



June 18th, 2021

Opponent Testimony on HB248

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chairman Holmes and Ranking Member Russo and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony on HB248. My name is David Maywhoor, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Public Health Association. The mission of Ohio Public Health Association (OPHA) is to be the inclusive voice for Public Health, to proactively advocate for policies that reduce health disparities and empower all people to achieve their optimal health, and to advance the practice of public health in Ohio.

We believe that people should be allowed to make personal choices about the health care they receive, but we also believe that policy makers and our public and private health care system has the responsibility to use science and evidence based practice to do what needs to be done to protect the health and safety of all Ohioans. Sometimes these not mutually exclusive beliefs do create community conflict. When it was made clear that masking and physical distancing were the right tactics for individuals to employ to reduce the risk of contracting COVID19, many Ohioans chose to wear a mask and keep safe distance from others.

Others chose to protest and avoid these requirements, creating tension and turmoil for public health leaders and practitioners. It is our responsibility to honor the first amendment allowing great latitude in ensuring free speech is protected. It is also our responsibility to assure that we do not create impediments to historically safe and effective treatments for common diseases.

That is why we oppose HB248. It places the responsibility for creating community health policy on the shoulders of the individual, many of whom have been left in a state of confusion by the past 12 months.

We have the experience of decades of disease prevention from the vaccinations science has developed and which our public and private health system has administered. Unfortunately, Ohio's vaccine rates are already among the lowest in the US. Low vaccination rates put all children at risk, including those who are immune-compromised and/or may not have the opportunity to receive live-saving protection from immunizations (such as newborns and infants).

We already have ways for parents to opt out of any or all vaccines for medical reasons, religious or philosophical beliefs. Ohio's current law allows for parental/personal choice. Unlike Ohio, most states do not allow for philosophical belief exemptions.

There are 4 other important points that we want to emphasize:

- We understand that HB248 still allows schools and childcare facilities to require vaccines for children, however the bill alarms public health providers because it discourages childhood vaccines, and seriously disrupts the ability of communities to respond to infectious disease.

- HB248 requires vaccine providers to **explicitly** advise parents that they can decline vaccines for their kids. We know from medical providers that overtly telling people they can skip their shots will result in more people opting out. We already advise parents and guardians of their opt-out choices, on immunizations forms we've had in use for decades.
- The bill also makes a critical change, in enabling parents to **verbally** refuse vaccination and skip written forms. This will impede accurate data collection as to vaccination status of the population. In addition, the bill says schools, employers, childcare centers, and other places cannot request vaccine status information, and that vaccine data cannot be used for a registry.
- Such data collection focuses on the immunization rates of a population, not individuals' status. When this data is available, public health offices have a baseline of information they can use to build awareness, and respond properly should infectious disease hit a community. Consider the outbreak of measles in 2014 that hit Amish communities in Knox and Holmes counties region. Almost 400 people were sickened in short order. The illness came after a few unvaccinated members of that community traveled to the Philippines, which at the time was experiencing an ongoing and deadly outbreak of the extremely contagious disease. Public health providers knew that many in the Amish community were under-vaccinated and used the data they had to help care for the sick and control further spread of the disease.

In closing, we want to emphasize that which has been said over and over: vaccines are safe and effective, but only if most Ohioans get them. Since this bill will dramatically reduce childhood vaccinations, we will likely experience regular outbreaks of potentially lethal yet preventable diseases, similar to COVID-19 pandemic. This threatens not only the health of all Ohioans, but our economy and way of life.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to speak on this important community issue and I urge the members to vote against HB248.