

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 Helen Hines and I am a medical student here in Ohio and I serve as the lab coordinator for the Columbus Free Clinic.

The Columbus Free Clinic provides care for over 2,000 patients each year. Our patients already have many barriers to receiving health care, and I fear that vaccine misinformation is placing just another barrier between them and the quality health care they deserve. As a future physician, I have dedicated my life to keeping my patients healthy; immunization plays an important role in that goal. Vaccines are safe and effective. They have played a critical role in this nation's public health and have eradicated devastating diseases such as smallpox. The problem with vaccines is they are silent heroes. They provide barriers between us and severe illnesses without making a fuss. People tend to forget their necessity until consequences result from not getting them. Recently, a patient of mine was diagnosed with COPD, an illness that makes it hard to breathe. Initially, she did not want to get the COVID-19 vaccine. However, as she found it harder to breathe due to her COPD, she realized that if she were to get COVID-19, the consequences could be very severe. I am grateful that she protected herself and others from this potentially deadly virus. Vaccines, not only protect the adults and children who choose to get them, they also protect the 18 day old baby I see after them who has not had the chance to make that choice.

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.