

Testimony supporting HB 2694

A Bill to Include LGBT-Owned Businesses in Oregon Economic Opportunity Programs

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Co-owner of Empower BodyCare

Chair and members of the committee. My name is Michele White. My wife and I own Empower BodyCare, a business in Oregon and are members of the Portland Area Business Association and the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

As a lesbian owned business, we have faced unique challenges in addition to the typical challenges of growing a small business. We work extremely hard and are dedicated to helping others with our products. We became NGLCC certified last year. The impetus for becoming certified was based on Macy's preferring minority owned businesses as vendors. They include LGBT owned businesses as preferred partners. We have been able to access several retail partners as an NGLCC certified business, including Nordstrom. These small gestures of support by companies and municipalities not only create a more level playing field for minority owned businesses, but also show that we are recognized as an important part of our society and economy. My wife and I have employed over 50 Oregonians and paid hundreds of thousands in taxes over the years. We are a part of the Oregon economic engine and are proud to play our part.

However, we do deal with many issues not only as a small business, but more specifically as a lesbian owned business. One hurdle that we see in all minority owned business is access. Access to connections, investment, etc. In general, investment is less available to women as well as the LGBTQ community. As gay women, we generally see a decreased opportunity in traditional business circles. Getting investment has been extremely difficult for us, despite our success and longevity. Of course, there are many reasons this may be the case, however, one specific example of how being a lesbian couple impacted our investment opportunities is a very real story. A couple of years ago, we met with a potential investor. To avoid the sordid details, I will just say that after hours of discussing our business and the opportunities he sexually propositioned us. As a woman, I feel I need to add the disclaimer here that we did nothing to warrant this behavior. I don't believe a straight couple would have had the same experience. This is an extreme example of the discrimination we face.

Oregon can do better. It is important to recognize all minority owned businesses as an important piece of our economy and our society. Your support of HB 2694 is important to all of us as a community.

Thank you,

Michele White