

Hello, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee. I appreciate the chance to speak with you today. My name is Julia Lester and I am from Paris.

I proudly show up as an out trans woman, and a proud member of our community in the Oxford Hills. My wife and I have lived there for 20 years having raised two children into adulthood, and are experiencing our first year of an empty nest. Our youngest was born in our house. It is our home.

As our kids got older I started serving our community like I think so many do – I helped with field trips to the County Fair. I joined our PTO and volunteered in the classroom and started seeing the community in a new way. Free events are necessary because people don't otherwise have the means to attend. Summer meal programs exist so that children can be fed while schools are closed.

It didn't take long before I began to value the greater needs of families in Maine. I'm thinking of how we trained ourselves in Narcan as the opioid crisis began to decimate our communities, and realized the difficulties young people face when they have a parent in prison. For each of these needs, we have discussed and gathered as a community so we can learn and grow and understand one another. With dignity, compassion, and empathy.

I ran for school board as a natural extension of my community involvement. While I beat an incumbent and became the first out trans woman elected to office in Maine, I never ran against anyone or anything. I ran prioritizing the needs of our students, families, and teachers with the spirit that our community believes in one another. I was a respected member of the school board and was chosen by my peers on the board twice to be chair of curriculum and twice to be on our tech school board.

It wasn't until we began talking about keeping our most vulnerable students safe that a coordinated, national campaign to disrupt our communities called for excluding those same vulnerable students. I saw first hand their desire to separate us from who we know, what we know, and the duties we have to our community.

Those seeking to divide us with legislation such as this are exploiting unfounded fears for their own political gains. They are not seeking the improvement of our communities but are instead using stigma and shame to create isolation and loneliness. These voices of division are a betrayal to the work we've done in our community for a generation, but cruelty is their point. It's made to make you feel small and alone, and that you have no value. And it's in the silence of those who say they care that we hurt the most.

We can do better for our youth and community as a whole by investing our energies in helping them rise to their potential, rather than wasting our time and energy trying to create divisions. It is through the resiliency of our community that I stand here today and urge you to vote "Ought Not to Pass" on these bills. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective with the Committee.