March 4, 2015

Dear Members of the Arkansas Senate Judiciary Committee,

Tolerance is enshrined in our Arkansas and U.S. Constitutions. Just Communities of Arkansas educates, celebrates and advocates for the diversity that is so essential to our State.

For that reason, Just Communities of Arkansas is closely monitoring attempts at the Arkansas Legislature to weaken anti-discrimination law.

Specifically, Just Communities applauds those votes against Arkansas House Bill 1228 and Senate Bill 202. House Bill 1228, “The Conscience Protection Act,” is a bill that would allow faith-based discrimination. HB 1228 allows people to file lawsuits to claim a religious belief as a justification for almost any action or inaction. This could include refusing to serve LGBT individuals or anyone else based on the flimsiest claims of religious beliefs.

Senate Bill 202, "The Intrastate Commerce Improvement Act," if upheld as constitutional, would likewise prevent our local communities from protecting our LGBT citizens and others who are not specifically covered by state anti-discrimination laws. SB 202, now an Arkansas law, denies local communities their ability to determine their own anti-discrimination policies.

In the not too distant past, segregationists denied civil rights to African-Americans in the name of religion. Both HB 1228 and SB 202 would deny fundamental rights for LGBT citizens and others in the same manner. Just Communities of Arkansas believes that Arkansans do not want to turn back the clock on our fundamental freedoms.

“Liberty for all” loses meaning if any person is discriminated against based on their fundamental identity. We must continue to promote religious liberty and tolerance for all.

Thank you for your service to our State,

Ruth D. Shepherd