

Testimony on House Bill 0214
Commission on Public Health - Establishment
Before the Health and Government Operations Committee

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 0214, which would establish a commission to modernize public health in Maryland.

In my testimony, I'll discuss the rationale for this commission, how the bill relates to similar activities in other states, and the opportunity that this legislation presents for the health of Maryland families and communities for years to come.

For those who do not know me, I am a former health commissioner of Baltimore City from 2005 to 2009 and the Secretary of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene from 2011 through 2014. I am testifying on my own behalf alone, and my views do not necessarily represent those of my employer Johns Hopkins University.

Rationale for the Commission

Like traffic lights and fire trucks, public health services are part of the background of our lives, protecting us even when we do not think of them every day.

Our state's 24 public health departments and the Maryland Department of Health respond to infectious disease outbreaks, help us to avoid heart disease and diabetes, respond to environmental hazards, protect children from lead poisoning, and connect people to clinical care.

Unfortunately, Maryland's approach to public health is antiquated. Many programs use outdated computer systems or pencil and paper. In some areas, there may be duplication of services with the private sector; in others, large gaps may persist. Many staff are retiring, and HR challenges have made it difficult to replace them.

We all experienced the stresses of the system during the pandemic. Public health workers rose to the challenge, saving many, many lives. Yet data moved slowly, communication efforts were overrun by waves of misinformation, and many partnerships had to be developed in the heat of crisis. More than 16,000 Marylanders died.

The rationale for the commission is to take stock of Maryland's approach to public health services and make recommendations for improvement.

A commission can ask tough questions about how well Maryland's health departments provide what are considered foundational public health services and capabilities.

A commission can learn the lessons of the fight against the pandemic and other public health challenges.

A commission can recommend changes to structures, financing, and programs to modernize the state's approach to public health for the benefit of every Marylander.

Other States and Public Health Modernization

A number of other states are already moving in this direction. Washington, Oregon, and Ohio have developed tools to identify gaps across the state in protecting their residents, and then applied these tools to close these gaps.¹

Indiana established a commission to "identify both strengths and weaknesses" of public health and find ways to "improve the delivery of public health services across the state."²

Kentucky has embarked on a public health transformation effort both to improve financial stability and "improve the health of its citizens."³ In recent years, Michigan, Massachusetts and Oklahoma have also embarked on similar projects.

This legislation aims to incorporate the best practices of these experiences – looking not only in the rear view mirror at COVID but also ahead to urgent public health challenges, from respiratory disease to overdose to maternal health, facing the state today.

The Opportunity of a Public Health Commission

At the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, I teach a class on crisis and response. One of the common questions that comes up as a major crisis fades is whether anything will change to prevent the chance that tragedy will strike again. There's a magnetic pull towards business as usual – putting the problem in the past and moving forward as if the crisis didn't happen at all. It is easy to be swept back into the current of the day to day challenges and fail to learn even from major catastrophes.

¹ PHNCI. Foundational public health services and public health modernization. Background report. 30 November 2021. <https://phnci.org/uploads/resource-files/FPHS-Background-Paper-2021.pdf>

² Indiana Governor's Public Health Commission. 1 August 2022. <https://www.in.gov/health/files/GPHC-Report-FINAL-2022-08-01.pdf>

³ Public health transformation. Inspiring change for a healthier Commonwealth. Commonwealth of Kentucky 2022. <https://www.chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dph/Pages/pht.aspx>

What matters most after crisis is leadership – respecting those who lost their lives by embracing the fact that we can do better next time. Establishing this commission is an opportunity for Maryland to write a new chapter for public health in this state.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to questions.