

***Substitute House Bill 606
Written Proponent Testimony
Keith Kerns, Executive Director
Ohio Optometric Association
House Civil Justice Committee
May 18, 2020***

Chairman Hambley, Vice Chairman Patton, Ranking Member Brown, thank you for the opportunity to submit written comments on behalf of the Ohio Optometric Association (OOA) in support of Substitute House Bill 606. The OOA is the professional association for Ohio's Doctors of Optometry and represents 70% of the licensed practitioners in the state.

Our member optometrists provided emergency and other essential eye care services during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic to help reduce stress on hospital emergency rooms and ceased providing "routine care" to preserve crucial personal protective equipment for frontline workers in hospitals and other facilities that were heroically dealing with the initial onset of COVID-19 patients.

As the state discussed a plan to move forward and permit the resumption of routine and deferred care, the OOA was active in designing a thorough plan for optometrists to safely return to work and deliver eye care services in a way that protects patients, staff members and optometrists. Patients should feel safe entering the offices of our members to receive the full range of eye care services they need, and we are confident that this important goal will be realized because of the precautions our members have put in place. However, because there are many variables at play and data related to the pandemic changes daily, the issue of liability is a concern.

Our members are not only valued health care professionals in their communities, they are also small business owners who provide jobs and are drivers of local economies. There are around 2,000 practicing optometrists in the state and statistics show that the average optometrist employees between four to five staff members. This means over ten thousand Ohioans work in optometric practices across the state. The last several months have been trying for the state's optometric practices on several fronts, including safely navigating patient care delivery and being met with severe economic challenges. Defending a questionable pandemic-related suit or disciplinary action in addition to facing these concerns could prove devastating as practices seek to recover.

Substitute House Bill 606 strikes an important balance in providing reasonable protections to healthcare providers striving to meet patients' vital healthcare needs in a challenging environment while preserving patient safeguards through state disciplinary actions and the court system if legitimate claims arise. For this reason, I encourage your support of Substitute House Bill 606. Our members would especially like to thank Representatives Diane Grendell and Bill Seitz for their work on this important legislation.

As always, thank you for considering the views of the OOA and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.