

March 22, 2021

The Honorable Mike DeWine
Vern Riffe Center for Government and Arts
77 South High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Dear Governor DeWine,

Columbus Public Health stands with you and your commitment to protecting the health of all Ohioans. We are thankful for the support of Ohio's 113 local health departments, and we stand with you in opposition to Senate Bill 22 of the 134th General Assembly. We urge the members of the Ohio House and Senate, respectively, to protect the health and safety of our residents by honoring the veto, and resisting the urge to override that veto for political purposes.

Senate Bill 22, which proposes ill-advised changes in public health authority in the state of Ohio, undermines scientific and public health principles historically proven to be incontrovertibly true for communicable disease control. This legislation is short sighted and has far reaching negative health consequences beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the provisions aimed at removing local boards of health authority are especially troubling and demonstrate a complete disregard for the public's health and safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the public's understanding of case investigation, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine. These longstanding public health measures are now part of the public's daily vernacular. But they do not just apply to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Boards of health are required to conduct these actions for all reportable, infectious diseases to protect the public's health. The list is comprehensive, encompassing diseases with the potential for epidemic spread such as botulism, hepatitis A-B-C, HIV, measles, meningitis, mumps, novel influenza virus, pertussis, plague, rabies, tuberculosis, and viral hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola.

Stripping local boards of health of their authority to prevent the spread of disease through the proven actions of isolation and quarantine violates the principles of the ethical practice of public health. These actions work because local health departments adhere to the foundational tenet of investigating and identifying confirmed and probable cases of disease. Cases self-isolate and close-contacts self-quarantine. Waiting for a medical diagnosis for confirmation of disease prior to action would be irresponsible and is counter to best-practice public health and medical principles adopted globally.

Furthermore, without the ability to issue general orders as outlined in Senate Bill 22, should any of the US Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) BioWatch sensors in Columbus detect anthrax or any other biological agents, there would be no ability for public health to secure an area of the city. Currently, DHS expects local health departments to be the lead agencies in securing areas when there is a positive result and a biological terrorist threat is being investigated. To tell a local health department that it cannot issue a general order is to endanger Ohioans everywhere.

The bottom line is, Senate Bill 22 as proposed casts aside scientific evidence, disregards the knowledge and expertise of medical and public health professionals, and is a misstep in protecting the health of all Ohioans.

While there will be time for careful consideration of legislative changes that will strengthen our ability to respond to future public health emergencies, Senate Bill 22 is simply the wrong course of action. A collaborative effort including key stakeholders from many sectors is paramount to making wise decisions on any changes to public health authority in Ohio. As such, Columbus Public Health supports the Governor's veto.

Best of health,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mysheika W. Roberts". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Mysheika W. Roberts, MD, MPH
Health Commissioner
Columbus Public Health