

TESTIMONY OF SHERILL K. WILLIAMS
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HB 253—Fireworks Legalization and Regulation
May 28, 2020

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Lepore-Hagan and Members of the House Commerce and Labor Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak in opposition of House Bill 253, which would make changes to Ohio's fireworks law.

As President & CEO of the Ohio Affiliate of Prevent Blindness, I represent an organization that serves as the voice for Ohio consumers when it comes to eye health and safety. We serve nearly 1 million Ohioans of all ages each year. We care about fireworks safety because annually 20% of the average 10,000 serious consumer fireworks injuries are to the eye. But, there are many other organizations that are part of our Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition – medical, public safety and insurance organizations - representing millions more Ohio constituents that are also opposed to HB 253 and its companion bill, SB 72.

As you know, HB 253 would legalize discharge of consumer fireworks in Ohio. This is not a new debate and previous General Assemblies have seen fit to keep the current prohibition in place. In reviewing data from other states, it is clear that legalization of fireworks discharge would lead to an increase in injuries and emergency room visits.

There have been many unexpected changes in Ohio and the world since we provided opposition testimony to this Committee on February 5th. Legalizing fireworks discharge in Ohio will negatively impact the time, effort and PPE resources available for patients affected by COVID-19 and other health needs. Passage of a bill that has a direct connection to an increase in serious injuries seen in our emergency rooms is a stark contrast to the hard work that the Governor and General Assembly have put forth to maintain the health and safety of Ohioans.

Further, as we have seen in past attempts to legalize fireworks discharge, no consumer groups have spoken in favor of allowing consumers to discharge 1.4g fireworks. We understand that the fireworks industry has legitimate concerns and policy changes outside of discharge and would encourage the legislature to focus on these pro-business policies and leave discharge out.

Mission: To Prevent Blindness and Preserve Sight

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Please remember Prevent Blindness Ohio in your will.

If enacted, HB 253 would allow discharge of consumer 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. Only Alaska, Wyoming, and Colorado have similar, expansive discharge provisions in their state statutes. This is quite a dramatic shift from our current position as one of the safest states.

If we listen and learn from other states that have recently lifted their consumer discharge ban, our fears will likely be realized – the state of Iowa just experienced its first summer of legal consumer fireworks use after a decades-long ban in 2018. Injuries due to backyard fireworks increased by 163% over the previous three-year average. And, while 67% of Iowans were in favor of consumer fireworks before the ban was lifted, only 47% were in favor after.

Safety and public health advocates urge you to carefully consider the price that Ohioans will have to pay in terms of property, health, well-being and future productivity with passage of this bill. While many say that use of fireworks represents personal freedom, we must remember that nearly half of those seriously injured are innocent bystanders ... people minding their own business and having their lives damaged by the action of others. One-third of injuries are to children.

I am positive that no one on this committee wishes to see emergency rooms burdened and more Ohioans injured. First responders don't want this bill. Medical and safety professionals don't want this bill. And, neither do pet owners and Vets, many of whom suffer a severe reaction when surprised by the sound of explosions. Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.