

February 22, 2016

The Honorable Nathan Deal, Governor
The Honorable Casey Cagle, Lieutenant Governor
The Honorable David Shafer, Senate President Pro Tempore
The Honorable David Ralston, Speaker of the House
Georgia State Capitol
Atlanta, Georgia 30334

Dear Governor Deal, Lieutenant Govern Cagle, President Pro Tempore Shafer, and Speaker Ralston:

As leaders of organizations committed to advancing equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, we are writing to express our serious concerns about Georgia House Bill 757. There has been a good deal of spirited debate over this legislation, but analyses from the legal and business communities are quite clear: **This bill is a ‘License to Discriminate’ that aims to allow individuals and entities receiving taxpayer funding to pick and choose which laws they want to follow**, based only on their religious beliefs about marriage.

Lawmakers in the Senate attempted to tamp down the current public outcry over this bill, which originated as SB 284, by merging it with another piece of legislation that had already passed the House. This bill, a Pastor Protection Act, did nothing to change existing law or alter the far-reaching and rightful protection that the freedom of religion already enjoys under both Georgia law and the First Amendment.

However, the so-called “First Amendment Defense Act” language rolled into this new bill sets Georgia on a dangerous path; one which could greatly damage the state’s economy and harm your reputation. As drafted, the bill invites individuals, faith-based organizations and even for-profit entities to deny services to anyone who they feel conflicts with their view of marriage. The scope of this extraordinary bill means legally married same-sex couples and their families, single mothers and their children, victims of domestic violence, and so many other hardworking Georgians could be denied critical – sometimes life-saving – services.

The bill is so broadly written that it even covers the hateful activities of groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which Sen. Greg Kirk conceded on the Senate floor during last week’s debate. While he later clarified that he didn’t condone racism, the exchange perfectly demonstrated the type of message this legislation will send to the rest of the nation about Georgia. It will tell the nation that in Georgia, our policymakers support relegating many hardworking families to second-class status; and it will send a message that Georgia doesn’t believe everyone should be treated fairly and equally under the law.

Let us be clear: Freedom of religion is one of our most fundamental rights as Americans. That’s why it’s protected in the state and federal constitutions. But that freedom does not give any of us the right to harm or discriminate against others.

While faith leaders from all walks of life and religious denominations have stepped forward to call this legislation unnecessary and divisive, the outcry from the business community has been even larger.

Business leaders are united about the dire economic impact legislation such as HB 757 would have on Georgia, and they have been speaking out for quite some time. Late last year, the Metro Atlanta Chamber warned that a religious refusals bill would immediately cost Georgia about \$1 billion in lost business. The Metro Chamber estimated the state would immediately lose about **\$600 million** from meetings and conventions taking their business elsewhere. The state stands to lose another **\$400 million** from sporting events it’s bidding for or has already secured – like the Super Bowl, NCAA tournaments and NASCAR races.

We know this sort of economic backlash is real – look to Indiana last year, or Arizona the year before. In fact, a recent report from VisitIndy found that in the immediate aftermath of last year’s flawed and discriminatory religious refusals bill in Indiana, the state lost at least \$60 million in hotel bookings, conventions and other revenue streams.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber was one of the many businesses weighing in following the Senate’s passage of HB 757, noting: **“We believe that treating all Georgians and visitors fairly is essential to maintaining Georgia’s strong brand as the premier home for talented workers, growing businesses, entrepreneurial innovation, and a thriving travel and tourism industry.”** And more than 300 businesses of all sizes from across Georgia support nondiscrimination policies. Those businesses include AT&T, Bank of America, BBVA Compass, Coca Cola, Delta, the Georgia Restaurant Association, Home Depot, Marriott, UPS and Wells Fargo.

Georgians are speaking up, loud and clear, about their values. New research from the Public Religion Research Institute found that a strong majority of Georgians – 57 percent – reject allowing businesses to refuse services based on religious beliefs. In fact, the research found that 66 percent of Georgians actually support comprehensive nondiscrimination laws.

As leaders in Georgia, you can advance this discriminatory bill – and in the process, **you will damage your state’s economy and tarnish your brand to an extent that will undoubtedly bring Georgia’s recent business growth to a screeching halt.** You will send a clear message to the rest of the nation that not all people are welcomed or treated equally in Georgia. Or, you could do the right thing. **You could reject this divisive and discriminatory bill, showing real leadership and taking a bold step that aligns with the values of Georgia voters and business owners.** We hope you make the right decision at this important juncture.

Sincerely,

