



## **HB 452 – Healthcare Workplace Safety Act**

### **Proponent Testimony by Rick Lucas, President & Executive Director**

#### **Ohio Nurses Association**

Good morning, Chairperson Mathews, Vice Chair Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Public Health Policy Committee. My name is Rick Lucas, and I am a Critical Care and Rapid Response Nurse at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. I also have the honor of serving as the President and Executive Director of the Ohio Nurses Association.

Today, I'm here to sound the alarm, calling a Code Red on the patient care crisis happening here in Ohio due to understaffing in our hospitals. While we await additional hearings on HB285 to address this crisis directly, House Bill 452 tackles one of the key drivers of nurses leaving bedside care: the escalating violence against healthcare workers. We must act now to protect them. As a nurse, I see firsthand the increasing violence my colleagues and I endure daily. These aren't just a few isolated incidents—it's a widespread crisis demanding immediate attention.

Workplace violence in healthcare settings has exploded. Nurses across Ohio are being hit, kicked, scratched, and verbally assaulted while trying to do their jobs. These assaults put our physical safety and mental health in jeopardy. Yet, hospital executives have failed us by not taking comprehensive measures to prevent these violent incidents, leaving us exposed and unprotected.

The current lack of robust security plans and incident reporting systems in our hospitals is a dereliction of duty. This negligence has led to a staggering 115% increase in workplace violence incidents since March 2021. *(Reilly, 2023)*

Healthcare workers now account for 73% of all nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses due to violence. *(BLS 2020)* These numbers aren't just statistics—they represent real people: our friends, colleagues, and family members who are suffering needlessly.

HB452 isn't just another piece of legislation; it's a lifeline for healthcare workers. This bill mandates the establishment of security plans and incident reporting systems to ensure that aggressive behaviors are managed effectively and healthcare workers are protected. It also requires hospitals to post notices against aggressive behavior, creating a safer environment for both healthcare workers and patients.

The voices of my fellow nurses echo the urgency of this call to action. One nurse shared, "Every day patients are assaulting staff. Several of us were hit, kicked, scratched." Another reported, "We are routinely having insufficient staff, missing breaks, and getting assaulted every shift." These aren't isolated incidents—they are our daily reality.

In Southwest Ohio, a nurse recounted a harrowing experience: "My patient is incontinent and requires many staff to change due to agitation and strength. This leaves the unit unattended as all the staff available are in the room. It's a struggle to change him. I'm sore and bruised from changing him because he is aggressive and grabs and swings his arms. Many highly acute mental illness patients on the unit and not enough staff make it unsafe, especially with recent events of staff being assaulted."

By requiring all hospitals to establish a security plan through workplace safety committees, hospital workers can have a say in how to keep everyone safe while providing quality care for our patients, by amending this bill to require those workplace safety committees to include at least half of their members as direct care providers. These committees should also reserve seats for patient rights advocates and representatives from collective bargaining units employed by the hospital if applicable.

Specifically, section B2, which allows healthcare staff to request first-name-only ID badges, prevents patients from obtaining personal information. Many nurses already benefit from this security measure, which has prevented patients from accessing their personal information.

Having these policies in place will only be effective if people know their rights and the safety plans, which is why we are asking this committee to amend the bill to require all Ohio hospitals to offer annual training on workplace violence prevention, identification, and response. This training should be compulsory for all employees upon hiring and whenever there are policy changes related to workplace safety.

Section B3 of 3727.18, requiring an employee trained in de-escalation procedures to be present on psychiatric and emergency units, is also crucial. This training enables us to manage potentially aggressive behaviors, resulting in a heightened level of safety for everyone involved. We ask that you amend this section to be stronger by requiring each hospital unit to have a designated number of trained individuals based on the unit's bed count, with higher-risk areas requiring more. These measures should be adaptable by hospital administrators, who can exceed these minimums in response to higher violence rates.

Section 3727.181, which mandates a workplace violence incident reporting system, is invaluable. This system allows us to review incidents, identify precursors, and develop revised plans to prevent future occurrences. Combined with Section 3727.182, requiring hospitals to post notices regarding workplace violence and assaults to staff, these tools can serve as effective deterrents.

The members of the Ohio Nurses Association feel strongly that we need to increase the legal penalties associated with using bodily fluids as a weapon. Criminalizing the use of bodily fluids as weapons against hospital personnel addresses a grievous and escalating threat.

While many of our first responders, law enforcement partners, and corrections employees have protections for this type of disgusting and potentially deadly behavior, too often health professionals are told that it is just part of the job. I am here to tell you that having someone use blood, saliva, urine, feces, semen, sputum, or vomit as a weapon against healthcare providers is not part of the job. That is called assault and should be criminally charged as a felony in the fifth degree.

These actions are not just violent; they pose severe health risks, including the transmission of infectious diseases. By amending this bill to increase the criminal penalty for the use of bodily fluids as weapons, we can do what is necessary to protect healthcare workers from both physical harm and psychological trauma, ensuring a safer working environment.

Every day, without these protections, healthcare workers face unacceptable risks that lead too many to leave the profession. This is a call to action—not only to protect staff but also to preserve the quality of patient care. Silence and inaction are luxuries we cannot afford.

In summary, HB452 is crucial for the safety and security of both hospital staff and patients. Far too often, staff assaults result in career-ending injuries, lifelong pain and suffering, and trauma for both the victim and witnesses.

Thank you for your time, and I urge you to support HB452. Our healthcare workers deserve nothing less than a safe and supportive work environment. Let's stand together to make this a reality.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.