more unsafe living in Ohio—my home.

Growing up is hard enough as it is. Please don’t make it harder for these kids. For the sake of young trans people in Ohio just like me, I beg you: please don't pass this dangerous, discriminatory bill. I urge you to oppose HB 68 to protect our state’s youth.

I will now take any questions.