

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Russo, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in opposition to House Bill 248. My name is Aliyah Bennett and I am a MD/PhD student here in Ohio.

In my studies, I provide care for many patients each year. As a student, I have dedicated my life to keeping my patients healthy; immunization plays an important role in my work. I have had many conversations with patients in my family medicine practice that I work in about vaccinations and their importance

Every physician understands the importance of maintaining a strong relationship with their patients. I would never coerce or force a patient to undergo a medical procedure or to receive an immunization. Proponents of House Bill 248 have consistently alleged that patients are being forced to receive a vaccine. This is not only inaccurate, but offensive to providers like me who care deeply for our patients. Patient informed consent is critical, and I work every day to ensure the Ohioans I care for are informed about all aspects of their medical care.

House Bill 248 would dramatically expand vaccine exemptions for children entering school or a state licensed childcare center. Additionally, the bill places new restrictions on hospitals and businesses that would place patients, customers, and employees at risk. Finally, in addition to a significant expansion of vaccine exemptions, the bill also prohibits hospitals and other healthcare facilities from taking any steps to control the spread of infectious disease. Perhaps that is why the healthcare and business community here in Ohio is united in its opposition to this legislation.

House Bill 248 would create a disincentive for parents to immunize by broadening the already broad exemptions for childcare and K-12 while also allowing for verbal exemptions. Parents who choose to immunize must schedule an appointment with their primary care provider or visit a pharmacy or health department. They must also submit a form signed by a provider detailing their child's immunization record or attesting to a medical contraindication. Under HB 248, parents who either choose not to immunize or simply don't feel like filling out the form could call the school or daycare and claim a medical or nonmedical exemption with no documentation. As a result, Ohio's immunization rates would suffer.

Further, HB 248 would cripple our ability to have reliable data on immunization rates and status of immunization for children in the event of an outbreak. This information is not public; however, it is used by a school district or health department in determining which children are at risk of a certain disease. This information is especially important to parents of immune-compromised children who cannot receive a vaccine.

No one would argue that immunization is not a personal choice for patients or their parents, however that decision can have public consequences. The fact of the matter is, no one is forced to receive an immunization or discriminated against for their decision to decline an immunization. Ohio's current vaccine laws for children include both medical and non-medical exemptions. Further, hospitals that require flu vaccination also grant exemptions to employees. Vaccine injuries are incredibly rare, and far more people are harmed, sometimes fatally, by vaccine-preventable diseases.

It is important this committee understands that both medical consensus and public opinion strongly support immunization. Anti-vaccine activists have consistently tried to diminish confidence in vaccination and have made baseless accusations about the conduct of providers like me who care for Ohioans. It is important that I be able to provide care for my patients free from interference by government and anti-vaccine advocates alike.

In closing, I hope that you understand that risks and complications from vaccine preventable diseases pose a significant risk to the health and freedom of all Ohioans. Ohio's healthcare providers are deeply concerned about this legislation. We are the people you trust with the health of your family and we are asking for you to make the right decision. On behalf of myself, my family, and my patients, I hope you will oppose this harmful legislation. Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

Aliyah Bennett