



## House Bill 96 - State operating appropriations for FY 2026-27

### Testimony before the House Health Committee

March 5, 2025

Chairwoman Schmidt, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, I am Ben Robison, Wood County Health Commissioner and President of the Association of Ohio Health Commissioners (AOHC). AOHC represents the 111 local health districts across Ohio. Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of House Bill 96. I want to acknowledge the health benefits of the key proposals highlighted by Director Vanderhoff in his testimony last week, namely:

- a) children's vision and dental care;
- b) school-based health centers;
- c) tobacco/vaping prevention and cessation; and
- d) Ohio Department of Health's Public Health Laboratory.

Today, I wanted to offer testimony specifically regarding the proposed increased support for the Public Health Laboratory ("Lab"), ALI line items 440451, 440452, and 4406A1.

Last week in his testimony before you, Dr. Vanderhoff described the Ohio Department of Health's Public Health Laboratory as the state's backbone for disease detection, monitoring, and response. The lab and its dedicated staff have a proven track record of identifying, preventing, and mitigating infectious diseases, foodborne illnesses, and environmental health threats.

The Lab works closely with local health departments across the state as a critical partner in disease detection – a process that starts at the local level, but affects the entire state in preventing the spread of communicable disease, limiting the impact of bioterrorism, and detecting genetic conditions that jeopardize the lives of newborns if not quickly diagnosed and treated.

I wanted to share a couple examples of how the ODH Lab supports work at the local level.

In August 2022, Wood County Health Department began an investigation of a Shiga toxin-producing E. coli (STEC) outbreak that sickened numerous people in our community. STEC infections can cause severe stomach illness, and while many people are able to recover at home, some have to be hospitalized.

To investigate what could be causing this, we issued a communitywide alert and asked the public to notify us if they had any symptoms of STEC. Our team interviewed dozens of people, and many were tested. Our jurisdiction normally sees an average of four (4) STEC cases per year. By the end of the outbreak, 23 Wood County residents were confirmed to have STEC, seven (7) of whom had to be hospitalized.

Throughout this investigation, the ODH Public Health Lab was an ever-present partner in our response. They quickly processed the samples they received and worked with the CDC's national laboratory to conduct additional testing that evaluated the genetic fingerprint of samples we sent them. That analysis demonstrated that cases in Wood County were linked to a multistate outbreak that had sickened people in Michigan as well. This outbreak would eventually lead to cases in four additional states: Indiana, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and New York. Knowing this allowed us to shift our efforts to factors outside Wood County and enabled Ohio to effectively contribute to the national-level investigation.

Similarly, the ODH Lab is the frontline evaluator of samples from people suspected of having H5N1, also known as avian influenza. This in-state capacity ensures the fastest-possible response to new illnesses, supporting care of individuals and protections for the general public. Without this resource, Ohio would have to wait for our samples to be processed by the CDC national laboratory, slowing our understanding of what is happening in our communities.

These are just two examples of the daily demonstrated value of the ODH Public Health Lab. They describe work that is provided to local health departments and the general public at no additional cost, due to the investment of funds at the state level. Whether testing for E. coli, H5N1, rabies or potential bioterrorism agents, removing financial barriers means that no person has to weigh the cost of the testing against the risk to their health or the health of the community. This speeds access to therapies and courses of action that prevent more significant impacts to the health and wellbeing of Ohioans.

Maintaining this capability is the cornerstone of informed, evidence-based response to the health needs of our residents. However, the ODH Public Health Lab has not seen a substantial increase in state GRF investment since 2012. The Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator indicates a 29% reduction in the purchasing power of a single dollar since 2012. Continued level funding strains the Lab's ability to conduct equipment

maintenance, improve technology and expertise to keep pace with new and emerging infections, and continue to provide the high level of service that we have come to expect.

Since the attacks of 9/11, it has been clearly demonstrated that the state laboratory model is the most efficient and effective way to protect all Ohioans from serious threats to health that require laboratory analysis and confirmation. Thus, AOHC asks that you vote favorably for the proposed increase in GRF support for the Ohio Department of Health Public Health Laboratory.

Thank you for your time and attention today. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions you may have.

**Contacts:** Benjamin Robison, MPH, 419-308-1368  
Beth Bickford, AOHC Executive Director, 614-832-0336  
Tony Brigano, Legislative Agent, 614-314-1070  
Zach Holzapfel, Legislative Agent, 614-774-0133