

Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee
Senate Bill 17

February 24, 2021

Chairman Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Committee. I am Zach McCune, Public Policy and Civic Engagement Manager for Equitas Health, and I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 17 and the proposed changes in eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and unemployment insurance.

Equitas Health is a nonprofit, community-based health care organization that serves patients throughout Ohio with a diverse set of services, including primary and specialized medical care, pharmacy, behavioral health care, dental care, HIV/STI prevention, advocacy, and case management. We are a Community Health Center and the largest Ryan White Program provider in the state. We operate four health centers and pharmacies in Columbus, Dayton, and Cincinnati. Our mission is to be the gateway to good health for those at risk of or affected by HIV/AIDS, for the LGBTQ+ community, and for those seeking a welcoming health care home.

SB 17 creates new barriers to healthcare, unemployment insurance, and vital food assistance at a time when Ohioans are struggling to navigate and survive ongoing public health and economic emergencies. Currently, 737,000 Ohioans do not have adequate access to food and thousands of Ohioans continue to file for unemployment insurance because of the COVID-19 pandemic. SB 17 weakens critical programs intended to help vulnerable people survive. The proposed requirements set forth in SB 17 are arduous, costly, and unnecessary.

As a community health center, we understand how critical the programs targeted by this legislation are to the people we serve. At Equitas Health, we work with our patients and clients to identify their unmet needs – this often includes ensuring access to food and SNAP benefits. Our client advocates (case managers) work diligently to connect vulnerable Ohioans, many of whom are people living with HIV (PLWH), to SNAP benefits so that they do not go hungry and can maintain proper nutrition. For PLWH, proper nutrition is essential to supporting an already compromised immune system and helping fight off infections¹.

SB 17 proposes a significant risk to SNAP eligible individuals and households. By blocking households with assets worth more than \$2,250 from SNAP eligibility and reverting to a “change reporting” system, the state is placing an unnecessary and burdensome means test on SNAP recipients. This will cause many to lose the benefits they need to navigate changes in employment or other conditions that influence their income. During a time of increased economic insecurity and increased food scarcity², we cannot afford to reduce benefits or put in place arduous new requirements. These requirements, paired with the changes to Medicaid eligibility will lead to worse health outcomes for vulnerable Ohioans.

¹ <https://www.hiv.va.gov/patient/daily/diet/single-page.asp>

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19>

I am gravely concerned that proposed changes to Medicaid eligibility and restrictions proposed for the Ohio Department of Medicaid will directly interfere with the health outcomes for vulnerable Ohioans. Implementing work or education requirements during a time where many are still unemployed or underemployed is unfathomable. Nearly 30% of our patients are currently enrolled in Medicaid and have been able to stay in care over the last year due to their enrollment in the program and the coverage they have received. Simply put, they cannot afford to have the rug pulled out from under them during this time of uncertainty.

One of our case managers shared with me the story of a client who relies on Medicaid and SNAP benefits to manage chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, HIV, address their mental health concerns, and maintain proper nutrition. Prior to Medicaid, they said, their client visited the emergency room rather than consulting with a primary care physician. Now that they have been approved for Medicaid, they can afford to visit a primary care physician, a counselor, and utilize a local pharmacy to manage their chronic conditions. This would not have been possible without the assistance of Medicaid.

Furthermore, the requirements proposed in relation to unemployment compensation place burdensome reporting on an already overwhelmed Department of Job and Family Services, further hindering their ability to process claims and provide assistance to those in need in a timely and efficient manner.

The communities we serve are counting on us all to create an environment in which they can not only survive, but also thrive. We should be working together to eliminate barriers to accessing health care, proper nutrition, and a path to economic recovery rather than implementing arduous and unnecessary new requirements. I urge you to oppose SB 17. Thank you.

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