

## Testimony on behalf of the Maryland LGBT Chamber of Commerce

### **Supporting HB 2694 | Imari's Business Pride Act**

*A Bill to Include LGBT-Owned Businesses in  
Maryland Economic Opportunity Programs for Socially  
and Economically Disadvantaged Individual*

February 17, 2021

We appreciate your time, today, to speak about the possibility of including certified LGBT Business Enterprises under the existing MBE/DBE program in the State of Maryland.

I am here today representing both the Maryland LGBT Chamber of Commerce as the Co-Founder as well as CEO of AdNet/AccountNet, Inc. as a certified LGBTE through the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce. The Maryland Chamber was founded in 2017 with the goal to expand opportunities for LGBT owned businesses throughout Maryland.

Having received MBE certification in 1997, I remember the process being very thorough and the panel interview grueling for me to justify being included as a woman. Each year my application is thoroughly reviewed to ensure I continue to meet the requirements set forth in the program.

You may ask, why is the LGBT inclusion needed if I am already in the program? For decades, doing business as an “out” gay woman was never encouraged or welcomed. I could only bring half of who I was into a business transaction. While conversations were plentiful hearing about other colleagues’ marriages and families, I remained silent. The times when I took the risk to speak about being LGBT, I was met with inappropriate comments and sexual harassment. After those early experiences, I rarely took the risk. Now, I wear all of my diversities proudly and I am a better business person because of my courage to be out. But I also know that my privileges make even this difficult experience easier than those faced by those who are both LGBTQ *and* Black, Hispanic, disabled, etc. This program will help them most of all--- and they deserve it most of all.

The LGBT community as a whole have only begun to benefit from tax advantages as married couples since 2013 when same-sex marriage in Maryland was legalized. Prior to that, we nurtured our significant relationships and raised our families the same way as our heterosexual counterparts, yet we were not recognized by the government as equal. We left money on the table by not having the same benefits afforded to heterosexual married couples and we were always at a disadvantage. Now we are equal in marriage and we deserve to be equal in business.

The Maryland Public Service Commission and the City of Baltimore have added LGBT certified businesses to their list of accepted disadvantaged categories for contract requirements. Both entities are utilizing this effort as a strategy to identify more businesses who can fulfil their product and service needs. As an LGBT woman, I know what alienation and exclusivity feels like and it is not empowering. Yet I know that I have to be better than my competition to get in and stay in the door of my customers. Our community is passionate about giving our best because when one of us wins, we continue to open the doors for others behind us.

Today, I ask you to consider opening the door of opportunity to the LGBT business community as recognized Minority and Disadvantaged Businesses. I have asked our members about being counted as an LGBT business and there is a resounding expression of pride to be acknowledged in business and bring our full selves to our customers each day. Our businesses bring over \$1trillion dollars to the US economy and now more than ever through and post COVID, we must be part of the solution to make businesses whole by providing the Maryland LGBT community the opportunity to bid for more contracts.

We want to add value by providing innovation and solving complex problems to make Maryland the most powerful State in the Mid-Atlantic and our community can help make that happen.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Betsy Cerulo  
bcerulo@adnetp3.com  
410-715-4035