

## Interested Party Testimony

Salem City Health District

Senate Bill 110

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee

My name is Judy Sicilia, President Pro Tem, Salem City Board of Health. On behalf of our Board and our city, I would like to encourage removal of all language related to assessing the value of merging local Boards of Health in cities of a population less than 50,000 with their General Health District.

Credentials: Bachelor of Science, University of Mount Union  
Masters of Science, Biology, Youngstown State University  
Medical Technologist (American Society of Clinical Pathologists)  
Certified Infection Control  
Retired Infection Control Practitioner, Salem Regional Medical Center

**Introduction:** Because we have good public health, we do not realize what it could look like without it. We are used to a safe environment but it doesn't just happen. Public Health personnel are highly qualified and knowledgeable in a wide range of topics which serve to improve our lives and the lives of our communities. Better public health is achieved by keeping it local.

I am sure that there are some reasons that proponents of this bill feel it is appropriate. I hope to show why it is not a "one size fits all" solution and seems contrary to our "home rule" philosophy. Historically, Health Departments have been able to merge and have, in fact, merged. This is not a new concept. But larger is not synonymous with better! Bigger does not equate with improved efficiency. It simply means there are more fires to tend and more problems to resolve and more steps/levels/hoops to accomplish it. For some it works. For others it does not.

**Salem was department where it failed.**

**History:** Despite a functional Health Department, our city chose to contract with Columbiana County Health Department in 1994 and found it ultimately did not serve our needs. I will address these reasons in a moment. In 2009, we returned to a local health district and have been very pleased with the result.

It does not mean we are not partners with our county health department, because we work very well with them. But we are able to address our local issues rapidly and more effectively than an entity miles away. We actually make their job easier.

**Reasons for returning to a Local Health Department:** In 2008, our then Mayor and Auditor recognized that as a small piece of the whole picture, Salem's specific needs were not being adequately addressed in the contractual arrangement.

- Between 1994 and 2009, all immunization were provided only in Lisbon. Much of the in-need population does not have the transportation to get to Lisbon nor is there public transportation available in our 534 square mile county.

Now Salem's at-risk community can walk to the department or get a local volunteer organization to facilitate local transport. We provide over 317 childhood vaccinations a year to a very high-risk population as well influenza vaccine clinics. Our flu vaccine clinics specifically address our police, fire, EMS, and city employees as well as the public to ensure a safer work environment and community. And COVID vaccine administration was efficiently and readily available to our citizens.

- While contracted with the county, food inspections became much more expensive for our local establishments because the county's cost methodology includes more staff, more travel time and more resources.

We now do them locally and it **is far more efficient** and therefore cheaper for our food establishments. Additionally, if there is a problem, reinspection can be performed quickly and easily to assure remediation was implemented. Overall food safety is far greater due to diligence and familiarity with our establishments.

- Animal bites and diseased wild animals were not able to be addressed in a timely manner as staff had to travel from Lisbon and had many other demands on their time.

We can now address these concerns immediately when the involved parties are all local. Our Director of Environmental Health has a great working relationship with the police, local veterinarians, animal shelters and the hospital to monitor these events fully.

- Nuisance calls were a major source of concern with a merged department. A centralized department is not going to respond to the garbage on the front porch in Salem with the speed and concern that a local department can and will. We love our city and want issues resolved immediately. Not that the county can't but in their very large world, it is not a priority. It is to us.

#### **Additional Points**

Our Environmental Health Division has been so effective that our City Council recently decided to incorporate our Housing Department into the City Health District. They saw that nuisance concerns frequently overlapped between the two departments and that it was more **efficient** to combine them.

Another positive for Salem is that we have a reliable group of translators for our non-English speaking population. And no matter what your stand on immigration policies, these individuals are in our community and can present a public health risk to the public just like anyone else. Ignoring their needs does not result in good public health. One unvaccinated person can spread a communicable disease through our schools endangering our entire community. And our trusted interpreters allow us to work to effectively prevent transmissions and achieve immunizations.

We have a large number of tattoo establishments. We wrote a significantly more detailed ordinance than the state licensing agency. We require more and because we inspect them locally, can assure compliance.

We have been directed to become accredited to continue existence. We have done all the necessary steps and are awaiting our on-site visit (delayed not by us but them due to COVID). We have worked very hard to meet all of the requirements for accreditation and spent considerable money to be accredited. If in fact, when we can achieve this, why would anyone want to eliminate a highly functional health department? I suggest utilizing accreditation to determine continued existence of a city health department.

#### **Summation:**

There are three key points that support removing all references and directives from SB 110 on merging Local Health Departments with General Health Districts.

First, once you are merged, you lose all ability to control your destiny. Knowing what your city needs or the best way to achieve it is out of your hands. A "breach of contract" such as we experienced during our contracted time

with the County cannot be overcome once you are merged. There is no power within the city to direct or improve the General Health Districts' services.

Second, if no other point matters, **access to care** should be a concern. Our county is rural and much of Salem's population is low income. The reliance on our health department is essential to improving community health and well-being. Good local health supports good county, state and national health.

Finally, the requirement to seek accreditation should serve as the yardstick for a successful and well-run department. Efficiency and effectiveness are not determined by size. Desire to serve and love of community motivate our board and our staff to continually improve services and better protect our citizens.

Thank you for considering this testimony.