

TESTIMONY OF SHERILL K. WILLIAMS
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SB 113—Fireworks Legalization and Regulation
June 1, 2021

Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, and Members of the Veterans and Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding Senate Bill 113. I am here today on behalf of the nearly 5,000 volunteers and advocates who support the charitable mission of the Ohio Affiliate of Prevent Blindness (PBO) – to prevent blindness and preserve sight.

PBO serves as the voice for Ohio consumers when it comes to eye health and safety. Along with the nearly 1 million Ohioans of all ages that benefit from our direct services, we also take an active role in advocacy to promote eye health and safety. This is the reason why I am here today to express opposition to Senate Bill 113.

Prevent Blindness leads a statewide coalition of 50 organizations representing healthcare providers, hospitals, fire safety officials, businesses, veterans groups, and animal advocates called the Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition. This large and diverse group has continually opposed fireworks discharge in the Buckeye State. Many of our coalition members are your constituents and feel strongly that this bill will result in more fireworks injuries to Ohioans.

This feeling was confirmed by facts from the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission report that said from March-September 2020, serious consumer fireworks injuries increased by 56%. The CPSC says that this increase is likely due to more consumers using these products at home (due to the pandemic), rather than in community settings with professional fireworks handlers. In fact, this considerable increase was the largest increase in consumer product injuries across all age ranges of any product that the CPSC monitors.

Despite industry warnings and public service announcements, many consumers believe that if something is legalized, it is inherently safe. This is the core of our concern with SB 113. Ohio's prohibition on fireworks discharge sends a clear message to our citizens: fireworks are dangerous.

This is not a new debate in Ohio. In fact, similar bills have been introduced in the past four General Assemblies. In each instance, advocates such as Prevent Blindness have come to

the Statehouse to share concerns and stories of fireworks injuries and fatalities. Proponents of the bill generally represent the fireworks industry and not consumers or constituents.

SB 113 is 75 pages long and only one page deals with consumer discharge. There are many laudable improvements to state fireworks laws contained in the remaining 74 pages. Even the fireworks industry is supportive of these revisions. Why is it then that the public attention is only given to consumer discharge? Does this bill need 100% of its intent unchanged to proceed with the 98% that all parties agree with or have a neutral stance on?

The 2% of SB 113 that health and safety advocates are concerned with includes legalizing discharge statewide with no restrictions. If this bill passes in its current form, discharge will be legal 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

According to the American Pyrotechnic Association website, Ohio is one of four states that prohibit discharge of 1.4G consumer fireworks. Only four other states allow for open-ended discharge as prescribed in SB 113 – Alaska, Wyoming, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Nearly every other state that does permit discharge places safeguards and limits on fireworks usage. Many restrict the times of year to days before and after the Fourth of July, others prohibit aerial devices, and some allow for strong local regulation. Ohio would go from being one of the safest states to being among a small handful of the most dangerous states.

We all believe in freedom and patriotism, but recognize that roughly half of all fireworks injuries are to innocent bystanders, not to the individual actually lighting the fireworks. Many injuries are to children and fireworks often have a very negative effect on veterans with PTSD, animal owners, and individuals with developmental disabilities. I know this is something that the bill sponsors and supporters of SB 113 do not take lightly and that concerns over public safety are likely the reason fireworks discharge remains illegal in Ohio.

If the General Assembly truly feels that discharge should be allowed in Ohio, then I would strongly encourage you to look to other states and consider limits and safeguards for SB 113. In fact, in the prior General Assembly, House Bill 253 was amended in the Ohio Senate to move the Ohio Fireworks Safety Coalition to neutral. This was a step in the right direction, though unfortunately HB 253 did not receive a concurrence vote in the Ohio House before *Lame Duck* came to a close.

In closing, I want to stress that, while our coalition remains opposes to fireworks discharge, we are committed to working with the bill sponsors and this committee to make this a pro-safety bill. If it is the position of the General Assembly to allow for consumer discharge in Ohio, we want to bring a constructive voice to the table.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.

