

Hi everyone. Thank you so much for allowing me to speak about the barriers facing trans people and name changes. My name is Ciora Thomas and I am the founder and director of SisTers PGH, the only Black and trans-led nonprofit working for Black trans and nonbinary people in the city.

I want to talk today about what it can mean to a trans person to be seen for who they are, inside and out. Our community often grows up cloaked in shame and clawing our way out of the confines of a society that restricts and polices our humanity at every turn.

The process of embracing yourself as a trans person can be a rollercoaster. It's full of ups and downs, and one of those ups, at least for me, was when I was able to change my legal name.

For many transgender folks who undergo a name change, it can be an incredibly freeing and affirming step in the transition process. Because too often, trans people are faced with anxiety, dysphoria, and trauma when we are referred to by our non-affirmed names. This is also known as dead-naming.

It can feel like a gut punch, like someone has stripped off a layer of yourself that no longer exists. It feels wrong and degrading. Imagine going to the emergency room after a car accident, just for example, and the hospital matches your Social Security number to your birth records. The name they see is not yours, not anymore. It can lead to confusion, and unfortunately, sometimes, discrimination.

Being able to change our government IDs goes a long way to prevent incidents like these.

But according to the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey, only 11 percent of people surveyed had their affirmed name on all of their government-issued IDs. Of the survey's respondents, 35 percent reported that they were unable to pursue a legal name change because of how expensive it is.

There's also the fact that many states, including Pennsylvania, have a public notification requirement that deters trans people from going through with the process because why should we have to out ourselves publicly? This threatens not only our privacy but our safety.

With legal name changes being expensive and not completely effective at eliminating dead-naming, it's important for institutions and states to put their own practices into place to support trans people.

Conversations like the one we're having today are also necessary, and I want to thank you again for allowing me to make my comments.

My name, again, is Ciora Thomas. I am a Black trans woman, who is proud of the person I am because I fought to become her. May every trans person in Pennsylvania and around the world be seen and loved for who they are. Thank you.