

Testimony from Friends of MPIPP

**Testimony re: HB 4192
House Judiciary Committee
August 26, 2009**

**Judith Kovach, Ph.D., L.P.
Executive Director
Michigan Psychological Association**

Earlier this year, the Michigan Psychological Association Board of Directors unanimously passed a resolution in support of the Kalamazoo anti-discrimination ordinance. The MPA is not an advocacy organization; it is a professional association and its members have diverse opinions and beliefs about many political and social issues. So why did we choose to speak out on legislation that would end discrimination? By virtue of our Code of Ethics, "psychologists are committed to increasing scientific and professional knowledge of behavior and people's understanding of themselves and others and to the use of such knowledge to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society. Psychologists respect and protect civil and human rights..." (American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, 2003.) By virtue of our clinical training and experience, we have heard firsthand about the very personal pain and suffering from people denied jobs or housing because of irrelevant personal characteristics such as race, gender, disability, national origin or sexual orientation. By virtue of our graduate training in social science research methodology, we cannot ignore the difference between solid empirical evidence and spurious mislabeled "facts" generated by people's fears and misinformation.

You have heard today from other experts about the scientific research documenting that unfair treatment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity expression is associated with serious mental health consequences such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts, substance abuse, and physical health problems.

Scientific surveys since the mid-1990's indicate that between 2.25 million and 6.5 million gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans have suffered employment discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.

Work is a major determinant of mental health and a socially integrating force. To be excluded from the workforce creates material deprivation, erodes self-confidence, creates a sense of isolation and marginalization and is a key risk factor for psychological distress.

Therefore, as psychologists, we cannot stand by when we see one group singled out and denied the same civil rights, the same protection against discrimination, held by the great majority of Michigan citizens. But it is more than that. The fact that bills that would amend the Civil Rights Act to include "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" have been debated and voted down in previous legislative sessions and now once again are being debated in the

Michigan legislature and in municipalities in the state, only contributes to the negative psychological consequences of discrimination against the LGBT community. Can you imagine how you would feel if your elected officials debated whether you were worthy of the same rights accorded to everyone else because you are different from them?

A young man in Portage was beaten last week because he is gay. I have no doubt that each of you would privately and publicly deplore the behavior of his assailants. We should be no less concerned when the wounds are psychological. Does the psychological pain of being told, "We don't hire people like you" hurt less than the physical pain of being beaten? The scientific evidence that you have heard today resoundingly says no.

In her recent book, *Voted Out: The Psychological Consequences of Anti-Gay Politics*, Dr. Glenda Russell describes her extensive research indicating that simply being exposed to anti-gay rhetoric during debates on legislation affecting the civil rights of LGBT persons is psychologically damaging. Discourse and debates such as this hearing, according to Dr. Russell, have "negative implications for the targeted groups... [and] for society as a whole; it is divisive and... invites human beings to act on their least noble impulses. Discourse directed against any group of people is likely to breed fear and aggressiveness simultaneously. Ultimately, it serves no one in society" (Russell, 2000).

Eighty-nine percent of Americans believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people should be protected from being unfairly fired (Gallup poll, May 2007.)

And so I urge you to join with the members of the Michigan Psychological Association to use the knowledge you have gained today to inform your decision-making. All hardworking Michigan citizens should have a chance to earn a living and provide for their families and be safe in their communities. Please take this opportunity to vote against unfair practices and provide full access to employment, housing, and public accommodation regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

Melissa J. Grey, Ph.D.

Dear Representatives of the House Committee:

I write this letter in support of HB4192 to amend the Elliott-Larsen civil rights act because of the overwhelming empirical evidence that discrimination causes individual and community harm and because of my professional experience with people who have needed these protections.

As a clinical psychologist, I have professional knowledge and experience about discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. I have conducted research on the effects of sexual orientation-based discrimination, and I have worked with hundreds of college students and community members in mental health treatment. The empirical psychological research clearly shows that discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is harmful. Personally, I have provided mental health treatment to gay and transgender persons who have experienced negative health consequences from discrimination.

Discrimination is an Alarming Community Problem

The problem of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is commonplace. In a national probability sample of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, approximately 20% had been criminally victimized, 50% had experienced verbal abuse, and 11% reported having experienced employment or housing discrimination in their adult lifetime because of their sexual orientation. (Herek, 2009) Since 1999, empirical studies have shown that transgender people across the U.S. experience even higher rates of verbal harassment, physical violence, and housing and employment discrimination. (Clements, 1999) (Keatley, 2003) (Lombardi, 2001) (Reback, 2001) (Xavier, 2005) For example, approximately 40% of transgender people have reported some kind of job discrimination. (Movement Advancement Project, January 2009)

Discrimination is Bad for Your Health

All people deserve to be free from discrimination and unfair treatment, including in employment, housing, and public accommodations. A body of scientific research has shown that unfair treatment on the basis of sexual orientation, (Mays, 2001) (Meyer, 2001) gender identity, and gender expression (American Psychological Association, August 2008) is associated with physical health problems and such mental health consequences as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors.

It is important to note that sexual orientation and gender identity do not determine a person's mental health. The psychological and medical communities affirm that being gay is not an illness. Rather, it is the discrimination and unfair treatment of gay and transgender people that leads to their additional psychological distress.

In my clinical experience at two public universities in Michigan, I have provided mental health services to hundreds of students from all regions of Michigan as well as those from other states

and countries. I have worked with clients who are scared and exhausted at work, at home, and in public because of sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination. They have been harassed, attacked, discriminated against, and barred from fair opportunities in every life arena on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is clear that discrimination has serious harmful effects on gay and transgender people, but the negative consequences extend beyond these individuals to their families and communities.

The Widespread Costs of Discrimination

Employers and community members are negatively impacted by discrimination against gay and transgender people. The stress of discrimination against gay and transgender people affects their friends, family, and community members. (Massie, 2009) Discrimination has also been related to more negative work attitudes, fewer promotions, (Ragins, 2001) and decreased job satisfaction. (Waldo, 1999) In the workplace, the psychological distress from discrimination, described above, has been related to seven types of costs to employers. Indirect economic costs include low morale, motivation, and satisfaction, communication breakdowns, poor decision-making, decreased quality of work relations, and aggression. Direct economic costs include participation and membership problems (for example, absenteeism), decreased job performance, and increased turnover, grievances, work stoppages, and health care costs. (Quick, 1997) Discrimination, then, has widespread and demonstrable social and economic consequences for our communities.

Summary

The systematic and verifiable nature of the information gained from sound psychological research is invaluable to this legislative decision. There is overwhelming empirical evidence that discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is widespread. An extensive body of research also shows that gay and transgender people experience negative mental health consequences because of this discrimination, and my work with clients in mental health treatment illustrates this research in a significantly personal way. Families, workplaces, and communities are also negatively impacted by this discrimination.

Fair treatment is not only a cornerstone of citizens' health, but it is also essential for promoting successful workplaces and vibrant communities. Discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is injurious to everyday citizens and to our communities. As a citizen and as a psychologist, I strongly support the House Bill No. 4192.

Sincerely,

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Clinical Psychologist
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