

Testimony of Catherine Romanos, MD

In Support of House Bill 559

Submitted to the Ohio House Health Committee

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Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am a family physician who lives and works in Columbus, Ohio. I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish literature at New York University (I am fluent in Spanish), received my medical degree from the University of Connecticut, and completed a residency in family medicine with an emphasis on social justice and caring for underserved Spanish-speaking patients in Lawrence, Massachusetts. I am board certified in family medicine.

In addition, I am a member of the Ohio Academy of Family Physicians and I serve on the Academy's Public Policy Committee. The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians strongly supports House Bill 559 and I represent them as well as myself in this testimony.

As a physician, I want to convey to you the vital importance of passing House Bill (HB) 559. This bill is about prevention and protection. This bill is about preventing deadly diseases and these diseases from spreading. This bill is about protecting the most vulnerable people in Ohio - children, people who are sick, and pregnant women, in particular.

Every time I think about the importance of vaccines, my mind goes back to a family I cared for during my residency training. A mother of 3, I'll call her Jane\*, was 20

weeks pregnant with her fourth child. Her children had not been appropriately vaccinated and while she was pregnant, one of the children came down with the chicken pox. Now many of us in this room have had the chicken pox and remember it as an annoying but benign illness. We forget, however, that chickenpox is not only deadly in its own right, but it is very dangerous for a developing fetus. If a woman contracts chickenpox during pregnancy the fetus is at risk for congenital varicella, being born with birth defects. Currently we do not have an effective way of treating pregnant women with chickenpox, or protecting the fetus. Jane's pregnancy was complicated and stressful. The most heartbreaking part is that these complications and stresses could have been prevented with vaccines.

So when we talk about vaccines, we are not just talking about the individuals being pricked by the needle in the doctor's office. We are talking about population health. We are looking out for pregnant women like Jane and her 4 children. We are thinking about people whose bodies cannot protect them from illness the ways healthy bodies can.

A few months ago, I was canvassing for a candidate for this House, an activity that many of you are very familiar with I am sure. I came to a modest home in a very typical suburban neighborhood. There was an angel hanging on the door with writing indicating that in that home resided a child that was immunocompromised. The woman who came to the door was perhaps this child's mother. She was fearful of me. Now I am not an imposing character to show up on your doorstep. I am just under 5'2" and hardly what one might find to be "threatening." But the woman who came to that door was scared. And I didn't blame her. Her child likely was not allowed to be vaccinated against

the flu every year or to get their booster shots for mumps and measles and rubella. An unvaccinated person coming to their door was a threat. We don't just vaccinate the children who need to be protected from deadly diseases; we vaccinate the people around them so that they don't spread these deadly diseases. This is called herd immunity. Herd immunity is the reason that vaccine efforts have all but eliminated polio and yellow fever and mumps.

As a family physician, I value the relationships that I have with my patients. I put equal value on that relationship as I do on their individual and bodily autonomy. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to talk with patients about decisions they make for themselves and their families. Because of the high volume of misinformation about vaccines, I think that this topic in particular requires a conversation with a licensed healthcare provider. It is not my job to make decisions for my patients. It is my job to listen to their concerns and offer evidence-based information that might help to inform their decisions. I am deeply concerned about the population risk of unvaccinated individuals and the risk they accept for their own health and the health of those around them. I would like to have the opportunity to discuss the risks and benefits of these decisions this with all patients, those that choose vaccination for their families, and those who do not.

Finally, this bill does not force any parent to vaccinate their children if they do not choose to do so. It does make it more likely that all families will receive the most accurate information possible about vaccines. There is a lot of talk about fake news and real facts these days. The evidence on immunizations is not weak. The benefits of immunizations are irrefutable and any healthcare provider that tells you otherwise if

practicing very far outside of mainstream medicine. It is critical to the lives and health of women, children, and families in Ohio that you vote in support of HB 559.

Respectfully submitted,

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\* Patient names have been changed to protect confidentiality.