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Dear Mr. Chair and members of the committee,

I am a queer resident of Missoula and I am here to testify against House Bill 516.

This bill is presented as a way to ensure the constitutionality of local ordinances, but my testimony is about the need to protect LGBTIQ individuals. Why? Because passing this bill affects the safety and political inclusion of myself and my community, and because this bill does not simply reconcile local and state procedures. It denies individuals necessary protections that state law doesn't offer, but that local elected officials recognize and have the political will to create. Bills to include LGBTIQ individuals in the Montana Human Rights Act came before the legislature for the past 20 years, and have been denied for the past 20 years. This year was no exception. Amidst lack of state response, and after hearing the testimony of LGBTIQ individuals who have been discriminated against, Missoula's local officials did what the state wouldn't. Their reward for being responsive and respectful to the community they serve, and the reward for other Montana localities, is this bill, a bill which strips away the chance for them to offer safe havens for citizens who are valued locally, but may be *legally* ostracized, discriminated against and threatened elsewhere in Montana.

I have many reasons for valuing protections for LGBTIQ individuals so deeply. I am queer. Many of my friends and loved ones in Montana are not heterosexual and can't express themselves truthfully within the narrow confines of male or female gender. But, more directly, homophobia was responsible for compelling one of my closest friends to attempt suicide. This personal story is my attempt to show why the ramifications of this bill are personally unacceptable and horribly alienating.

In 2001, RJ, a transgender man, was arrested for a nonviolent misdemeanor. The charges were dropped and courts determined that the arrest was unwarranted, but the real impact had nothing to do with RJ's legal record. It had to do with the abuse he suffered while in the custody of law enforcement officials. At the police station, RJ, who was born with a feminine anatomy, but who always felt masculine, was subjected to a body search. Clad solely in his underwear and confined in a room with several police officers, he was berated with homophobic slurs and threatened with rape. The officers made it clear that my friend was a freak who deserved to be violated because of his gender expression. After this traumatic event, RJ spiraled into depression. He began drinking heavily and ultimately ended up in the emergency room after attempting suicide. He almost succeeded. He made it through and today he's doing great. He finished grad school, got a dog, got hitched to a wonderful woman, and loves working as a counselor to help troubled kids and violent men.

LGBTIQ folks have been portrayed as criminals, perverts, dangerous and second class citizens who have nothing better to do than injure or deprive other individuals. This hateful portrayal insults us and has been used to ostracize, discriminate against and commit violence against us. Without official recognition and renunciation, institutions of power and influence condone these acts. We are a whole class of children, parents, siblings, friends, workers, neighbors and citizens who justifiably fear for our safety and are denied opportunities to participate in the places we live because we love and desire in the only way that feels right and natural to us.

If there are legitimate concerns about jurisdiction and process, please find another way to resolve them. This bill, this way, is another message to myself and other citizens that we don't matter. Passing this bill without acknowledging its effect on LGBTIQ individuals is equivalent to trivializing us and the difficulties we've faced. I request that you do not pass this bill.

Thank you,

Yvonne Sorovacu