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Committees:
Finance
State and Local Government
Government Oversight

Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 56.

This legislation would require facial coverings for everyone, including Representatives, when attending any committee meetings and Session. The legislation will exempt persons under the age of two and persons unable to wear a mask or face covering due to a medical condition or recommendation by the Ohio Department of Health.

Although it has become so, the issue of wearing a mask at the Statehouse should not be a divisive, partisan matter. It should solely be about making the people's house and the people's government safer and more accessible.

When Governor DeWine required mask wearing^[1], it was to "mitigate the danger that [high exposure and spread of COVID-19] presents to the residents of this state." Ohioans should know that alongside the Governor, the state legislature is taking the steps necessary to keep Ohio's government, and Ohio's people, protected. Throughout our state, in virtually every other public place (and place of business) people are required to wear masks; places of government business should be no different.

The CDC notes^[2] that it "is especially important to wear a mask when you are indoors with people you do not live with and when you are unable to stay at least 6 feet apart since COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in [close contact](#) with one another." A recent Toledo Blade editorial¹ pointed to the unfortunate reality that the Statehouse has too often become the scene of super-spreader events as folks continue to go maskless and not properly socially distance. This has led to outbreaks of the disease over the recent months of the pandemic. As the article points out, mask wearing is an important and common-sense way to keep the people who work inside or visit the Statehouse healthy and well. Furthermore, many organizations including restaurants, offices, schools, and stores have successfully operated their business while upholding a mask mandate; there is no reason why the legislature cannot do the same.

As a result of this pandemic, many Ohioans continue to struggle. People are making impossible choices related to rent and food, childcare and work, and are getting a firsthand view of broken systems. While we contemplate the most appropriate action to take on behalf of the people in our state, it is critical that we find ways in which Ohioans can safely weigh in on important policy decisions that impact their lives every single day. If Ohioans are forced to come to the Statehouse to testify, then the least we can do to uphold our duties is to protect each other by requiring masks.

A recent article² in the New York Times highlighted a hearing in this legislature where an elected official was forced to leave because of a lack of mask wearing and social distancing by people attending the committee.

¹ <https://www.toledoblade.com/opinion/editorials/2021/02/09/coronavirus-circus-in-columbus/stories/20210204122>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/08/us/mask-mandate-state-legislature-coronavirus.html>

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Sure, he could watch the proceedings from his office, but he could not ask questions of the witnesses. Now, some may not say he was forced to leave, rather that he chose to. Yet, many of you have loved ones who are immunocompromised, or may even have health challenges yourselves. It's an impossible choice between trying to do your job and endangering the people around you – and no one (not just elected leaders) should have to make that decision. That same article notes that in at least 28 states, masks are required on the floors of both legislative chambers.

Again, the issue of wearing a mask should not be divisive. It is something that should bring us together so that we can work on behalf of the people we represent.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony today and I will be glad to answer any questions.