

Testimony of Albert Vargas
In opposition to House Bill 68
Submitted to the Public Health Policy Committee May 22, 2023

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Public Health Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony for House Bill 68 (HB68). My name is Albert Vargas. I testify today as a medical student at Ohio University – Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine and member of the Physicians Action Network.

As a medical student and future physician, I am strongly opposed to HB68. HB68, dubbed the so-called "SAFE Act," would harm the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. We must protect our children and ensure that they have access to best-practice physical and mental health treatment, including LGBTQ+ Youth. HB68 directly puts already vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth at risk of losing access to vital, best-practice healthcare, including mental health care, and would forcibly re-transition all transgender youth in the state of Ohio. This legislation would upend the lives of Ohio families, many of which would be forced to flee the state to protect their children.

Lack of access to gender affirming providers increases the risk of suicide and further creates barriers for LGBTQ+ simply trying to exist as their authentic selves. Prevalence of mental health disorders is notably higher in LGBTQ+ youth, especially transgender/nonbinary people and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation like HB68 further creates stigma and increases risk of self-harm and suicide.

Further, this bill completely disregards both the physician's autonomy and the shared decision-making between physician and patient. For example, this bill outright bans the ability to prescribe puberty-blocking drugs to minors. For transgender youth, these medicines can improve mental well-being, reduce depression and anxiety, improve social interactions with other kids, reduce thoughts or actions related to self-harm, and potentially eliminate the need for future surgeries. This bill eliminates a physician's ability to use these medicines, even when their expertise determines that it may be beneficial for a patient. This bill would potentially subject physicians to discipline by their professional licensing board for prescribing a medication that is beneficial per their medical expertise and consistent with the patient's wishes.

For these reasons, I am strongly opposed to this bill. As a future physician with lifelong ties to Ohio, I cannot imagine practicing in a state that would enact legislation that harms an already vulnerable LGBTQ+ population. I also cannot imagine practicing in a state that would disregard the physician's expertise and the physician-patient relationship to pass such legislation.