



Opponent Testimony HB 561

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March 25, 2026

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in opposition to House Bill 561.

I am Dr. Olivia Safady, a second-year Family Medicine resident. I am here on behalf of the Academy of Medicine of Cleveland & Northern Ohio and in the interest of protecting medicine.

The Academy of Medicine of Cleveland & Northern Ohio represents more than 7,200 physicians and medical students in Northeast Ohio. For more than 200 years, we have worked to protect the health of Ohioans in our region and beyond and to promote the highest quality practice of evidence-based medicine. We've appeared before this body several times to affirm our collective medical opinion that vaccinations are safe, effective, and critical to public health. I am here to voice our strong opposition to House Bill 561 and share our concerns.

I want to begin with a personal story. My grandmother contracted polio as a child, just a few years before the development of the polio vaccine. She survived, but decades later, she developed post-polio syndrome, a condition that emerges years after initial infection. She lived with joint degeneration, muscle weakness, chronic pain and fatigue, and partial paralysis of her diaphragm for more than 20 years. Her medical journey and her strength in the face of irreversible, chronic illness is the reason I chose to go into medicine.

We vaccinate not just to prevent illness, but to prevent lifelong suffering. Surviving an infection is not the same as being spared from it, many vaccine-preventable diseases leave lasting, life-altering complications. These long-term consequences are often invisible in policy discussions, but they are very real for the patients we care for.

House Bill 561 weakens the ability of public health and school officials to protect children from preventable disease. By restricting the ability to temporarily exclude unvaccinated children during outbreaks, it increases the risk of exposure and further spread within our communities.

Currently, Ohio's nonmedical kindergarten vaccine exemption rate is higher than the national average. This bill is not about improving access to information or transparency; families who want exemptions are already obtaining them, and at increasing rates. As physicians, we support informed consent and shared decision-making. We should be encouraging families to talk with their doctors about their vaccine concerns, not weakening opportunities for these potentially life-altering conversations.

Additionally, the specific removal of the Hepatitis B vaccine is of deep concern. Hep B is a highly infectious virus that can be transmitted through blood and bodily fluids, conditions that occur often in childcare settings. When infants and young children become infected, they are far more likely to develop chronic Hepatitis B, which can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer later in life. We have a safe, effective vaccine that prevents this entirely. Removing this reverses decades of progress against a disease we know how to prevent.

Existing laws already provide flexibility. House Bill 561 goes further, not to improve care, but to limit the ability of public health professionals to respond to outbreaks and protect vulnerable populations. Parents send their children to school with the expectation that their health and safety will be protected. This bill undermines that trust. We respectfully urge you to vote no against this dangerous bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.