

Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 36
Senate Health Committee
Emily Benson, OD, MS
Optometry Resident
University of Virginia Department of Ophthalmology
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Dear Chairman Huffman, Vice Chairman Johnson, ranking member Liston, and honorable members of the Senate Health Committee:

My name is Dr. Emily Benson and I am a doctor of optometry practicing in Charlottesville, Virginia. I am currently a resident specializing in ocular disease and specialty contact lenses at the University of Virginia Department of Ophthalmology. I graduated from The Ohio State University College of Optometry in the dual OD/MS degree program in 2024, and during my time in optometry school I served as the National President of the American Optometric Student Association. I provided a proponent testimony for last year's version of this bill, so I wanted to provide an update on my experience during my residency in Virginia.

I was raised in Twinsburg, Ohio, and although family moves took me all across the country, Ohio has always been home. I knew from a young age I wanted to become a medical practitioner in some regard, so I spent time shadowing multiple doctors, including an optometrist. As someone who has worn glasses since I was young, I always loved going to my local optometrist for a comprehensive eye exam. I always knew I wanted to return to Ohio and was excited to be accepted to The Ohio State University College of Optometry, which is consistently regarded as one of the top optometry schools in the country.

The process of becoming an optometrist is long. In addition to four years of undergraduate coursework, optometry school is a four-year doctorate level program. Our first year of school focuses on the human body, with specific emphasis on physiology and systemic diseases. The next two years consist of intensive coursework in ocular disease, pharmacology, and the ocular implications of systemic disease including diabetes, autoimmune disease, and cancer. Third and fourth year of optometry school have a strong clinical emphasis. According to my patient log, I cared for over 2,000 patients during optometry school, which included rotations through our school's advanced clinics, the Salt Lake City VA Hospital in conjunction with the Moran Eye Center, and at private optometry and ophthalmology practices in Columbus, Newark, and Athens.

During those clinical years, all optometry students take board examinations by the National Board of Examiners in Optometry. The written board exams are Applied Basic Science, Patient Assessment & Management, and Treatment & Management of Ocular Disease. There is also an in-person practical exam in Charlotte, North Carolina, that assesses our clinical skills and critical decision-making. There are other examination parts, including the Injection Skills Examination and the Laser and Surgical Procedures Examination that students may elect to take per their state's scope of practice and licensure requirements. Optometry board exams are known to be

particularly challenging, but Ohio State consistently ranks at the top for boards passage rates. My class last year had the highest boards passage rate in the country for both written examinations, and we performed well above the national average in the practical examinations. I achieved passing scores on all parts of our board examinations, including a perfect score on the Injections Skill Examination, which tests procedures I am not currently able to perform in the state of Ohio.

At Ohio State, excellence in leadership is just as important as excellence in the classroom. Because of my passion for this career, I became President of the American Optometric Student Association, our national student association across North America. There, I was entrusted to lead the over 7,000 optometry students in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. I know multiple students at all 23 optometry schools in the United States and deeply understand what is important to students across the country when deciding where to practice. According to every survey we have conducted for our organization regarding what guides a students' choice of where to practice after graduation, scope of practice is always a top concern. In school, we are trained to the highest scope a Doctor of Optometry can practice, and we would like to be able to treat our patients to the high clinical standard that we learn in school.

While I was in Virginia for residency, I have been exposed to many of the procedures that are included in Senate Bill 36. The main reason I ranked this program first was its location in a state that had expanded scope of practice that includes laser procedures. Virginia passed this bill in 2022, and just recently Governor Youngkin certified the regulations governing the practice of optometry, which will go into effect on May 1, 2025. I am hopeful that I will be able to complete these requirements and begin performing these laser procedures before the end of my residency year and bring my knowledge back with me to Ohio.

Patient care and safety are of utmost concern for Doctors of Optometry everywhere, and I wouldn't submit this testimony if I wasn't confident in my and my classmate's abilities to perform these procedures safely and effectively. Modernizing the scope of practice for Doctors of Optometry in Ohio can help minimize healthcare deficits in the state and improve the overall quality of care that Ohioans receive by minimizing wait time and driving distance to a capable eyecare provider. For these reasons, I urge you to support Senate Bill 36. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in support of this bill, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



Emily Benson, OD, MS
Optometry Resident
University of Virginia Department of Ophthalmology
Charlottesville, VA
emilybenson.od@gmail.com