

Ohio Chapter

INCORPORATED IN OHIO

American Academy of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

February 10th, 2021

The Honorable Kristina D. Roegner
Chair, Government Oversight and Reform Committee
Ohio Senate
Ohio Statehouse
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Chairwoman Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee—

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on Senate Bill 22, legislation that would expand the General Assembly's oversight of Ohio's response to a public health emergency. I am submitting these comments on behalf of nearly 3,000 pediatricians who are members of the Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

First, let me state the obvious: The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically challenged our great state and placed major hardships on nearly every member of, and institution within, our society. More than 10,000 Ohioans have lost their lives to the virus while many more have been seriously hospitalized and could face ongoing health issues. Additionally, we have seen reports showing a rise in other deaths due to suicide, drug overdose, and injury. These 'deaths of despair' add the toll of COVID-19 and have further traumatized our families and communities.

This pandemic has created major challenges for our hospitals and public health system. Further, our businesses have been adversely impacted by state orders aimed at slowing the spread of this deadly virus. As a result, every Ohioan has been put under significant stress. Regardless of your views on the dangers of COVID-19 or Governor DeWine's handling of the pandemic, we all need to recognize the trauma and strain placed upon our fellow Ohioans.

Ohio pediatricians have dedicated their lives to caring for children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this means supporting aggressive immunization strategies, encouraging safeguards such as masking and social distancing, and supporting a robust public health response that includes testing and contact tracing. These are proven strategies that have helped save thousands of lives here in the Buckeye State. Governor DeWine and his team have been forced to make some very difficult decisions over the past year and I believe that each decision was made with the best interests of Ohioans in mind. In a pandemic, every decision carries consequences. An order closing down nonessential businesses may slow the spread of a highly contagious virus, but it also creates significant financial hardships for business owners and employees. Alternatively, keeping businesses open may protect those businesses and workers, but it could lead to more hospitalizations and deaths due to spread of the virus. Either way, someone is likely going to be harmed.

The main focus of Senate Bill 22 is to expand legislative oversight of orders and actions taken by the Executive Branch during a public health emergency. This includes the formation of an Ohio Health Oversight and Advisory Committee. Our organization has no opposition or concerns with these procedural changes. The

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General Assembly has sole discretion in determining the processes by which individuals can address critical issues. Whatever the process, Ohio AAP will be a participant and we are confident that legislators will approach these discussions fairly and with the best of intentions.

Our organization is also supportive of suggestions being offered by the Governor's office and other stakeholders to modify the membership of the proposed Ohio Health Oversight and Advisory Committee to include healthcare experts, business owners, and community voices. This would provide additional insight and help ensure that the diverse views of all Ohioans are reflected in the committee's deliberations. Our only point of concern with SB 22 is language that limits the duration of a declared public health state of emergency to thirty days unless the General Assembly votes to extend the emergency declaration. Given that SB 22 also empowers both the Ohio General Assembly and the Ohio Health Oversight and Advisory Committee to rescind a public health emergency declaration (along with other executive orders and public health orders), I would ask that the 30-day cap be removed or extended.

Public health disasters can range from viruses and disease outbreaks to natural disasters or infrastructure-related issues. They do not follow a statutory timeline and there could be practical issues that limit the ability of the General Assembly to meet to extend a public health emergency declaration. It is important to note that most public health emergencies affect individual communities or regions. Subjecting a local public health emergency to statewide approval could disrupt the response to that emergency. Further, the sunseting of a public health declaration could risk access to federal funding intended to assist in disaster response. Even without a 30-day limit on the disaster declaration, the General Assembly would still have adequate authority to rescind the declaration under SB 22.

Beyond this change, our organization has no recommendations regarding the content of Senate Bill 22 and appreciate the General Assembly's willingness to support Ohio's healthcare leaders in responding to a public health emergency. I would like to offer some additional comments on the conduct of some of the organizations and individuals supporting SB 22 and related measures. Like other organized healthcare groups, Ohio AAP is committed to working respectfully with the members of the Ohio General Assembly. I believe that we provide factual and accurate information that delivers important insight into key policy issues being discussed. In recent years though, my members have become increasingly concerned about the growing ferocity of anti-medicine and anti-vaccine organizations in Ohio.

OhioAAP receives harassing phone calls and social media posts on a daily basis and myself, along with many Ohio pediatricians, have been the targets of incendiary remarks and threats. Further, these organizations have targeted public officials, including protests at the homes of legislators and state officials. We know that the extreme rhetoric and tactics of these groups does not represent legislators who support SB 22, however it does reflect poorly on the process and sends a very toxic message to healthcare providers across the state. The COVID-19 pandemic is real, and the dangers of the virus are significant. Masks, social distancing, and vaccines are proven interventions to slow the spread. We can have a civilized debate over whether or not these interventions should be mandated by government or what role the separate branches of government should have in responding to a pandemic, but we all must reject rhetoric that seeks to undermine medically accurate and scientifically verified information.

We support the intent of the bill sponsors to work more collaboratively during a public health emergency and look forward to working with the General Assembly to promote the health, well-being, and prosperity of all Ohioans. Thank you for your consideration and service to Ohio.

Sincerely,



Melissa Wervey Arnold
Chief Executive Officer