

Transgender Americans Belong: An Open Letter to America's Employers

- Aimee Stephens -

My Story and Journey to the Supreme Court

The justices of the Supreme Court will soon determine whether transgender people like me and all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people throughout America are in fact afforded basic employment protections under our nation's bedrock civil rights law, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. My journey to the Supreme Court was not my life's calling and it has taken great emotional and physical energy to sustain. But it has been worth it. Whatever the Court decides, I want America's employers to know a few truths about my journey. I want employers to know that there are things that they can do to ensure transgender people like me and all of us in the LGBTQ community are safe and supported on the job.

I don't claim any profound wisdom about the meaning of life. Working for years as the director of a funeral home, I have however seen numerous coworkers, families and friends – in suits, in blue jeans, and in tears – in the days that follow death. As funeral directors, our work is usually designed to fade into the background so families can mourn and heal, and a person's final resting place can be one of beauty. I was raised in faith. The concepts of service, the sanctity of everyone's life, and the covenant of mutual respect we all have to one another, are dear to me.

The intimacy of grief shows us something universal: that a sense of belonging is life-sustaining. And that, even in death, we all need a place where we belong. To me, belonging is that special combination of making people feel seen, feel recognized, and feel like a valued part of the community. Prior to my transition, I had a sense of belonging at work with my colleagues. They were among my dearest friends.

Several years ago, I stood in my yard with a gun in my hand pointed at myself, pondering my options. I then chose to recognize who I really was. I chose life. And for me, choosing life meant choosing my family, my friends, my work. Ultimately it meant choosing to be a part of the fight for basic rights. I have come to believe that one of the biggest gifts we can give to ourselves and others is to live as our true selves.

How Employers Can Make A Difference

The way employers treat transgender employees can have life-altering effects – either negative or positive. I am grateful for the support I have received from around the country, especially the 206 businesses that submitted a friend-of-the-court brief supporting me and the other plaintiffs in asserting that the law protects us from discrimination.

Too many transgender Americans receive the message that we don't belong. It comes from the violence against us, from those looming state laws aimed at transgender children and from discrimination at work. Despite the sobering statistics and despite the barriers we face, I want to state unequivocally that when transgender people can live our authentic lives, we thrive. We have so much drive, resilience, creativity and compassion to offer to our work.

As the justices review our cases, I urge all employers to consider the vital role you can play to affirm transgender and all LGBTQ people in our places of work:

1. You can implement clear non-discrimination policies protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination. The vast majority of the Fortune 500 as well as thousands of mid- and small-size businesses have cemented protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. That is a great start.
2. You can also ensure transgender people can – just like anyone else – use restrooms and facilities that correspond to our gender. I belong in a women's room just like my wife or any other woman does.
3. You can ensure that your health insurance plans cover transition-related medical care (at minimal cost to the bottom line).
4. You can equip your leaders, managers, and employees with information about transgender people and support employees, customers and clients who are transitioning and those who are outside of the gender binary. They can respect people's pronouns, learn the terms "gender identity" and "gender expression," maintain eye contact and connection when a transgender person mentions their gender history, and give words of support to someone who is transitioning.

You have the ability to create and expand spaces where we belong – both at work and in our communities: When LGBTQ people are dehumanized, when our civil rights and our well-being are threatened by anti-LGBTQ legislation, companies have the power to blunt these attacks. Businesses already have forcefully supported fair legislation such as the federal Equality Act and stymied state legislative efforts to ban transgender people from accessing appropriate facilities and critical healthcare services. I urge you to use your voices to continue opposing attacks on transgender communities, especially those who are young and most vulnerable.

The majority of people in America support fundamental fairness and respect for LGBTQ people. Do not underestimate just how profound an impact that you, America's employers, can have on the lives of everyone in this country. Meaningful social change does not instantly come to be by the stroke of a judge's pen. What you do – the way in which you treat your workers, your customers, and your neighbors – can move us toward equality.

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