

Robert Vance Interested Party Testimony for Ohio House Bill 561

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 561.

My name is Robert Vance, and I have volunteered with Ohio Advocates for Medical Freedom (OAMF) since 2017. Over the years, I have worked with many Ohio families navigating immunization requirements, exemptions, and school and childcare policies. Through that work, I have observed consistent patterns in how current law is applied in practice.

I come before you in support of greater clarity, consistency, and transparency in how Ohio's existing immunization exemption laws are communicated and implemented. House Bill 561 addresses several recurring issues that families across our state continue to encounter.

1. Barriers to Exercising Lawful Exemptions

Ohio law clearly allows for medical, religious, and conscientious exemptions. However, in practice, families often encounter confusion or resistance when attempting to exercise those rights.

It is not uncommon for parents to report being told that certain exemptions are not accepted, or that additional justification is required beyond what is outlined in statute. In some situations, families feel uncertain about whether they are complying correctly, simply because different schools or even different administrators within the same school interpret the requirements differently.

These types of experiences create unnecessary stress and inconsistency. HB 561 helps ensure that exemptions already recognized in law are applied uniformly and without added barriers.

2. Lack of Clear Communication to Parents

Another recurring issue is that parents are rarely informed of their rights at the outset.

Families routinely receive communications listing required immunizations without any mention of available exemptions. As a result, some parents only learn about exemption options after encountering compliance issues or seeking outside guidance.

This lack of transparency can lead to confusion, delays in enrollment, and strained interactions between families and schools. Requiring that exemption information be clearly included in all relevant communications, as proposed in HB 561, would help ensure that parents are able to make informed decisions from the beginning.

3. Administrative Burdens Beyond the Law

Even when parents are aware of their rights, they often encounter administrative practices that go beyond what is required by law, many times are downright harassing, and I would argue there's many instances that infringe upon parent's First Amendment rights.

For example, families may be asked to complete specific forms, provide additional documentation, or meet procedural requirements that are not outlined in statute. Parents report being required to have a physician sign off on their religious exemption. Other parents have reported that schools have required clergy to sign off on religious exemptions. In some cases, these expectations vary widely between institutions, creating a patchwork of requirements across the state.

This places an unnecessary burden on families and contributes to confusion about what is legally required. HB 561 provides important clarification that helps align administrative practices with existing law.

4. Confusion Around Requirements in Early Childhood Settings

In preschool and childcare settings, families often experience additional uncertainty regarding immunization requirements and expectations.

Parents have reported that they receive mixed messages about what is required versus recommended – particularly for very young children. Without clear and consistent guidance, families feel unsure about how to proceed or whether they are in compliance.

Ensuring that requirements are clearly defined and that exemption options are consistently communicated helps reduce confusion and supports smoother interactions between families and childcare providers.

5. Exclusion of Healthy Children During Outbreaks

One of the more concerning patterns reported by families involves the exclusion of children who are not ill, but who have not received certain vaccinations.

In these situations, families experience disruptions to schooling or childcare, even when their child is healthy and has a valid exemption on file. This can create challenges for working parents, as well as emotional and educational disruptions for children.

While public health considerations are important, policies should also be applied in a way that is consistent, clearly communicated, and respectful of existing legal exemptions. HB 561 seeks to provide greater clarity in this area.

House Bill 561 does not create new exemptions. Instead, it reinforces existing rights, promotes transparency, and provides guidance to ensure that policies are implemented consistently across Ohio.

The families I have worked with are seeking clarity, fairness, and the ability to navigate these systems without confusion or unnecessary barriers.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony.

Sincerely,

Robert Vance