

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Russo, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in opposition to House Bill 248. My name is Layne Weatherford and I am a Scientist here in Ohio.

I develop methodology to study the safety and efficacy of pharmaceuticals, including vaccines. I realize that the testing of new pharmaceuticals is complex and is convoluted to understand for people outside of the field. However, pharmaceuticals are thoroughly tested for safety and efficacy during clinical trials before they are marketed to the public. This includes the COVID-19 vaccines. Though the vaccines were approved in record time, this was not due to the process being “rushed”. This was due to the investment in this process and because of the help of the many people that helped by enrolling in the clinical trials testing these vaccines, including many Ohioans.

As is clear from the testimony from proponents of House Bill 248, these opinions are rooted in misinformation and conspiracy theories. Anti-vaccine activists believe that my colleagues and I are somehow conspiring to hide or fraudulate the safety data on the COVID-19 vaccines. This is offensive and ridiculous. There should never be legislation passed that is based on conspiracy theories, and especially legislation that will harm Ohioans.

House Bill 248 would dramatically expand vaccine exemptions for children entering school or a state licensed childcare center. Additionally, the bill places new restrictions on hospitals and businesses that would place patients, customers, and employees at risk. Finally, in addition to a significant expansion of vaccine exemptions, the bill also prohibits hospitals and other healthcare facilities from taking any steps to control the spread of infectious disease. Perhaps that is why the healthcare and business community here in Ohio is united in its opposition to this legislation.

House Bill 248 would create a disincentive for parents to immunize by broadening the already broad exemptions for childcare and K-12 while also allowing for verbal exemptions. Parents who choose to immunize must schedule an appointment with their primary care provider or visit a pharmacy or health department. They must also submit a form signed by a provider detailing their child’s immunization record or attesting to a medical contraindication. Under HB 248, parents who either choose not to immunize or simply don’t feel like filling out the form could call the school or daycare and

claim a medical or nonmedical exemption with no documentation. As a result, Ohio's immunization rates would suffer.

Further, HB 248 would cripple our ability to have reliable data on immunization rates and status of immunization for children in the event of an outbreak. This information is not public; however, it is used by a school district or health department in determining which children are at risk of a certain disease. This information is especially important to parents of immune-compromised children who cannot receive a vaccine.

No one would argue that immunization is not a personal choice for patients or their parents, however that decision can have public consequences. The fact of the matter is, no one is forced to receive an immunization or discriminated against for their decision to decline an immunization. Ohio's current vaccine laws for children include both medical and non-medical exemptions. Further, hospitals that require flu vaccination also grant exemptions to employees. Vaccine injuries are incredibly rare, and far more people are harmed, sometimes fatally, by vaccine-preventable diseases.

It is important this committee understands that both medical and scientific consensus and public opinion strongly support immunization. Anti-vaccine activists have consistently tried to diminish confidence in vaccination and have made baseless accusations about the conduct of scientists like me who want to ensure that pharmaceuticals, including the COVID-19 vaccines, are safe and effective for Ohioans.

In closing, I hope that you understand that risks and complications from vaccine preventable diseases pose a significant risk to the health and freedom of all Ohioans. Ohio's healthcare providers are deeply concerned about this legislation. We are the people you trust with the health of your family and we are asking for you to make the right decision. On behalf of myself and my family, I hope you will oppose this harmful legislation. Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.