

Thank you, Mister Chairman and members of the committee.

My name is Rion Dennis and today I will be testifying on behalf of Progressive Maryland, a non-profit political advocacy group with 15,000 members and 40 religious, community and labor affiliated organizations who fight for working families. Progressive Maryland supports Senate Bill 290 because in the long tradition of civil rights advancement which begins with Thomas Jefferson's words, "all men are created equal" to the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution and its equal protection clauses, from the woman's suffrage movement to the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision abolishing the contradiction of "separate but equal" our nation, its people and its laws have labored to defy the current discriminatory norms of the day and advance the rights of those who are not treated equally in the face of the law.

Denial of civil marriage for same-sex couples IS discrimination. The only way to remedy this is for our government to allow all adults, no matter their orientation, equal civil marriage with all the legal rights and protections it implies. Civil marriage is not just a symbolic reform, its serious and very real consequences can easily be quantified, yet like all discrimination, its full meaning can never fully be qualified for those who never face its ugly head. Because same-sex couples in Maryland are not allowed to legally marry, they and their children are denied the legal, financial and social benefits and protections of marriage. Many homosexual Marylanders work hard for their families and, like all other Marylanders, want the fruits of their labor for their loved ones who share their lives and livelihood.

There are more than 400 state-level and more than a thousand federal rights and responsibilities that accompany a marriage license. Social Security benefits, pension payouts, 401k's, health insurance, family and medical leave, all are not available to same sex couples or are taxed much more substantially than heterosexual couples. This is simply unfair, working families are being denied their right to leave their earnings to their loved ones and families.

There are also a myriad of administrative rights denied to same-sex couples. The list is too long to review, but some of these are: the ability to visit a spouse in the hospital, sue for wrongful death of a spouse, sponsor a foreign-born partner to stay in the country, make medical or post-mortem decisions for a spouse or access family courts for dissolution of relationships. Married, heterosexual couple-led families are also favored over other types of families in determining eligibility for limited supply benefits such as Head Start slots, student financial aid, public housing, or job training. This is all clearly discriminatory.

Only the far-reaching and unquestioned protection, marriage commands in our legal system can correct these injustices. Without these protections, same-sex couples will be relegated to second-class citizens who do not enjoy all the same rights and opportunities their fellow citizens take for granted. In a democracy, we all do not have to agree on every decision each citizen makes, but we all have to stand up against discrimination in order to resist the tyranny of the majority. Progressive Maryland believes if heterosexuals, like myself and the majority of this committee and the General Assembly, do not stand up against this discrimination, it will be another example of our great nation falling short on its most fundamental ideals, freedom and liberty for all and the pursuit of happiness based on each individual's hopes and dreams.

Thank you.