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Testimony of FreeState Justice IN SUPPORT OF HB182: State Procurement – Certification of LGBTQ Businesses

Good afternoon, Honorable Delegates of the House,

My name is Jamie Grace Alexander & I'm the policy coordinator at Freestate Justice. Our organization is Maryland's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) civil rights advocacy organization. Each year, we provide free legal services to dozens, if not hundreds, of LGBTQ+ Marylanders who could not otherwise be able to afford an attorney, as well as advocate more broadly on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community.

We are here today in support of HB182, which would allow for the certification of LGBTQ+ businesses through the LGBT chamber of commerce.

So many LGBTQ+ businesses have come & gone in my short time as a part of the community here in Baltimore. Hopefully this bill can bring longevity & opportunity to community institutions that might otherwise lack the institutional support to stay open. I've found that these businesses close for myriad reasons, external neighborhood pressures, high overhead costs –but rarely to LGBT businesses close because of lack of support & love from LGBT people.

I am a huge believer in by-us-for-us mentality, that is, our community's ability to create our own spaces that cater to our specific needs. This is what is possible through LGBT-owned businesses & especially creative spaces. When LGBT people try to push through spaces that weren't created with their interests in mind, we often encounter roadblocks, gatekeeping & microaggressions.

LGBT owned businesses also provide employment opportunities to queer & trans individuals that might experience implicit bias when seeking traditional employment. Often the same gender affirming aspects of someone's presentation can be used to legally discriminate against them in the hiring process, things like piercings, dyed hair or bold makeup. 29.4% of trans Americans were living in poverty in 2019. LGBT owned businesses proclivity to hire queer & trans individuals would give our community more places to work leading to greater opportunity & choice.

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I don't think businesses will solve the problem of oppression in our communities but it will allow for greater self-determination of our people. I'm thinking about people who have to present as their birth gender to get a job, people who get misgendered regularly & don't have managerial support, people who are stuck at a job they hate but know is safer than looking for something else.

Specifically, Black LGBT people (30.8%) experience significantly higher poverty rates than Black cisgender straight people (25.3%). I was moved by Imaris' (he/him) story & how his entrepreneurial spirit led to the outcomes of this bill. It is for these reasons that we urge a favorable report on HB182.