

Local Health Officers – Removal – Grounds and Processes – HB0609

Health and Government Operations

Testimony in Favor

Beth Resnick

2/23/2022 1:00pm

Good afternoon, Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and members of the Committee.

My name is Beth Resnick. I am a Senior Scientist in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The first decade of my career was spent working at the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) to support and advance the capacity of our nation's nearly 3,000 local health departments. I am honored to come before this committee, and I am here today to ask you to give a favorable report on House Bill 0609

The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

Public health officials are public servants that work to protect and promote the health of all populations within their jurisdiction, including the responsibility to create, champion, and implement laws that affect health. Health Officers, like directors of other county agencies, serve at the pleasure of elected officials. However, when it comes to Maryland's termination policies, state-employed Health Officers and county-employed division directors should be reassessed. As COVID has demonstrated, Health Officers need considerations to allow them to reflect the best scientific and medical evidence to protect the health of all Marylanders.

HB 0609 aims to improve the current termination process with procedures to lessen the potential political pressure to influence decisions that directly impact the health and safety of Maryland residents.

Health Officers are responsible for the enforcement of state laws, as well as orders issued by the Governor and health Secretary. Additionally, Health Officers take actions based on state and national guidelines and standards, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Health, state professional boards, as well as physician, and nursing codes of ethics. Thus, differentiating health officers from other appointees who serve at the pleasure of elected officials and can result in Health Officers being put in difficult political situations when there is disagreement between the state and local leaders. Thus, Health Officers should not be at risk of termination when performing their duty to uphold these legal requirements.

It is paramount that decisions directly affecting public health be based on the Health Officer's legal requirements and professional abilities. By necessitating a defined cause for termination, HB 0609 assures Marylanders that actions are being taken in the best interests of their health and safety.

This legislation allows health officers to work in the capacity that they were hired: to protect and promote the health of all Marylanders. I urge you to give a favorable report. Thank you.