

Good afternoon. My name is Josh Hemsath and I'm speaking to you today as an Alaskan resident and as the Regional Development Organizer for Pride Foundation urging you to vote in favor of adding sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression to Alaska's Human Rights Act.

Pride Foundation supports Alaskans' ability to be who they are, where they are, by providing grants, scholarships, and sponsorships to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied students and organizations. But Pride Foundation's vision is something greater than a scholarship or grant-making program.

We envision a world in which all LGBTQ youth, adults, and families enjoy the freedom to live safely, openly, and genuinely. So when we know that Alaskans can still be fired or evicted for being who they are, Pride Foundation will continue to work tirelessly with our community partners to ensure that all Alaskans are protected.

I've never thought that my story is all that special, unique, or as heartbreaking as some of my friends testifying today. My family moved to Alaska 20 years ago, when my dad was transferred to work on the slope. My brother and I both graduated from Chugiak High School. Alaska and the Northwest have been home for me for the majority of my life. I have always been proud to call myself Alaskan Grown.

When I was 14, my story started changing from my brother's. In eighth grade, I told someone in my class that I was gay. Within a week, I was sitting in the vice principal's office, petrified. I thought I was in trouble, but she wanted to tell me that if I ever felt unsafe or threatened that I could let the administration know, and they would take action. Of course, given that my parents didn't know I was gay, I didn't want to draw more attention to myself. Not every student has this option.

Later, I graduated from Chugiak, attended school in Montana and organized on behalf of LGBTQ people there. When time came to graduate and start looking for employment, wanting to be honest and authentic to who I was, I included my experience in mobilizing volunteers, facilitating training, and implementing grants. It just so happened that these experiences were for the LGBTQ community in Montana. As you might imagine, this made it immensely difficult to find gainful employment back in my home state of Alaska. Eventually, since I couldn't find work at home in Alaska, so I accepted a position in

Montana with an organization willing to take me on. When funding for that position ran out, I knew I wanted to return home for good.

Between May 2012 until May 2013, I interviewed for over 20 positions across Alaska, some with the State itself. With every application and resume I sent including my experience, I was coming out to strangers. Certainly in some cases, I'll admit I wasn't a good fit. In other cases, I legitimately believe that my openness about who I am and my experience raised concern with the hiring teams.

As you've heard today, discrimination against LGBTQ individuals isn't nearly as subtle or unspoken as this; more often, it's blatant and overt.

We know that equality is good for business and the health of our community. Eighty-eight percent of Fortune 500 companies prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and nearly six-in-ten prohibit discrimination based on gender identity. Seventeen states prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and another four states prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. If Alaskan lawmakers truly want to recruit and retain a talented workforce, and prevent "brain drain," then you need to make our state attractive and welcoming to as many people as possible. Alaska needs every kind of talent, skill, and person we can recruit in order to move our state forward and remain competitive in the 21st century.

In closing, while a non-discrimination policy in and of itself does not prevent discrimination, it is a crucial first step. The Health and Social Services committee has this amazing opportunity to provide leadership for the state and be the models for how you expect other members of the legislative body to act. And with this standard in place you'll help create an environment in which all Alaskans will feel safe enough to do the rest of the work necessary to make Alaska a truly inclusive environment for everyone.

For all these reasons, I urge you to vote to add sexual orientation, gender identity and expression to Alaska's Human Rights Act.

Thank you very much.