

March 19, 2009

Good afternoon. I'm Antonia Loconte. I want to thank the Committee for allowing me to testify in support of H.B. 6452, an Act Concerning Discrimination. Hopefully, this will be the year it passes.

Back in the year 2000, I was working at a state agency, in a quiet office setting. I had been struggling with my gender identity since childhood. By the time I reached my thirties, I'd realized I couldn't keep presenting myself to the world as a man, just going along with what everyone else expected. I felt like I wasn't really living my life, because a fundamental part of myself was constantly kept hidden. I was always pretending - and it was limiting my potential in life. So I decided I had to fight to define my own identity by starting to make changes, including changes to my body, that would help others see me as a woman.

After a few months, folks in my office noticed my appearance and demeanor were changing. They had no idea why, though. Several of them kept telling me to cut my hair, which I'd been growing out. I would just laugh, or nod. I didn't really know how to handle it. I figured I'd let things happen gradually, and when it became more obvious what was going on, I would come out. In the meantime, I'd be saving money in case I lost my job.

It so happened that the CHRO issued a declaratory ruling in November 2000 saying that Connecticut's law against sex discrimination prohibited employment decisions based on someone being transgender or transsexual. As a lawyer, I knew that it wasn't the same as having statutory language that explicitly protected me, but it gave me some courage because it was the first time I'd seen any sort of legal support in Connecticut for a person's right to go through gender reassignment. That was crucial to me. At that time, there was only one state--Minnesota--that prohibited this type of employment discrimination by statute. Now there are 12, plus the District of Columbia. I'm hoping Connecticut joins that list soon.

Around January 2001, one of my co-workers noticed I had breast growth, and that I was wearing a sports bra to cover it. She started asking people if I was gay, I guess because she didn't understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. I felt pressure to come out. So I gathered all sorts of scientific, medical and autobiographical information and wrote up a 23-page presentation for my human resources department. My agency referred the matter to the state Attorney General's office, and after some research, they were told that the best bet was to support me, because in everyone's estimation I had a good case for my right to make that change, though the law wasn't totally clear. I did my best to be open about everything after that, and even made a brief announcement to my co-workers about what was going on with me.

Most of the employees seemed to adjust okay, though a few struggled, including the one who'd been asking so many questions about me. She became really upset, and said could of handled it if I'd been gay, but after talking to her pastor, the idea of me being a woman was something she could not accept. She said she could no longer respect me. She refused to speak to me unless she absolutely had to, or use female pronouns to refer to me. She also started a petition to keep me from using the women's restroom, which was not successful. My employer did a good job supporting me about that and backed me up.

Meanwhile, because of all the legal research the AGs had done, lots of people who worked for the state had heard through the grapevine that there was a transgender lawyer in my agency. One attorney even told me, "if you think most of our colleagues don't know about this, you're kidding yourself - people talk." I felt like I was a curiosity to others. I found out, too, that the co-worker

who could not accept my transition actually filed a workers' comp claim because she said she had been afraid to use the restroom because I might be in there, and had held it in, causing her to develop a bladder infection. There were other restrooms available in the building that she could have used. Ironically, by the time we both left the agency a few years later, that same employee had gotten used to my identity and accepted me a lot more. People do change.

If there had been laws in place prohibiting discrimination based on a person's gender identity, I believe that my transition process in the workplace--which at the time seemed to have gone reasonably well--would have been a lot smoother and would have saved everyone a lot of time, effort and grief. I think tools would have been in place to help my co-workers become more educated around this issue, and people would not have been so shocked, and in such disagreement about what this meant and what their rights should be. Our focus would have more easily stayed on our jobs, instead of my gender.