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Good morning Chairman Foster, and members of the House Commerce Committee. My name is R Cole Bouck, I am from Lansing, MI, and I testify before you today in support of HB 5804.

By way of introduction, I am a 29-year state employee with the **Michigan Department of Corrections**. I joined the **Department** in August 1985 as a Correctional Officer, shortly after college. I have worked inside our facilities at almost every custody level, including what was referred to at the time as our 'SuperMax' Level VI facility. I currently serve as a Process Improvement Specialist in our Office of Effective Process Improvement and Communication, in Lansing. I sit here before you today, however, only in my personal capacity, to share with you first hand my stories of discrimination in the workplace, which I experienced solely as a result of being discovered as gay.

Right out of college, and shortly before beginning my employment with the **Department** as part of its Officer's Training Academy, I was let go from my year-long employment at a restaurant and pub in East Lansing. I had recently been 'promoted' from host to server, presenting me an opportunity to earn more through tips - which I did well at, until management learned from others that I was gay. Unsettling under any circumstances, it was especially disconcerting heading into my new and long-awaited opportunity with the **Michigan Department of Corrections** - a conservative, traditional and paramilitary criminal justice profession. Unfortunately, the restaurant would not be the only place I faced on-the-job discrimination.

In the summer of 1991, while off on an extended medical leave from my work at one correctional facility, I was contacted by an entirely different facility and offered a promotion – on the spot. I had never discussed my sexual orientation as part of my work, however it was clear the moment I arrived at my new facility that I had been outed to my new co-workers before I ever even arrived. This incident led to a lengthy period of workplace discrimination. A dangerous place under any circumstance, working inside of a correctional facility was especially frightening when I had no idea whom I could trust, or on whom I could depend for support or backup, should I need it. There is no sound like that of three bullet-proof glass and steel gates, slamming shut in sequence behind you, as you report to your assignment several times a day, walking and working among more than a thousand prisoners who are not locked up in cells. This discrimination went on for months, and I dreaded going to work every single day. Countless reports and discussions with my Assistant Deputy Warden, his repeated call for me to 'just be patient', and his endless reassurances he would 'get to the bottom of this' yielded no results. Alarmed by the lack of any corrective measures by my supervisor or the administration at the time, I felt vulnerable and alone at work. Worse, I knew that I could have been fired without any legal protections to the contrary, while those who perpetuated the discrimination would have been allowed to keep their jobs. That is still true for many people in Michigan today.

I pledged then that I would work vigorously and visibly to assert and address issues of

importance to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees and offenders within the **Department**. For several years, **Department** leadership progressed steadily in its commitment on these issues, and worked hard for change; but even a Director can only do so much. At the end of the day, the law is the law, and it was not there to protect me, even as I served to protect those around me.

It wasn't until 2000, while searching the internet, that I happened upon **Law Enforcement Gays & Lesbians (LEGAL) International** - a network and umbrella organization for state and regional chapters supporting LGBT law enforcement, public safety, corrections and criminal justice professionals, and non-gay allies. For the first time, I at least knew I was not alone as a gay person serving inside some of the most dangerous places one can work.

In 2010, with great assistance from a talented and energetic group of Michigan professionals, I co-founded the **Michigan Gay Officers Action League (MI-GOAL)**, an affiliate chapter of **LEGAL International** and Michigan's statewide organization for LGBT law enforcement, public safety, corrections and criminal justice professionals, and our non-gay allies. I served as **MI-GOAL's** first president.

A safe correctional environment requires that every staff member show up - and be safe in showing up - as their full and true self - to be tuned in, alert, and focused. Staff must arrive fully prepared to spend each moment inside their facility, or outside in their field services position, trying to out-contemplate, out-manuever and always stay at least one step ahead of the offenders under their charge. Their safety, my safety, the offenders' safety, the entire security of the facility - indeed, the public safety - requires nothing less. Discrimination compromises all of that.

As law enforcement and criminal justice professionals, we are called to serve and protect everyone in our community. Our workforce must reflect our community, and our community must see itself reflected among our workforce. We are drawn to this work, despite all of its risks, because we care about protecting people. To be effective, we must be secure in that ourselves.

There are countless hardworking and dedicated law enforcement, corrections, public safety and criminal justice professionals, who swear on an oath to be truthful in their duty, to uphold the law, and to protect and serve their community, and yet they may be met with discrimination and termination from this duty simply because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

This is not only unfair, it is dangerous, and it is wrong!

I thank you for your time and consideration in this important work, and I urge your passage of HB 5804.

You may feel free to contact me at RCBouck@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

