

VIA EMAIL

North Carolina Bar Association
8000 Weston Pkwy
Cary, NC 27513

June 1, 2023

Dear North Carolina Bar Association (NCBA) leaders,

The undersigned write to express our collective disappointment and embarrassment over your May 17, 2023, statement regarding the NCBA's cancellation of the June 8 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Committee's drag show trivia night event. This decision flies in the face of the NCBA's previously stated commitment to promote diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity for all, and renders the NCBA unworthy of the trust and commitment of its membership, including, importantly, those who identify as and/or who regularly represent members of marginalized communities.

In canceling the planned event, the NCBA leadership stated that holding the event "would most likely be interpreted as a political statement," and the NCBA's "association-backed legislative agenda will be negatively affected" if the event was allowed to proceed. This assertion — that anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in the General Assembly are so strong that NCBA's legislative agenda would be hurt by a single event that brings together and celebrates the LGBTQ+ community — suggests the NCBA is willing to abdicate its own mission and dishonor the dignity of some of its members in order to placate the political winds of this moment. To be certain, the undersigned and the communities we serve are acutely aware that anti-LGBTQ+ efforts in our legislature and across the nation are putting LGBTQ+ individuals in harm's way. Canceling the June 8 event merely fuels these efforts and emboldens those who seek to cause such harm.

As you certainly well recall, in November 2020, the NCBA [issued a report](#) that laid bare its own longstanding and deeply rooted failures to stand up against political and legal campaigns that sought to divide and discriminate against North Carolinians on the basis of race. The NCBA's report detailed how "[w]hite supremacist policies and ideas were incorporated into the founding constitution of the NCBA," and how that grounding revealed itself time and again — for example, when the NCBA repeatedly pushed back against admitting Black attorneys into its ranks, and opposed efforts to repeal the literacy test in the North Carolina Constitution in 1970. In the wake of its own report, the NCBA vowed to, among other things, publicly and decisively commit to advancing principles of equality and equal justice for all, and "help our profession and our society promote diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity for all."

Drag and the celebration of LGBTQ+ individuals are expressive activities of joy and belonging, and represent foundational principles of freedom, equality, and liberty to be one's own self, all of which are bedrock values of our society. By canceling the event, the NCBA has sent a message of exclusion and bowed under pressure to a worldview that would deny equal rights to all. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, 474 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been filed across

the nation, with several specifically targeting individual's rights to freedom of expression through drag. These efforts to appropriate drag celebrations for partisan gain and otherwise politicize human civil rights will continue to grow more and more extreme if cowered to and not confronted. If the NCBA—a membership organization of lawyers, judges, paralegals, and law students—is not up to that task, then it is only a matter of time before the type of dangerous censorship occurring across the country in various forms targets the programming and discourse within this very organization.

Allowing our LGBTQ+ family the space to express themselves creates richer, more inclusive communities and respects the fundamental human dignity of each and every one of us at a time when so much is trying to drive us apart. We ask the NCBA to stand with marginalized communities and show they will always have defenders in those of us who stand for diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity. That begins with the NCBA leadership issuing an unambiguous statement acknowledging the decision to cancel the SOGI Committee event was wrong and committing to centering LGBTQ+ voices in matters affecting their rights and well-being, eschewing censorship and authoritarianism in all its forms, and taking proactive measures to rebuild trust between the Association and its members.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned:

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ACLU of North Carolina
Advance Carolina
Carolina Jews for Justice
Carolina Migrant Network
Carolinas LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce
Center for Death Penalty Litigation
Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy
Charlotte Pride
Charlotte Trans Health
CRAN (Carolina Reproductive Action Network)
Democracy North Carolina

Disability Rights North Carolina
El Centro Hispano, Inc.
El Pueblo
Emancipate NC
Equal Justice Alliance — *(For the record and due to regulatory factors, Legal Aid of North Carolina, one of the members of the Equal Justice Alliance, has had to abstain from participation in this letter. We understand that may not be reflected in the language of our sign-on.)*
Equality North Carolina
Fayetteville Police Community Taskforce
Financial Protection Law Center
Friends of the Earth
Joseph Pope Counseling, PLLC
League of Women Voters of North Carolina
LGBT Center of Raleigh
LGBTQ Center of the Cape Fear Coast
NC Justice Center
NCAAT in Action
North Carolina Asian Americans Together
North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence
North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty
North Carolina NAACP
North Carolina National Organization for Women
PFLAG Charlotte
Pro-Choice North Carolina
Red Wine & Blue
Rooted Therapy PC & Jennifer Ratajczak, LCMHCS, NCC
SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective
Southern Environmental Law Center, NC Offices
The Freedom Center for Social Justice
Voyage
Wake Forest Law Environmental Law and Policy Clinic

Graig Meyer
Karen Stegman, Mayor Pro Tem Town of Chapel Hill
Marcia Morey
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Sam Hershey, Wake County School Board
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Adria Roberson
Adrienne Spoto
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Ben Finholt
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Ian McAdoo
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John L. Pinnix
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LeeAnne Quattrucci
Marguerita Blaker & Associates, PLLC
Melissa Boughton
Monica Burks Center for Responsible Lending
Nancy Walker
Roselyn Torrellas
Ryan Roberson
S. Alex Snow (#53620)
S. Luke Largess NC Bar No 17486
Spencer Holland
Stephanie Marella Gryder
Suzanne Montgomery
Teresa Norris (SC Bar 15081)

Please also see relevant comments from signatories below:

- *North Carolina's LGBTQ+ community deserves better from the judges, lawyers, and law students who are tasked with defending us and our civil rights.*
- *I'm pretty sure that the North Carolina legislature would probably say that the very existence of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Committee is itself a political statement. I can't imagine that adding a drag show trivia night event would change that analysis. As a member of the NC Bar and a former member of the NCBA's Board of Governors, I urge you to stand up to these bullies. My 12-year-old just founded the Pride Club at school to provide a safe space for LGBT students against bullies. Try to be at least as courageous as my 12-year-old.*
- *As a UNC law graduate, I am appalled to see our organization conduct such actions, particularly given NC's unique history of LGBTQ equality among southern states.*

- *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” — Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”*
Similarly, discrimination, whatever its form, sprouts from the same root. Discrimination against one of us harms all of us.”
- *We must stand together.*
- *[I am] deeply saddened and disturbed by the NCBA's cancellation of this event. Carolina Migrant Network (CMN) represents many LGBTQ+ individuals who are fleeing persecution in their countries of origin. I often wonder the reception they receive in their new home.*
- *I urge the NCBA to consider the significant power that it yields as an institution of law as we face a landslide of discriminatory legislation across the nation, our state, and our local communities. There is an opportunity here for repair and empowerment that would be tragic and life threatening to ignore.*
- *NCCADP is committed to creating a new vision of justice which affirms the human dignity of everyone, most especially those in our community who have (and continue to) experience inequity, lack of safety, and discrimination. As a coalition comprised of 18 partner organizations and thousands of North Carolinians, including many members of the NC Bar, we eagerly add our voice urging the NCBA to correct this harmful decision.*
- *We must not give in to hate and not holding the event is caving to hateful extremism.*