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SHAPIRO**  
COUNTY EXECUTIVE



Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee

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Opponent Testimony – SB 22

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig and members of the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for the opportunity for Summit County Executive Ilene Shapiro and Summit County Public Health Commissioner Donna Skoda to submit written testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 22.

Summit County is home to 541,000 residents and 31 local municipalities. Summit County Public Health (SCPH) is the agency charged with protecting the health and safety of each resident. Until this past year, many residents were unfamiliar with the work of their local health department. They have since learned a responsibility to protect community well-being is central to SCPH's work. Summit County residents have also learned how closely SCPH works with the State Department of Health and the Governor's Office and how critical those relationships are. Senate Bill 22 seeks to undermine those relationships and the abilities of those who have spent a lifetime studying and practicing public health. The bill imposes legislative authority where public health expertise is paramount.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Summit County has tallied 37,110 cases, 3,213 hospitalizations and 829 deaths. It is clear these numbers would be higher if the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) had not acted quickly to stem the spread of the disease, including statewide health orders. When the severity of COVID-19 became apparent, ODH acted swiftly to prioritize the health and safety of Ohio residents. Other states quickly followed our lead. Today, Ohio's COVID-19 death rate is far lower than other states of similar population size.

As the COVID-19 crisis emerged, and as other states debated what action to take, Ohio trusted its public health experts. Though we have not seen a crisis of this magnitude in a century, preparing for a communicable disease outbreak is standard operating procedure for every state and local health department. When we suddenly found ourselves at the beginning of a contagious disease outbreak, Ohio called upon these prepared public health professionals to lead. Since March of 2020, ODH, SCPH and other local health departments across the state have relied on data and evidence-based research to protect health and safety. They have done so under challenging circumstances and with limited resources. Ohio's funding for public health currently ranks among the lowest of all 50 states.

When ODH issued health orders and charged local health departments with enforcement, the agencies acted with transparency and took care to educate the public. At the beginning of the pandemic the Health Director and Governor held regular briefings and answered questions. The briefings and availability to the media continue today. To keep Summit County residents apprised of local conditions, SCPH held regular press briefings and answered questions from the media and residents. With assistance from the County Executive's Office and Summit County Emergency Management Agency, SCPH has continued to hold virtual events to keep residents informed of state and local action.

Now one year ago, in February 2020, the United States experienced its first COVID-19 death. We did not know then what we know now. We now know this disease is contagious and spreads easily. We know it affects each infected individual differently. We know it is mutating. We know the use of masks is a strong defense against infection. We know the vaccines will prevent severe disease and hospitalization. Now is the time to focus on what we know.

Senate Bill 22 will hamper the ability of public health experts to act on what they know and distract from vaccination efforts. We know getting vaccines to our most vulnerable residents will result in lower hospitalization and death rates. This task is increasingly difficult due to vaccine supply and socioeconomic barriers, like transportation and internet access. We respectfully ask the General Assembly to focus efforts on these pressing issues and help us make sure anyone who wants a vaccine can get one as supply increases.

Senate Bill 22, as introduced, would also severely restrict the authority of the Director of Health to respond in a timely and efficient way to other outbreaks of communicable disease and public health emergencies. In the past decade, we have seen three serious infectious disease outbreaks threaten the health and safety of Ohioans: H1N1 (swine flu), Ebola and now, COVID-19. As globalization and international travel increase, we will undoubtedly continue to encounter novel disease and virus outbreaks of varying sizes. Restricting the authority of the Director of Health to respond to disease outbreaks, threatens the health and safety of Ohioans today, and in the future.

Due to the unprecedented nature of Senate Bill 22, we fear this legislative action will pull attention and resources away from the fight against COVID-19 at a time when we desperately need both. We are gaining ground in this fight. Over a million Ohioans have received their first dose of vaccine. With new vaccines expected to obtain FDA Emergency Use Authorization in the coming weeks, we could drastically increase the number of vaccinated Ohioans within a few months. This task will require executive and legislative collaboration, and state and local coordination. Working together, we can end this pandemic. And, together, we urge a no vote on Senate Bill 22.