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SUPPORT The Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act, SB 290

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair (or Madam Chair) and members of the committee. It's good to be here to speak out for Senate Bill 290 today, especially with my state senator, Senator Raskin sitting on the committee.

I come here in support of The Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act, SB 290 from three perspectives--- first, as a licensed clinical professional counselor who has been in private practice for 30 years, second, as a lecturer at the University of Maryland who teaches about families and the impact of homophobia, and third and most importantly, as a lesbian who has been in a committed relationship for 25 years. Given my experience, I'd like to discuss the importance of this legislation and in doing so, please know that I am speaking for same-sex couples from all 24 counties in Maryland, many of whom do not have a voice, or who are too afraid to speak for fear of losses which may ensue. But the reality is that we truly ARE everywhere and need the protection of this legislation to feel safe enough to come out of the proverbial closet and live healthy, joyful, and fulfilled lives in both our families of origin and families of choice.

As a counselor in the LGBT community in a clinical setting, I can tell you that THE major source of emotional distress and despair (in individuals and couples) comes from the stress of living in a homophobic society. The emotional fallout of dealing with unfair laws can lead, not only to depression and anxiety, but to the instability of our relationships. For same-sex partners with children, the pain is multiplied for the kids—not because they have same-sex parents, but rather because they live in a state where their family is not protected. As many of you already know, since same-sex partners are not viewed as spouses, that leads to unfair treatment and emotional pain of all kinds. Imagine, just for a moment how YOU would feel, if: your spouse died and you were not afforded bereavement leave, or your spouse was ill and you were unable to use paid sick leave to take care of her or him, or that you were divorced and there were no laws to protect you regarding equitable division of property? In fact, just reviewing marriage inequality (from Agriculture to Taxation to Veterans) in the Maryland Code is enough to depress any fair-minded citizen!

The good news is that you have the power NOW to change the lives, and indeed the emotional and physical health of gays and lesbians all over this great state of Maryland. By giving same-sex couples the option of marriage, you will offer structure (instead of disorganization), feelings of inclusion (instead of exclusion), pride (instead of shame), and hope (instead of despair), not just to gays and lesbians, but to their children and parents as well. This legislation is about health and economics. In my own family, since Dori and I may not marry, I have been unable to include her on my health insurance policy at the University of Maryland and as a result, we have paid over \$70,000 in premiums over the last 10 years alone. Due to degenerative disk disease and chronic pain, she is unable to work fulltime and cannot acquire benefits on her own. As you can imagine, that

certainly has both of us feeling anxious and stressed about our future, especially regarding retirement issues.

I'd like to close with the last few words taken from the court's decision in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, the Massachusetts case that legalized same-sex marriage: Without the right to choose to marry, "one is excluded from the full range of human experience and denied the full protection of the laws for one's commitment to an intimate and lasting human relationship." And with that in mind, I implore you to pass the "Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act" so that all Maryland families may be safe and protected. Thank you.