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Opponent Testimony, Ohio House Bill 248 (HB 248)
Ohio House Health Committee
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Chairman Lipps, Vice-Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Russo and members of the House Health Committee: My name is Michele Wilmoth, and I am a licensed school nurse in the state of Ohio. I serve as the Director of Nursing in the Department of School Health Services at Akron Children's Hospital, where I have been employed since 2007. Thank you for providing this opportunity to express our hospital's firm opposition to Ohio House Bill 248 (HB 248).

Akron Children's is fully committed to doing everything possible to ensure that we provide safe and effective health care services to our patients. This commitment extends to our widely collaborative efforts to enhance patient safety within our health care facilities, as well as through clinical interactions in the communities we are privileged to serve. Many of these interactions occur with the families of the constituents in your respective districts. During the past school year, our school partnership program reached over 95,000 students in Columbiana, Cuyahoga, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Richland, Stark, Summit, Trumbull and Wayne counties. We firmly believe that the provisions outlined in HB 248 will directly compromise our ability to create a safe school environment for the students and families in our (and your) communities.

Akron Children's School Health Services is comprised of health care professionals who are dedicated to improving the health and academic achievement of Ohio's students. We bring resources and programs to reduce barriers to science-based, quality health care for all children, and this includes immunizations which protect against deadly diseases. We serve children who are medically fragile, such as those with chronic health conditions like asthma and diabetes, through the provision of medical and emergency care at schools. Our staff ensures that children with complex health care needs, including those who are ventilator-dependent or need tube feedings, can attend school. Our goal is always to keep children healthy so they can attend school and are ready to learn. In addition to providing direct clinical services, our nurses bring health science education into the classroom for students and provide professional development opportunities for school staff.

HB 248 would eliminate one of the essential tools we use to control the spread of communicable diseases among our School Health staff, specifically mandatory flu shots for employees, with specific exemptions. Influenza is a costly and deadly disease. During the 2018-2019 flu season, the U.S.

recorded 6,419,101 medical visits, 46,340 hospitalizations and 477 deaths among children under the age of 18 due to influenza. Children, along with pregnant women, the elderly, those with underlying medical conditions and the immunosuppressed are at the greatest risk of contracting this disease. Stated simply, the passage of HB 248 would increase the possibility that a child in one of the communities you represent will face a higher risk of contracting this highly contagious disease as the result of an interaction with a health care provider from whom they are seeking care.

HB 248 also raises significant concerns regarding immunizations and the potential for disease outbreaks in the communities we serve. This legislation expands the list of eligible exemptions to school entry vaccine requirements in current law and further lowers the bar for parents seeking an exemption. This bill encourages parents who refuse to immunize their children, and therefore would reduce vaccination rates across Ohio. Influenza spreads from person to person, making our public schools vulnerable to outbreaks. If HB 248 is passed, a public-school building in your district could become ground zero for the rapid spread of this disease.

Akron Children's Hospital is fully committed to the health and safety of all children. After reviewing this legislation, it is clear this bill is detrimental to our efforts to protect children by mitigating disease within our facilities, among our staff and most concerning to us, puts our patient and student populations at increased risk of contracting serious, vaccine-preventable diseases. At Akron Children's, one of our three promises to our patient families is to "treat every child as we would our own." It is our responsibility to provide patients and families with medically accurate information regarding the risks and benefits of immunizations, and any allegation that patients or employees are coerced into being immunized is inaccurate.

Thank you for this opportunity to share Akron Children's perspective. I respectfully request that this committee not advance HB 248.