

Sarah Pajka, MD
Opponent
House Bill 68
Ohio House Public Health Committee

Thank you, Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Public Health Policy Committee. My name is Sarah Pajka, and I am a graduate of Ohio State College of Medicine in Columbus, Ohio. I am providing testimony in opposition to House Bill 68 on behalf of myself as an Ohioan and as a physician.

As a medical student placed at a children's hospital for my clinical education, I've seen first-hand how our health system is struggling to bear the weight of a mental health crisis among our youth – the lack service availability has left many families waiting months to get care. I am particularly concerned about youth who identify as trans/gender-nonconforming, who experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness, physical violence, substance use and high-risk sexual behaviors¹⁻⁴ all while having higher rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide⁵⁻⁷.

Given the unique challenges faced by this group, it is pertinent that we find ways to bolster their health and well-being. I believe that every child deserves access to the treatments and resources that they need to thrive; and every family should be equipped with the knowledge and support necessary to get them there. Research tells us that while mental health care for comorbid conditions such as anxiety, depression or PTSD is often necessary, for many people with gender dysphoria, it is not sufficient as a stand-alone treatment^{8,9}. Therefore, it is crucial that youth with gender dysphoria receive appropriate assessments and access to *all* the treatments that they, their families and their care teams believe are in their best long-term interest, including the medical and psychological interventions that HB 68 seeks to ban.

HB 68 seeks to restrict evidence-based health care for young people while inserting legislators into the relationship between minor, their guardians, and their medical providers in an unprecedented manner. I am concerned about the messages this bill sends about Ohio's dedicated healthcare providers, the impact it will have on our ability to provide the best care possible to our communities, and its potential impact on our healthcare workforce:

1. The language of this bill implies that medical treatment for gender dysphoria is being provided in an unsafe, experimental manner and it implies that health providers are not doing their due diligence of evaluating the myriad of factors which impact youth who experience gender dysphoria. In previous testimony to this committee on HB 454, representatives from leading pediatric hospitals in the state have clarified emphatically that this is not the case. Clinical practice guidelines from the Endocrine Society, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health recommend that

adolescents diagnosed with gender dysphoria receive mental healthcare prior to and concurrent with any pharmacologic treatment^{8,10,11}. Additionally, the Ohio State Medical Association recently shared their opposition to bans on gender-affirming care in Ohio, affirming that individual healthcare decisions should be left to patients and their families, not legislators.

2. This bill raises concerns about the effectiveness and long-term impacts of various gender-transition medical treatments. Every day physicians apply medical evidence and research to ensure quality, safe healthcare and provide the best outcomes they can – care for trans/gender-nonconforming youth is no different. I think you would all agree that Ohio kids deserve the best we have to offer, and that includes an investment in understanding the best approaches to serving gender-diverse youth. As a point of pride, Ohio has some of the best hospital systems in the country. We have the opportunity to be leaders in improving the health/well-being of gender diverse youth. But this bill would crush any opportunity for us to do this important research.
3. I am concerned that this bill would force Ohio's providers to decide between violating their ethical duty to provide the best care possible patients, or lose their license. I don't want to be put in that position, and neither do many of my classmates. If this bill passes, many of us will be incentivized to establish our practice elsewhere, which would be an unfortunate waste of this state's investment in our education thus far. This should be of grave concern to this committee, as the US Department of Health and Human Services predicts that Ohio will have a primary care physician shortage of 13% by 2025¹². Amidst an epidemic of youth mental health concerns, along with our state's abysmal infant/maternal mortality rates and addiction crisis, this committee should be prioritizing efforts to keep Ohio's physicians in this state.

Lastly, all of this attention on such a small minority of children, who deserve love and care, speaks volumes to the culture in our state. As a young person who may one day have their own family, I want to live somewhere where all people are loved and accepted for who they are, and who have access to the resources they need to thrive. And I believe that we can build that here in Ohio, but not if this statehouse imposes itself on the complex decisions that children are making with their guardians and their doctors. I strongly urge you to vote NO on this bill and I thank you for your time and consideration.

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