April 25, 2017

Honorable Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, Chair
House State Affairs Committee
Alaska State Legislature
State Capital
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Chairperson Kreiss-Tomkins and Members of the Committee,

My name is Sarah Warbelow, and I am the Legal Director for the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBTQ citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. On behalf of our nearly 2,000,000 members and supporters nationwide, I am writing you today in support of House Bill (HB) 184, which would extend nondiscrimination protections to LGBTQ Alaskans in employment, housing, and public accommodations.

America has a proud history of valuing liberty, freedom, and hard work. Anti-discrimination laws put those values into practice. By expanding the state's civil rights laws to include LGBTQ people, Alaska will send a strong message that all of its residents matter. It is time to ensure that discrimination does not trump merit or basic fairness by extending protections to include sexual orientation and gender identity.

Discrimination against LGBTQ people continues to be a very real problem. Far too often, LGBTQ Americans have lost their livelihoods simply because of an employer's fear, lack of understanding, or intolerance. Some are highly skilled professionals who, though seemingly irreplaceable in their positions, suddenly become expendable when they wish to live openly in their communities or are outed by colleagues. Others are people forced into whatever jobs they can find, some scraping together money for the tremendous medical costs of gender transition, which are rarely covered by health insurance. They are people in every walk of life—doctors and lawyers, plumbers and bus drivers. Many are parents and spouses, whose efforts to find secure, fulfilling employment are also a struggle to provide for their families. And for these Americans, the threat of discrimination does not end once they leave the workplace. It is well-documented that LGBTQ people are shown less desirable properties for purchase or rent, receive less favorable customer service, or encounter outright refusal of service. The time has long since passed when we as a nation ought to tolerate arbitrary discrimination against any group of people, in any aspect of life.

I cannot overstate the real-life implications this bill would have for Alaska. It would extend vital protections in the most fundamental aspects of life to all Alaskans. Now that marriage equality is a reality nationwide, this bill would eliminate the untenable possibility of an individual marrying the person they love, only to be fired from work, evicted, or denied access to public places for doing so.

Moreover, this bill would send an unequivocal message to businesses that Alaska is a place where they can find the best and brightest; where their employees can live, grow, and thrive without fear of discrimination.

Finally, passing the HB 184 will place the state in good company. Beginning with an ordinance passed in Minneapolis in 1975, 19 states, the District of Columbia, and more than 100 cities and counties have enacted fully-inclusive, comprehensive laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Additionally, more than 600 private businesses across the United States, including 66% of Fortune 500 companies, have voluntarily adopted policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It is clear that employers and governments nationwide agree that they are at their best—their most competitive and most productive—when they do the right thing and affirm that they're open to everyone.

It has never been more important for Alaska to act and ensure that discrimination has no place in this great state. Please vote in favor of HB 184.

Sincerely,

Sarah Warbelow