



Honorable Eric D. Fingerhut
Testimony in Support of Ohio House Bill 476
Ohio House of Representatives Government Accountability and Oversight Committee
May 10th, 2016

Chairman Brown, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Clyde, and Members of the Committee:

For ten years, I had the great privilege of serving in this building as a Member of the Ohio Senate. Upon leaving the Ohio Senate, I also had the privilege of serving as the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents. I appear before you today as the President and CEO of Hillel International, the largest Jewish student organization in the world, operating on 550 campuses across the United States and in eighteen countries across four continents. While it is my work as president of Hillel that caused me to return today to this General Assembly that I hold in such high esteem, it is my experience as a member of the General Assembly and as Chancellor that compel me to urge your support of House Bill 476, a bill that prevents state agencies from contracting with companies that boycott Israel or divest from Israel.

Today, to show you our support for this bill, I stand united with the eleven Hillels that serve over fifteen campuses across the State of Ohio. I am joined in this committee room by leaders from Cleveland Hillel, Kent State University Hillel, Ohio State University Hillel, Ohio University Hillel and the University of Cincinnati Hillel. Each of them can tell you directly the impact of the issues addressed by House Bill 476 on the students and higher education community in this state.

I would like to personally thank my friend and former colleague, Representative Kirk Schuring for introducing this bill. Representative Schuring has never hesitated to defend Ohio from those who would do harm to our state or its people. That is exactly what he is doing again with his sponsorship of House Bill 476. I'd also like to thank the distinguished Speaker of the House, Cliff Rosenberger, and another former colleague, House Minority Leader Rep. Fred Strahorn, for co-sponsoring the bill and demonstrating once again that defending Ohio is not a partisan issue.

It is not possible to begin my testimony without mourning the loss, and remembering the life, of a tireless advocate for our state and for the Ohio Jewish Community, Joyce Garver Keller. Like many of you, I worked closely with Joyce during my many years in Ohio politics. I also had the privilege of knowing her as a member of her community and her synagogue. Joyce would have been proud to see the bi-partisan support this bill is receiving. I know that the Ohio Jewish Communities, under the leadership of Howie Beigelman, will continue her legacy



and honor her memory in their work every day. We have an expression in Judaism – *Zecher Tzaddik Livracha* - which means “the memory of the righteous is a blessing.” Truly the memory of Joyce Garver Keller is a blessing in the halls of this Statehouse.

Many of us have passionate feelings about the issues in the Middle East. I, of course, do not hide my pride, or that of the organization I am privileged to lead, in the accomplishments of the State of Israel, which this week celebrates its 68th year of independence. At the same time, the professionals and students that I represent, and indeed the entire Jewish people, earnestly seek and pray for a peace that will allow all in the region to live in safety, free to fulfill their God given potential. The great scholar and rabbi of antiquity, Hillel the Elder, after whom the organization I am privileged to lead was named, famously urged his followers to “love peace” and to “seek peace,” – *Ohev Shalom* and *Rodef Shalom*. We oppose the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement not just because it seeks to do harm to our brothers and sisters in Israel, but because it seeks to cut off the interactions, the dialogue, and the business and academic partnerships that lead to peace.

But that is not why I urge your support of House Bill 476. It is not the responsibility of the Ohio General Assembly to make peace between Israel and its neighbors, no matter how much you might wish you could. Rather, I urge your support because of the damage that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement can do to the State of Ohio, its people and its economy, and is already doing to the well-being of students on campuses throughout the state.

One of my proudest roles during my time in state government was serving as Chairman of the Ohio Third Frontier Commission, a vantage point from which I could see first-hand the efforts to accelerate Ohio’s innovation economy. And so I know that Ohio has benefitted tremendously from the business and research partnerships that have been formed between Ohio and Israeli companies, research centers and entrepreneurs. Ohio and Israel share a culture of innovation, breakthrough research and entrepreneurship. We are natural partners. As Howie Beigelman mentioned in his testimony, there are over 40 Israeli companies in Ohio and dozens of research and commercialization partnerships between our state and Israel. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement would destroy these partnerships, harm Ohio’s economy and cost Ohioans jobs. This bill will ensure Ohio companies can continue to partner and transform our state’s economy.

But others can testify better than I to the impact of this bill on Ohio jobs. The reason I came today is to describe to you what is happening on our college campuses, and why this bill is so important to the future of higher education in Ohio.



The organizers of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement have particularly targeted college campuses, especially those with a significant Jewish population, as a place to promote their agenda. They do not seek to build partnerships for peace or dialogue – indeed, their leaders shun dialogue and their organizations on campus prohibit it. They seek to ban academic partnerships and dialogue of all kinds, on all subjects, both those that exist today and all those that have not yet been imagined, partnerships that could one day transform the state and the world. In pursuing their harmful agenda on campus, they divide students and student groups one from the other, they create a hostile environment for supporters of Israel on campus, and they foster an environment in which anti-Semitism on campus has become all too real a problem. Indeed, a recent report showed a resounding correlation between anti-Semitic expression on campus and BDS activity, with 95% of schools with BDS activity having at least one incident of anti-Semitic expression.¹

Hillel and its community partners are working hard to educate students, faculty and administrators about the harmful effects of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions efforts on campus. I am proud to report that Ohio State’s Student Senate just recently defeated a resolution seeking to impose this movement’s goals on our state’s flagship university. As a show of the bi-partisan support this issue has rightly garnered, all three Central Ohio members of the United States House of Representatives, Joyce Beatty, Steve Stivers, and Pat Tiberi, wrote a united letter against that resolution.

The Boycott Divestment and Sanction movement against Israel has no place in Ohio. House Bill 476 is similar to measures that have passed in six other states, including Georgia, Florida, Illinois and Indiana². As a former member of this General Assembly, nothing would make me prouder than to see Ohio join the growing list of states that is rejecting this movement and standing for dialogue and collaboration, which is in turn the only hope for peace for all peoples. I urge you to continue to move this bill forward and consider opportunities to continue to improve the bill to ensure widespread support.

House Bill 476 protects Ohio jobs, Ohio innovation, and Ohio’s most precious investment in the future of our state – our centers of higher education and our college students. Your support will continue Ohio’s national recognition as a leader in cooperation, collaboration, and innovation.

Thank you. My colleagues and I would be happy to respond to any questions.

¹ <http://www.amchainitiative.org/first-hard-evidence-antizionism-fueling-antisemitism>

² <http://www.jta.org/2016/03/28/news-opinion/politics/georgia-becomes-6th-state-to-pass-anti-bds-legislation>