

Written Testimony of Sarah Warbelow, State Legislative Director for the Human Rights Campaign, in Support of Senate Bill 131: An Act Relating to and Prohibiting Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity or Expression

to

The Alaska Senate Committee on Health and Social Services
February 24, 2014

Chair Stedman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sarah Warbelow, and I am the State Legislative Director for the Human Rights Campaign, America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. On behalf of our more than 1,500,000 members and supporters nationwide, including more than 6,519 in Alaska, I am honored to submit this statement in support of Senate Bill 131: An Act Relating to and Prohibiting Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity or Expression.

Alaska has a proud history of valuing freedom, integrity, and hard work. Anti-discrimination laws put those values into practice. They send a strong message that all of Alaska's residents will be given a fair opportunity to compete in the marketplace, rent or own a home, and enjoy all Alaska has to offer. Today it is time to ensure discrimination doesn't trump merit by extending civil rights protections to cover sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people continues to be a very real problem. Far too often, LGBT Americans have lost their livelihoods simply because of some combination of an employer's fear, ignorance and 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, if ever, 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. The time has long since passed when we as a nation ought to tolerate arbitrary discrimination against any group of people. I cannot understate the real-life implications for Alaska. That any hardworking LGBT Alaskan should be denied the ability to contribute to the economy and support his or her family is simply unacceptable.

In addition to guaranteeing a level playing field in employment, Senate Bill 131 would ensure that housing opportunities are made available to all, individuals are free from discrimination in securing credit, and no one has to forego basic needs such as telephone

services based solely on who they are. It is well-documented that LGBT people are shown less desirable properties for purchase or rent, are excluded from schools activities, receive less favorable customer service, or encounter outright refusal of service. This bill does not prevent employers from firing incompetent employees nor does it prevent landlords from turning down unqualified renters. Instead, this bill simply makes sure that all employees get a fair chance at working hard to get ahead without discrimination or bias and that no one is singled out for arbitrary discrimination when it comes to areas like housing, public accommodations, and access to credit.

Passing SB 131 will place Alaska in good company. Beginning with an ordinance passed in Minneapolis in 1975, 17 states, the District of Columbia, and more than 190 cities and counties have enacted laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. More than 500 private businesses across the United States, including 61% of Fortune 500 companies and 79% of Fortune 100 companies, have voluntarily adopted policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Addressing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is not new for Alaska. Many of Alaska's largest employers have adopted similar policies. These corporations include major household names such as: Walmart, Safeway, Alaska Airlines, BP, FedEx, UPS, McDonalds, Wells Fargo, and Home Depot.

The time has come for Alaska to act and ensure that discrimination has no place in this great state. Please vote in favor of Senate Bill 131.