

Written Testimony of Harleigh Walker

United States Senate
Senate Judiciary Committee
Protecting Pride: Defending the Civil Rights of LGBTQ+ Americans
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Testimony of Harleigh Walker, 16-year-old transgender girl from Alabama

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you more about myself and what it is like to be a transgender person. My name is Harleigh; my pronouns are she/her; I'm 16 years old, and I am from Alabama. I'm hoping to be able to share with you what my journey has been like and to clear up some of the false information that I've heard come out of Congress and state legislatures, including the Alabama legislature. There has been so much misinformation shared around what it means to be a transgender person, and what healthcare looks like for transgender youth like me. Most of what I've been hearing is inaccurate at best, or just outright falsehoods and misrepresentations about the healthcare given to transgender youth by qualified medical professionals. The laws preventing people like me from having access to the health care that our doctors and parents agree is necessary to keep us healthy don't keep us safe; they do the opposite. The horrible things we hear from legislators at the state and federal levels put us at greater risk because of bullying and dangerous harassment. Transgender people deserve to be able to pursue happiness - and I am happy.

Growing up, I had a really great childhood, loving parents, a wonderful big brother, loving grandparents, and friends. As I grew, I just felt like something was different for me, and when I was between ten and eleven years old, I told my parents that I was transgender. No one pushed me to become transgender. No one suggested, forced, or influenced me to "choose" to be transgender. It is not a choice. I just knew that this is who I am.

My parents did the absolute best they could to love and support me, and they took me to our pediatrician. He sat down with my parents and me and referred us to medical professionals in our state that could best treat me. He never once "pushed an agenda" onto me. Instead, he listened to me, his patient, and advised all of us on how I could get the best healthcare for my situation. I remember going on the first trip to the specialists - we were all so incredibly nervous - and the team of doctors we saw were incredible. It wasn't a single doctor but a group of doctors who were there to help me in whatever way they could. One of the falsehoods I hear all the time out of those who would keep me from getting my healthcare is that these doctors pressure or rush you, and they pull you in and start filling you full of hormones, puberty blockers or wanting to surgeries - and I want to tell you that none of that happened. As a matter of fact, these doctors advised us that at no point would they talk about any surgeries on a minor; it wasn't even something they would discuss. Instead they spent time getting to know me, understanding my specific case, getting to know my parents, and figuring out how to best care for me, personally, as a patient. Not only did they never push me, but instead, one of the things that stuck out as they talked to my parents and me was that if I ever decided to stop, or if this care wasn't right for me, it was ok, and they would support me on that, too. This is the opposite of what I hear in the news or in the legislatures. It makes me wonder why legislatures think they should get to tell my parents and my doctors that I can't get the care I need to be healthy and happy.

I want you to understand something really important. I want all of you to look at me, here and now, and hear my words. I am a VERY happy 16-year-old. I have wonderful friends who accept me fully for who I am. I'm active in my school's debate team and other extracurricular activities. I love to travel. I enjoy concerts and music like Taylor Swift, and listening to my record collection way too loud in my room. I get As in school and I'm looking forward to college. I am not miserable in my life, I'm not depressed. I'm just trying to be a teenager in America. Same as any other teen, but I keep having to jump through hoops that other people my age don't have to. I have had to spend spring break lobbying for my right to exist while my friends are on vacation. I'm here in front of this Committee instead of enjoying summer vacation, just to try and ensure that my right to exist isn't taken away.

I also hear so many lawmakers saying they are writing and passing these laws to protect kids, yet, in my home state, when these laws were being proposed, not one lawmaker was willing to sit down with my dad or me to talk through it, so that we could better explain what this looked like, what it meant to us. From our State Senate, House of Representatives and even our Governor, we begged and pleaded for an audience - but those writing these laws absolutely refused to meet with us. Instead, these lawmakers pushed rhetoric and laws that weren't true and were unfounded, including that transgender people are being "groomed" by our parents, which is nonsense!. In support of these laws my Governor has decided to say horrible things about me and those like me in my state. I would love for you to imagine for a moment if these statements were made about you or your kids, how would this make you feel? What would you do to protect your kids from these harmful laws and statements? If you were me, would you want to stay in a state where the people who are supposed to make sure you have a safe place to live instead talk about you and your family this way? I live only a few miles from the best college in my state, but I can't really even consider going there in this climate, because of the continued attacks against me.

As I'm looking forward to college though, I have had to rethink where I might go. Alabama was one of the first states to ban my healthcare, but because of the new laws that have been passed in states across the nation blocking my ability to just be who I am, and because we don't have the Equality Act to help protect me from discrimination, I've had to start looking at colleges very far away from where I was born and raised, away from family and friends. My parents say this breaks their heart; they can't stand the thought of their kid being so far away from them where it would be tough for them to help me if I needed them.

This type of discrimination, which will make me have to move where I live or work or go to school, is not designed to protect or help me. It is really designed to do two things: one, keep me from being who I am and being successful; and two, to use transgender people as scapegoats for increased political capital. I'm here today to tell anyone who would support that to look out; you will not stop me from being who I am or obtaining my goals, and I will not be used as a political pawn.

I also want you to understand that discrimination makes me unsafe. This journey isn't easy; as I first began my transition, there was an incredible amount of bullying in my middle school. So much so, that at one point my parents decided I needed to go to online school, not because I wanted to but because the bullying got so bad that it was getting close to physical violence, and the school refused to help. I hated online school - I love being around people, and I learn best in a school environment. The next year, I went back into my old school, and, though there was still bullying, we worked with the school to make sure they knew they couldn't shrug their shoulders anymore. For me, it never escalated to physical violence but that was just lucky. Kids shouldn't feel helpless at school against being bullied or discriminated against just because they

are different - this is another way that The Equality Act could really help. Leaders in our state and country have the ability to help, but instead so many legislators have decided to promote bullying and discrimination.

Despite all this, despite being called a demon, a monster, or other despicable things, I love my life, I love my family, I love my friends and I'm happy. I am asking for you to help us stop certain people from using the transgender community as a political pawn. Please stop attacking our lives for votes or money. These are our human rights hanging in the balance. Help us communicate that they are impacting people's lives and our "pursuit of happiness." We're not people to be feared or villains. We are just like your kid, your neighbor, and you. We also deserve the ability to be happy.

Thank you.