



Ohio Affiliate
1500 West Third Avenue, Suite 200
Columbus, Ohio 43212
Phone (614) 464-2020 Fax (614) 481-9670
Toll Free (800) 301-2020

Regional Locations
Miami Valley Ohio Chapter - Dayton
Northeast Ohio Chapter - Cleveland
Northwest Ohio Chapter - Toledo
Southwest Ohio Chapter - Cincinnati

TESTIMONY OF SHERILL K. WILLIAMS
President & CEO, Prevent Blindness, Ohio Affiliate
HB 172—Fireworks Legalization and Regulation
April 21st, 2021

Chairman Stein, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Lepore-Hagan, and Members of the House Commerce and Labor Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding House Bill 172. I am here today on behalf of the volunteers and advocates who support Prevent Blindness Ohio.

The Ohio Affiliate of Prevent Blindness (PBO) is a charitable non-profit organization that serves as the voice for Ohio consumers when it comes to eye health and safety. We serve nearly 1 million Ohioans of all ages each year. We also take an active role in advocacy to promote eye health and safety. This is the reason why I am here today to express opposition to House Bill 172.

Prevent Blindness leads a statewide coalition of healthcare providers, hospitals, fire safety officials, businesses, veterans groups, and animal advocates called the Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition. This large and diverse group has continually opposed fireworks discharge in the Buckeye State. Many of our coalition members are your constituents and feel strongly that this bill will result in more fireworks injuries to Ohioans. You should have received written testimony from several coalition members representing hundreds of thousands of Ohioans who are opposed to fireworks discharge.

This is not a new debate in Ohio. In fact, similar bills have been introduced in the past four General Assemblies. In each instance, advocates such as Prevent Blindness have come to the Statehouse to share concerns and stories of fireworks injuries and fatalities. Proponents of the bill generally represent the fireworks industry and not consumers or constituents.

House Bill 172 would make several changes to Ohio's fireworks laws, including legalizing discharge statewide with no restrictions. There are also some industry-related changes impacting licensure and regulation. In general, we have no position or concern with the industry provisions of HB 172. Our concern comes after a consumer leaves a fireworks retailer and heads home.

Let me state the obvious – some Ohioans disregard the prohibition on discharge and will let off fireworks during celebrations around Independence Day, New Years Eve, or other events. We often equate the prohibition on discharge to speed limits or drunk driving. While illegal, some individuals choose to ignore the speed limit or drive while impaired. And unfortunately, those decisions can have tragic outcomes not only for that individual but for others nearby. Much like the speed limit or laws prohibiting drunk driving, Ohio's prohibition on fireworks discharge sends a clear message to our citizens: fireworks are dangerous.

Despite industry warnings and public service announcements, many consumers believe that if something is legalized, it is inherently safe. This is the core of our concern with HB 172. We have seen injuries increase in other states once discharge has been legalized. Roughly half of all fireworks injuries are to innocent bystanders, not to the individual actually lighting fireworks. Many injuries are to children and fireworks often have a very negative effect on veterans with PTSD, animal owners, and individuals with developmental disabilities. I know this is something that the bill sponsors and supporters of HB 172 do not take lightly and that concerns over public safety are likely the reason fireworks discharge remains illegal in Ohio.

You may recall from sponsor and proponent testimony that Ohio is one of four states that prohibit discharge. However, nearly every other state that does permit discharge places safeguards and limits on fireworks usage. Many restrict the times of year to days before and after the Fourth of July, others prohibit aerial devices, and some allow for strong local regulation. Only three other states allow for open-ended discharge as prescribed in HB 172.

If the General Assembly truly feels that discharge should be allowed in Ohio, then I would strongly encourage you to look to other states and consider limits and safeguards for HB 172. In fact, in the prior General Assembly, House Bill 253 was amended in the Ohio Senate to move the Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition to neutral. This was a step in the right direction, though unfortunately HB 253 did not receive a concurrence vote in the Ohio House before *Lame Duck* came to a close.

In closing, I want to thank you all for your time and attention to this issue. I hope that we can have constructive dialogue about fireworks discharge and can adopt a more safety-conscious approach. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.