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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony
HB 214 – Commission on Public Health
Committee on Health and Government Operations
January 26, 2023

Good afternoon Madam Chair and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 214 for consideration. The bill creates a commission that will recommend modernizing Maryland's public health activities and response to public health challenges.

The impetus for this bill for me starts with our pandemic experience – over the last three years, more than 16,000 Marylanders have died of COVID.

Under the circumstances, I'm proud of how we as a state managed the pandemic. It hasn't been easy. But we have come together and saved lives.

Still our collective experience the last few years has shown us that we need to invest strategically in our public health planning and infrastructure.

Despite being one of the richest states in the nation, the Centers for Disease Control recently ranked Maryland 25th in life expectancy, 29th in infant mortality and 45th in drug overdose deaths.

These facts have a few things in common.

First, these tragedies do not affect all groups equally. The lowest life expectancies, the highest rates of infant mortality, COVID mortality and drug overdose deaths are among people of color.

Second, many of these deaths were not just premature. They were preventable. Preventable deaths leave us all asking what could have been done – and what more can yet be done.

What is the future of public health in Maryland?

Public Health is defined as what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy and thrive.

In Maryland, we rely on the Department of Health and 24 local health departments to provide essential public health services. These services keep our food and water safe, reduce the spread of infectious disease, help people quit smoking, improve birth outcomes for parents and newborns alike, and so much more.

Most times, public health is invisible. During the pandemic, however, the work of public health became visible. And what we saw in Maryland, as well as around the country, was a system that sometimes struggled to serve the people in a moment of crisis.

Our public health workers have been heroic. They worked long and hard to make sure we had access to masks, medicines and vaccines. Yet they struggled to use old systems to report information. They relied on old HR and procurement systems to quickly hire the staff and make the partnerships they needed. **They did their best, knowing the whole time that it would be possible to do better.**

HB 214 starts the conversation of what **better** looks like.

This bill, if successfully enacted, would establish a commission to study Maryland's response to major challenges, - including COVID, maternal health, drug overdose – and make recommendations for the future.

A key focus of the commission would be on the core capabilities of public health and how they could best be organized and supported in Maryland. These capabilities are what allow our public health officers to monitor for health and disease, partner with community organizations and businesses, communicate effectively, prepare for emergencies, and advance equity.

Maryland's approach to these core tasks is outdated. This bill allows us to ask in 2023 and beyond, in a new era for our state, how we can do better.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill. I urge a favorable report.