

SUPPORT

HB0609 Local Health Officers - Removal - Grounds and Process

February 23, 2022

Good afternoon, Madame Chair and Committee members. My name is Lorraine Diana. I am a family nurse practitioner and have practiced in Maryland for 41 years. I support this bill HB0609 Local Health Officers - Removal - Grounds and Process.

Imagine being in the middle of a pandemic and the middle of an opioid crisis like nothing else Maryland or this country have ever experienced and then having your county health officer-- the person who leads the planning and implementation for public health, public safety, keeping and reporting data and statistics on these crises, and developing guidelines and programs to protect the public from further harm--fired for no reason except doing his job! Fired because of political will. Fired, not based on science or data, but because some members of the public didn't like those policies that helped keep them safe.

This would never happen you say! But it did in Maryland. Twice in 2021. One health officer was reinstated. The other was not.

So, what do health officers do?

- Responsible for the day-to-day operations of the health department which may include:
- Child Fatality Review Team
- Behavioral Health & Local Behavioral Health Authority
- Mental Health Core Service Agency Advisory Board
- Substance Abuse Services & Drug & Alcohol Abuse Council
- Crisis Intervention
- Environmental Health (potability of water, sewer, perk tests, etc.)
- School Nurse Program
- Community Health
- Disease Surveillance and Response including public safety measures, vaccine programs, testing programs
- Health Promotions
- Reproductive Health including prenatal care for women with opioid use disorder

Under current law, county health officers are employees of the Maryland Department of Health but are hired by county commissioners or county councils and serve at their will. There are specific guidelines for the qualifications health officers must have to serve in that position.

County councils/county commissioners consist of elected officials who may not have any background in public health, science, scientific data, disease management or any of the other bodies of knowledge required of a health officer.

I am a mother, a grandmother, and a health care provider. My children and grandchildren live in one of the counties where the health officer was dismissed without cause during the pandemic and opioid crisis. The firing occurred after children returned to in person school with masks to help stop the spread of Covid and while vaccine programs for adults and children were actively underway on an almost daily basis throughout the county. Testing sites were set up and staffed by the health department when no other testing sites were available to citizens who feared they were exposed to Covid. Without a health officer, who would ensure these programs continued? What about all the other daily functions the health department is responsible to provide for the public? In a county where behavioral health services are sparse at best and the health department is often the entry point into the system for behavioral health services, what would happen to those patients? Consider the pregnant women with opioid use disorder who depend upon the health department to help keep them and their babies safe.

Can you imagine the fear, panic, and sense of insecurity the loss of a health officer at such a critical time can cause for an already over stressed public? Please put yourself in the peoples' shoes and pass HB609. Don't let this happen again!

Thank you for all the hard work you do to make Maryland a better place to live. I have attached an excerpt from the Baltimore Sun about our health officers.

Sincerely,

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To quote the Baltimore Sun December 26, 2021

“Imagine your singular professional goal is to protect the health and well-being of others — a challenge on a normal day, given the public’s varied personal habits and histories, and decades of underinvestment in your field. And then, along comes a pandemic.

Suddenly, you’re not just battling diabetes, mental illness and opioid addiction within segments of your community; you’re also charged with keeping the entire population safe from a novel coronavirus that no one yet understands. It’s taking lives, shutting down schools and businesses, causing chaos in the financial markets and terrifying the country. There’s no vaccine for it, no treatment for it and no clues about when it might end.

That was the situation Maryland’s 24 health officers (one for each county and Baltimore City) faced as COVID-19 swept the globe in 2020. Since the beginning, they’ve acted with a unity of purpose in our best interests under trying and exhausting circumstances. They’ve put boots on the ground in communities to bolster relationships and information sharing across groups. They’ve traced contacts, distributed protective gear and administered tests on a mass scale. And they endeavored to do it all equitably. All this, while also trying to quell their own fears and those of their families, and to manage their daily household affairs.

But this year, the second of the pandemic, took a particular toll, with 2021 deaths surpassing 2020’s; misinformation abounding; and politicization of the virus, safety precautions and the newly available vaccines growing. Some public officials improperly pressured health officers to go against best practices, and some community members harassed them. Two [resigned](#), one was [fired](#), and several had police details assigned to watch over them because of [credible threats](#) that were made toward them. Yet those health officers who could, continued their important work, often for piddling pay, and they did it for us. For those reasons, and countless others, Maryland health officers are The Baltimore Sun’s 2021 Marylanders of the Year. Pre-pandemic, many people had no idea who the state’s community health officers were or even what they did. They’re not in it for the accolades. They keep life humming behind the scenes, ensuring we have potable water to drink and safe food handling in restaurants. They work to promote good nutrition, combat disease, and educate mothers-to-be on having healthy babies. It’s a challenging job, made exponentially more so by the pandemic.”