

WoodmereArtMuseum
Office of the Director

William Valerio
The Patricia Van Burgh Allison Director and CEO

March 21, 2024

**TESTIMONY FOR HEARING WITH REGARD TO “MICHAEL’S LAW,” OR HB 1104:
THE ADMISSION FAIRNESS FOR PERSONS WITH CARE ATTENDANTS**

House Tourism and Economic and Recreational Development Committee of the
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

To the Honorable Representatives Mary Jo Daley and Tarik Kahn, other distinguished members of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s House Tourism and Economic and Recreational Development Committee, Members of the Committee’s staff, Mr. Michael Anderson, students, teachers, and other guests. As the Director and CEO of Woodmere Art Museum it is a deep honor to host this hearing and for the Museum to become the gathering place for this exchange of ideas and points of views. This is the process through which the laws that shape our lives are created. My testimony today is offered in support of HB 1104, also known as Michael’s Law, in honor of Michael Anderson.

Looking around the walls of this gallery, you will see the art of Henry Bermudez, an artist whose life was shaped by laws that were made by an elected authoritarian government in his country of birth, Venezuela. These were laws in Venezuela that limited freedoms—freedom of expression and freedoms of speech—which, for all of us here in the United States, are bedrock principles of the social contract that make possible the exchange of ideas expressed in this hearing today.

The artist Henry Bermudez came to Philadelphia as an immigrant in 2003, and the paintings around us seek to elevate the human spirit with vibrant color, dynamic lines, and varieties of texture in paint, wood, fur, and glitter. The work evolved over the last twenty years as a result of Bermudez's experience as an immigrant in Philadelphia, embraced by new friends and other artists, learning English, and establishing a new home in a Commonwealth, Pennsylvania, that was founded by William Penn as a place of tolerance for all persecuted people of his time and of today. Bermudez became a citizen of the United States in 2013, and in all his art, America is an idea to be cherished and protected.

As the director and CEO of this museum, I can speak on the behalf of my fellow museum directors at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and at the Barnes Foundation, on the behalf of my partner institutions, such as the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania and the Friends of the Wissahickon here in the Northwest, and on the behalf of the leaders, principals, and teachers in all the schools that are represented here today. Our collective job is to bring people together through different kinds of activities that open the mind, foster knowledge, and encourage creative self-expression. If you go online and read the ethics statements of all the institutions I just mentioned, you will understand that our shared work is built on a spirit of inclusivity across all definitions of race, gender and identity, age, religion, national origin, creed, and physical ability.

Now, speaking more specifically as the leader of Woodmere, I can describe that we embrace the idea that, for some people, a care attendant is a necessary facilitator that makes it possible for such people to participate in the experiences and the idea of beauty through art that the Museum offers. We partner regularly with the organization ARTZ, which offers art experiences to individuals with dementia together with their care attendants and partners. With my colleague Susan Shiffrin, who founded ARTZ and is here at Woodmere today, I express the notion that the care and nurturing of health care attendants is an important best practice for the activities of our social lives. Our staff at Woodmere's front desk who welcome visitors every day are already trained to welcome any caregiving attendant who accompanies a visitor free of charge. However, it was not

until learning about the effort to create Michael's Law that we determined that our official Ethics Statement should be made more explicit and clear on this point for all to know. The Statement of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, which is published on our website and also included in our Ethics Statement currently reads:

"Woodmere is committed to ACCESSIBILITY in its admission policy: free to students, discounted for seniors, and free to all visitors on every Sunday."

Now with the new awareness and understanding that comes from Michael's Law, there is a proposal at our next board meeting to expand our language to the following:

"Woodmere is committed to ACCESSIBILITY in its admission policy: free to students, discounted for seniors, and free to all visitors on every Sunday. We welcome caretaker attendants free of charge."

Museums, like all open-spirited institutions, are always learning, growing, expanding, and refining their policies. It is better for us to be precise in what we believe and what we do because then everyone knows, and the message of inclusion is clear to all, including to those who may require an attendant. In this way, we become better contributors to the organized society in which we live, here in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and in the United States.

I would like to describe special appreciation of Representative Kahn, whose career in public service is founded in his work as a nurse, and whose efforts in this matter of Michael's Law reflect the special humanity he brings to legislation that touch on health care and inclusivity. I would also like to describe special appreciation of Representative Daley, whose commitment to art and music, well known at this Museum, also informs her commitment to this important legislation.

In closing, as a cultural institution that serves the public, Woodmere has grown because of Michael's Law. I urge you, our elected officials and representatives, to pass this important legislation, and—in the spirit of William Penn—make it a law of the Commonwealth.