



**Senate General Government Budget Committee
December 7, 2021
Opponent Testimony – HB 218**

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Chair Peterson, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Senate General Government Budget Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to House Bill 218.

House Bill 218, currently pending before members of the Senate General Government Budget Committee, proposes to upend a crucial and longstanding component of our healthcare system: vaccinations against infectious disease. It goes far beyond prohibiting certain COVID-19 vaccination mandates, a measure which alone would effectively strip businesses, schools, healthcare systems and governments of the authority to deploy one of the most effective tools at our disposal to bring an end to the current pandemic. It also requires public entities and private businesses to honor exemptions that are so broad that essentially anyone can opt out, effectively limiting any public health benefits resulting from increased vaccinations and increasing the likelihood that the COVID-19 pandemic will unnecessarily persist.

This is a dangerous proposition for the health of all Ohioans and undermines confidence in one of our most effective tools for ending the COVID-19 pandemic as Ohio continues to see high transmission rates and faces uncertainty related to the new omicron variant. Just last week, as reported in *The Columbus Dispatch*, hospitals are seeing a surge in hospitalizations comparable to those seen in January. We must use every tool at our disposal to fight back this pandemic and allow employers and businesses to protect their workforces and customers. The vaccine is proven to lower the risk of infection, complications, and death due to the COVID-19 virus, and indeed areas of Ohio with higher rates of vaccination have seen lower numbers of cases and deaths per capita than in those areas with low rates of vaccination.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed that local governments and local communities are in the best position to implement public safety measures to protect the health of our constituents. Similarly, business owners are in the best position to take necessary precautions to keep their operations up and running and keep their employees safe. This bill, however, seeks to impose the will of the General Assembly on local governments, healthcare professionals and private businesses.

Furthermore, medical and individual exemptions from vaccination programs have been in place long before COVID-19 appeared, while the broad adoption and usage of vaccines has saved millions of lives for decades. To prevent future surges and finally emerge from this pandemic, we must continue to increase the number of Ohioans protected by vaccination and empower employers with the option to require a highly effective and safe vaccine for the protection of their employees, customers, and businesses. Moreover, as new viruses continue to emerge and mutate, far deadlier and more contagious diseases may emerge. These proposed regulations could hamper our response to a future crisis.

As a collaborative of elected county leaders, we ask you to reject House Bill 218 in its entirety and preserve longstanding public health practices and the autonomy of employers to deploy our most effective tools for protecting our communities.