

Testimony to the City Manager Search Advisory Committee by the
LGBTQ+ Employees Affinity Group

July 8, 2017

Good afternoon, Task Force members.

My name is Matthew Ramirez and this is Neal Falgoust. We are here today representing city employees who are working toward forming an official affinity group to represent the city's LGBTQ+ employees. Thank you for your invitation to speak and to offer recommendations concerning the search for the next city manager.

For those who might not be familiar with the term, "LGBTQ+" refers to individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and the many supporters allied with those individuals seeking gender and sexual minority justice under the law. In recent weeks, several dozen city employees who consider themselves members of the LGBTQ+ community have begun the process of forming an official employee affinity group. Although we are not yet an official organization, we appreciate your reaching out to us and for actively engaging us in this dialogue.

First, I'd like to share some data with you from a citywide workforce survey we conducted last month. We believe the results of this survey will help shed some light on the diversity of the city's workforce and the issues important to LGBTQ+ employees.

Four hundred employees, representing 98 percent of all city departments, completed the survey. Half of respondents identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. An additional 35 percent identified as an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, meaning they do not necessarily identify as LGBTQ+ themselves, but have a family member or friend who does, or they generally support the LGBTQ+ community. The most significant issue identified by respondents for the City of Austin to address as an employer was "fostering a supportive work environment that values diversity, equity, and cultural competency." Comments provided by respondents revealed the belief that exposing the workforce to different views fosters a supportive work environment when supported by managers and executives. One respondent stated, "Human resources and employee engagement are all part of creating a safe space. Activities that help others realize that LGBTQ people are no different from their straight counterparts, just people wanting a good life, would be a great focus."

On June 28, about 50 employees gathered here in Council Chambers to begin the process of forming our affinity group. Through a collaborative process, participants identified five key values it hopes to represent. Those values are: inclusion, respect, empathy, visibility and education. We believe these are the values, skills, and abilities that would serve a new city manager well.

Inclusion -- Actively recruit individuals with different LGBTQ+ perspectives and make them a part of the policy-making process.

Respect -- Recognize the creativity and talent that LGBTQ+ employees bring to the city.

Empathy -- Stand in the position of an LGBTQ+ employee and clearly understand the world as that employee experiences it.

Visibility -- Openly advocate for policies that address the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and openly support those employees.

Education -- Support our group's intention of educating and training the City of Austin workforce on LGBTQ+ identities and experiences.

Based on these values and the preliminary discussions our group has had so far, we believe there is one critical challenge a new city manager must focus on in terms of managing the City of Austin as an organization, and that is employment discrimination and workplace harassment. Although the City of Austin has policies in place that prohibit discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity, our state does not. Under state law, it is still perfectly legal for an employer in the State of Texas to fire an individual because that person is or is perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. These policies result in economic uncertainty for LGBTQ individuals, and lead to disparities in income, health care, and economic status. Although the city employs many professionals who identify as LGBTQ, there are many workers in hourly, low-wage positions who do not share the same benefits as someone who works at City Hall. These workers also might not be aware of the workplace protections available to them. The reality is that many in the LGBTQ community still live in the shadows, and for those who either are not aware of the protections afforded to them or who are too intimidated to seek help, this reality represents economic uncertainty. The City of Austin, as a major area employer, should take the lead in addressing this uncertainty.

We also believe the candidate should have experience advocating on behalf of diverse communities. These communities include LGBTQ, people of color, the disabled, and economically disadvantaged. The candidate should have experience dealing with federal and state laws that aim to prevent workplace discrimination and harassment.

You all have a big job. On behalf of the LGBTQ+ employee affinity group, thank you for your service on the Task Force. We are available to answer any questions you may have.

