

TESTIMONY OF SHERILL K. WILLIAMS
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House Bill 226—Fireworks Legalization and Regulation
June 7, 2017

Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde and Members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak in opposition of House Bill 226, which would make changes to Ohio's fireworks law.

As President & CEO of Prevent Blindness Ohio, I represent an organization that serves as the voice for Ohio consumers when it comes to eye health and safety. Prevent Blindness is a voluntary, charitable public health organization with Chapters in 5 locations statewide and over 8,000 donors and volunteers located in every Ohio county that serve nearly 1 million Ohioans of all ages each year.

Prevent Blindness facilitates the Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition which believes that there is no safe way to use fireworks and is opposed to policies that legalize discharge of consumer grade fireworks. The Coalition is composed of nearly 50 statewide and regional organizations concerned with public health and safety. The membership and populations of communities served by these organizations represents millions of Ohioans from every corner of the state.

In addition to my testimony, I would like to call your attention to a letter submitted by the Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition in opposition to this measure. I am here today to express deep concerns with HB 226 and the repeated attempts to legalize fireworks in the state of Ohio. Among other things, this bill would allow for consumers to discharge 1.4g fireworks including bottle rockets, missiles, roman candles and firecrackers in the state of Ohio 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year as long as it is on their own property or property they have received permission to use.

The legislation also establishes a 13-member study group to make recommendations about regulations before the law becomes effective, but there is no requirement that the General Assembly adopt these recommendations.

Mission: To Prevent Blindness and Preserve Sight

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Please remember Prevent Blindness Ohio in your will.

Current law allows for consumers to purchase but not discharge 1.4g fireworks in Ohio. Purchasers are required to take the fireworks out of the state within 48 hours. Of course, we recognize that the law is often ignored and that the current statute does nothing to promote safety and education.

However, as advocates for safety and public health, we believe the repeal of the current law sends the wrong message to Ohioans and will lead to an increase in fireworks discharge, property damage and injury to both individuals igniting the fireworks and individuals minding their own business.

HB 226 would make Ohio one of the most open states as it relates to fireworks usage. Many states that have legalized discharge have restricted the times of year the fireworks can be purchased and discharged. Further, many states have also placed limits on the discharge of fireworks by children and the types of 1.4g fireworks that can be purchased and discharged.

Unfortunately, more and more states are going the route of legalization with dire consequences. Since 2008, 5 additional states have legalized discharge of consumer grade fireworks and during that same period of time, serious injuries increased by 60% from 2.3 injuries per 100,000 population in 2008 to 3.7 injuries per 100,000 populations in 2015.

In addition to the many healthcare groups and fire departments that oppose fireworks legalization, you might be surprised to hear about some of the other opponents. We have heard from animal advocates that dog shelters are overrun around the 4th of July with dogs that have been startled by fireworks discharges and run off. Farmers similarly express concerns as fireworks can startle cattle and other livestock or cause damage to crops. Veterans suffering from PTSD endure symptoms and stress brought on by fireworks discharge.

The list of opponents and concerned citizens is a long one. There are many heartbreaking stories of families that have seen children injured or loved ones maimed by fireworks; in some cases, the injuries are fatal. The current law is not ideal, and if this bill were merely a bill to establish a study committee then I would not be here in opposition. I am positive that no one on this committee wishes to see more Ohioans injured. For that reason, I hope you will oppose HB 226.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.