

The Judiciary Committee

Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 6599 An Act Concerning Discrimination

Submitted by Thomas N. Shusterman, MS Journalism

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Good Afternoon. My name is Thomas Shusterman, a graduate student at the UConn School of Social Work. I am here today to voice my unequivocal support for House Bill No. 6599 An Act Concerning Discrimination. I consider myself a deeply committed ally of those men and women who identify as transgender and indeed any population in need of protection under the law. Your willingness to bring H.B. No. 6599 under consideration is a testament to your commitment to justice and equality and it is an honor to be here before you today.

An Act Concerning Discrimination is simple enough with regard to its purpose. If passed, House Bill No. 6599 would add gender identity and gender expression to the list of protected classes covered in our state's non-discrimination law, thereby stopping employers, landlords, and others from turning away qualified and dedicated residents simply for being true to their identity and living their daily lives.

There is a critical need to protect those who identify as transgender individuals in the state of Connecticut. The passing of House Bill No. 6599 is crucial to preserving the safety of this class, encouraging tolerance from the moment a child steps into the classroom and out into the world, and ultimately reaffirming Connecticut's dedication to upholding the basic human rights afforded to every resident.

On the issue of safety, there is a growing body of empirical research which shows that transgender individuals face violence everywhere. One such study, conducted by Dr. Emilia L. Lombardi of UCLA, describes the horrors in which transgender individuals are confronted with each and every day, from interactions with teachers, medical staff, police officers, and indeed any random person they may meet while walking the streets of their local community. This is a sad and troubling matter. What perhaps is even worse is how some groups and individuals are comparing transgender folk as pedophilic predators who, if given the opportunity, would harm those in restrooms. This contention is groundless and entirely fear-based. The simple truth is that the bathroom is a place of privacy and safety; it is not a breeding ground for sexual assault. And there is absolutely no empirical research to support otherwise.

Tolerance, for any individual begins in the classroom. History has taught us some painful lessons here. We are not far-removed from a time when a teacher would be shunned and ultimately fired for even suggesting that African Americans deserved the same rights as Caucasians. A research study headlined by Kim A. Case and Briana Steward of the University of Houston-Clear Lake, shows that what it means to be transgender is vastly misunderstood across all levels of academia. Additionally, current research concludes that by infusing school curriculum with information about the transgender class would significantly increase social tolerance and further promote equality over hate and fear. And despite the arguments to the contrary, there is no better way for someone to learn what it means to be transgender than being taught by a transgender teacher.

I would like to conclude my testimony with a few brief words about the preservation of human rights because that is after all what H.B. 6599 is all about. Laws are meant to protect those in need, even at the expense of political popularity; it is the right and responsibility of every legislator to see beyond the "now" and remain one step ahead of public perception, especially when it comes to promoting safety and equality. Those who identify as being transgender deserve the right to have access to employment and fair housing opportunities. Above all else they deserve the inalienable right to feel safe and be respected.

For these reasons I urge you to support House Bill No. 6599. Thank you for your time and consideration.