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Testimony by Karla Nichols with the Reno County Health Department to
Senate Committee on Judiciary
Written-Only Opponent for SB 541 • March 7, 2022

Chair Warren and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to supply written testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 541 which makes numerous public health changes, particularly around schools and childcare facilities.

Our health department has concerns about the changes related to schools in this bill. New Section 4's inclusion of a religious exemption for school face mask requirements, with no ability to inquire to the sincerity of the request, we see as just another name for a philosophical exemption. Such an exemption is so broad that anyone can just opt out, completely undermining any such requirement from actually working to prevent disease spread.

Section 7 and Section 8 strip away the ability for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, local health officers, and other local governments (namely the local boards of health) from taking operational action related to school districts and community colleges for any contagious or infectious disease. There is no required expertise on those school governing bodies related to public. This would open up the ability for negative health outcomes due to political decision-making that does not appropriately weigh the health impacts of disease spread.

Section 13 adds new language to K.S.A. 65-122 which appears to indicate that people under quarantine might not be denied access to school or childcare facilities, given the language "reasonable grounds to believe that such a person is actually infected" suggests a higher standard than the close contact protocols currently used. This could have severe consequences for any transmissible disease.

Section 15 makes substantial changes to K.S.A. 72-6262, namely installing a philosophical vaccine exemption per the definition applied for "religious beliefs" in this section. Allowing people to opt out of immunizations defeats the strategy they rely on (herd immunity) and puts the lives of those who cannot receive such immunizations (for medical reasons) at serious risk of illness and death.

The Reno County Health Department believes SB 541 is bad public policy and puts the lives of Kansans at risk. Today's interconnected world is global in nature and disease spread can happen fast. We need to be ready. As such, we oppose SB 541 and ask that the committee not recommend it for passage.

Sincerely,

Director, Karla Nichols, MHSA, FACHE



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