

Good morning Chair Muth, Senator Cappelletti, Senator Kearney, Senator Williams, committee members, and attendees. Thank you for this opportunity this morning.

My name is Dr. Tyler Titus and I use they/them pronouns. I proudly identify as non-binary and queer.

In 2017, I became the first out trans elected official in Pennsylvania history: a moment that belongs to everyone who has been told we have no place at the table, let alone in public office. I am now one of only 9 non-binary elected officials in the country, and I am the Democratic nominee to become the first trans county executive in United States history.

This was not always my path.

My story begins in the small, rural town of Titusville, where I was born into poverty. Where I grew to believe I was fundamentally flawed because the questions swirling inside me were not discussed by the adults around me. Where I didn't see anyone like me in the books we read in class, the songs we heard in the car, or the movies we watched at home.

Where I didn't have the language to express what I was experiencing.

From the isolation and the confusion, from being left behind by a society, community, and government that taught me I was broken, I attempted suicide twice before graduating from high school.

I subjected myself to criticism and humiliation from religious and traditional communities because I didn't want to be different. I didn't want a life of judgment. I didn't want to fight just to be treated with decency. I didn't want to be ostracized.

I caused harm to my body and allowed myself to remain in harmful, dangerous environments as a plea, from desperation, for the only people and community I knew to accept me, or fix me.

I was 30 years old when I had had enough of the internal battle. I was either going to accept myself or end myself. Those were my two options. Do I live as my full self, or do I die? This is the gut-wrenching depths of what it means to be gender-expansive.

We watch the world around us, our community, our government, our families, our friends verbalize their opinions about our hidden intrinsic truths. We know the minute we release our stories, our struggles, our truest selves, we will be thrust into the center of their discussions and dissections, forced to prove our validity over and over again. Often in vain.

We make heart-breaking decisions about who to keep in our lives out of self-preservation. We are told we are no longer welcome at family gatherings, community events, and places of employment. We endure the grief of mourning people who are still alive.

And we are bound to suffer these social and societal stigmatizations and excommunications while being represented by a government that refuses to defend our inalienable rights, to enshrine and ensure our freedom, to simply have our backs. It isn't right.

I want to exist in a state where I can say I am proud of who I am, at peace with the journey I have travelled, and confident my government and employer has my back. Isn't that what all of us—from all genders—want?

My life experiences have created a path for me. A terrifying, yet beautiful path. Once I accepted that I was not broken, I was able to encounter the limitless expanse of possibility queerness offers. I was introduced to my own freedom, not one granted but one felt. After 30 years, I finally met myself. I got to know myself. I learned to love myself.

And then, I set out to create a community safe for those who knew the same darkness I felt. I wanted those who were force-fed fallacies about themselves to know they are not “fundamentally flawed.” I wanted to be a part of a movement that fostered inclusion and compassion, rather than fear and ignorance.

I got my master's in Community Counseling from Edinboro University, obtained my licensure to become a professional counselor in the state of Pennsylvania, and earned my Doctorate in Social Work from the University of Southern California.

I buried myself in research to try to understand what was happening to those like me. Data collected over the past decade reveals startling truths about the lived realities of gender-expansive people.

Transgender youth report significantly increased rates of depression, suicidality, and victimization compared to their cisgender peers, due to discrimination, verbal hostility, and physical violence. In the past year, one in three transgender youth reported attempting suicide, almost one-third reported being a victim of sexual violence, and more than half reported a two-week period of depression (Trevor Project, 2020).

75% of gender-expansive youth feel unsafe at school. They are more likely to miss school out of concern for their safety. They are less likely to continue their education. (GLSEN).

And what keeps me awake at night is knowing that 50% of gender-expansive youth seriously contemplate, attempt, or complete suicide.

These are the facts.

This is also a fact: shame, rejection, discrimination, conversation therapy, and abandonment do not cause orientation or gender to change. What shame, rejection, discrimination, conversion therapy cause is isolation, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and completion. These shameful tactics kill the very children the people who use them claim to care about.

I work with children and families. I sit with them while they are deep in the struggle of coming to terms with not only who they are, but with the world they live in—with a society and government that denies them equitable access to housing, employment, education, and health care. A Commonwealth that says they can marry the person they love, and be fired for it the next day. A Commonwealth with an administration that has appointed some of the highest ranking queer representation in the nation, and a legislature that permits discrimination to occur within all our systems with no recourse.

I have come too far to allow another person's misconception, anger, or fear diminish what I know to be a magnificent part of myself. My trans, non-binary, and queer identities are simultaneously what make me feel the most at home, and the most unsafe. It doesn't have to be this way. We can reject legislators who use the denial of basic tenets of survival—safe housing, health care, education, and employment—to assert their personal beliefs upon marginalized people.

All of our children are worth nothing less than unconditional love, support, and access to the resources they need to become their most authentic, content, full selves. Anyone who believes otherwise, or makes children believe otherwise about themselves, should not hold a seat in government.

Gender-expansive people deserve protections under the law that allow us to go to school and learn, gain meaningful employment, participate in our communities, build up our neighborhoods, elevate our families, and laugh with our friends in safety and security. We deserve to live as our authentic, radiant selves, without punishment or condemnation, but with embrace and celebration.

No amount of education can overcome these systemic barriers. I will continue to do my part, but it is insufficient absent meaningful institutional change. Pennsylvania is better when it is inclusive, equitable, and protects all of the citizens who call this Commonwealth home. That is the responsibility of the people of this body.

I would like to close out this testimony with a direct message to those whose souls are too beautiful to be contained by norms and expectations—who are charting their own path to

freedom: I see you, I hear you, you are valid, you matter. Don't let the voices of a hateful few grow louder than the masses who are listening, elevating, and fighting for equity.

There is so much love in this world. Love that you deserve. Love that you will feel. Do not succumb to the hatred, fear, and ignorance that is trying so hard to drown it out. This world needs your beauty. It needs your truth. All the memories you have left to make need you. We need each other. And I promise you this: a better world is possible. In fact, it's coming.