

(HB 1147), Places of Public Accommodation and Public Buildings – Single–Occupancy Public Restrooms – Availability

Submitted by:

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In support of the Bill.

Mr. Chairman Davis,

My name is Silvie Gallardo, and I submit this statement in support of SB401, a Bill to require gender-inclusive signage for single-occupancy bathrooms. First, I would like to say thank you to all who have devoted so much effort and time to advocating for this Bill and who are responsible for it making to this point which is for the benefit of all. My thanks and appreciation as well for all of the members of this Assembly who have sponsored this Bill.

My family and I live in Bethesda, Maryland. My son, Max, is 8 years old; he will be nine in June. He is funny, smart, kind, a great musician, and has a very sensitive soul. Max is also, like many, many other kids in this State, on the autism spectrum. He has what would have been called Asperger's, before the Autism Spectrum Disorder was recategorized. With this syndrome come a set of challenges and issues which are varied in complexity and in severity.

Just from looking at him, you would never guess that my son has any sort of issue impeding his free and comfortable use of public facilities. However, Max does have anxiety issues when doing things in the public setting that most people not on the spectrum never have to think about. Max feels anxiety, which goes through the roof, when in new situations and places. Public restrooms are a particular challenge. We are not alone in this issue, many families with children with ASD experience these same difficulties just like Max and we do.

When I have to take Max someplace or on errands with me, I have to always do a mental calculus of which places have a family bathroom, or a gender-neutral bathroom. If I cannot come up with an itinerary where I know we'll be near a "safe" place, I either keep him at home or have to ask my husband to do the running around. There are errands I simply won't attempt to do when Max is with me because I know that there are no bathrooms where I can go in too. The times there has been an emergency, and I have just taken him into the woman's bathroom with me, I have gotten the odd look or two, because he's no longer that little of a boy. Or, when I have dashed into a man's restroom with him, gentlemen are quite surprised to see me come out. At times I feel great sadness that my boy is not enjoying the world as much as he could, just because of a bathroom sign.

Single-gender, single occupancy bathrooms are one of those things a lot of people don't have to think about as a challenge, at all, but we do, because for Max using bathrooms in public places, when we are not accompanied by his father and he has to do it alone, are a difficult thing. Children on the spectrum have motor control issues, both major and minor. Some bathroom doors are heavy, locks are sometimes hard to engage, the hand dryers – though a good thing for water conservation, are so loud that Max gets scared, but when he's reassured by the presence of a family member, the use of a public bathroom becomes easier and something that he can handle well. Eventually, I am certain that Max will be able to go to a public restroom alone, but this process of learning cannot happen if he doesn't get the support he needs now and up and until he is proficient at navigating these bathrooms. So, right now and for some years to come, he needs to be accompanied by someone else.

What this Bill would mean is that I, or his sister or sitters, could always accompany him and assist him in going to the bathroom. We are not asking you to provide bathroom help on the public's dime - I am only requesting that you permit me to help him, that you let his older sister or his grandmother, help him. We have every confidence that Max will get better and better at navigating this challenging world. He has a great school support system, he has us, but now he needs you to remove a barrier that has no real reason to be there.

Many times, a legislator's job is complicated more than normal when a segment of their constituency feels something is taken from them. This Bill takes nothing away from anyone and instead empowers many to live their lives with less obstacles. I urge you to support this Bill and make into law.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Silvie Gallardo