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Healthy People Build Strong Communities

Testimony by Dennis Kriesel with the Kansas Association of Local Health Departments (KALHD) to

Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

Written-Only Opponent for SB 489 • March 8, 2022

Chairman Hilderbrand and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to supply written testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 489 concerning infectious/contagious diseases and the powers of the secretary of health and environment and local health officers. KALHD is a nonprofit association dedicated to strengthening local health departments for the purpose of improving and protecting the health of all Kansans.

KALHD has several concerns with SB 489 and possible negative impacts it could have on the lives of Kansans.

The bill modifies K.S.A. 65-119, removing the ability for a county or joint board of health or the local health officer from prohibiting public gatherings when necessary for the control of an infectious/contagious diseases. When dealing with person-to-person disease transmission limiting exposure is a key tool in the public health toolbox to fight morbidity and mortality. This is particularly true when pharmaceutical interventions are not yet developed or are of limited availability and/or effectiveness. By removing local decision-making to prohibit public gatherings this bill could put the lives of Kansans at risk. Local officials do not make these decisions lightly and the power to do so should remain at the local level.

The bill also adjusts K.S.A. 65-101 and K.S.A. 65-128, removing the ability for the Secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) to take action to prevent the introduction and/or spread of infectious/contagious diseases within Kansas and moving the responsibility for the Secretary of KDHE to designate which diseases are infectious/contagious (via the rules and regs process) to merely providing a report with recommendations to the Kansas House Speaker and Senate President. KALHD believes a proper public health system must rely on those with public health expertise to make crucial decisions to protect the health and safety of Kansans. As such, we are very troubled by what appears to be the politicization of disease decision-making and we worry what would happen if a very dangerous emerging disease were to arrive in the state but the legislature refuses to act for non-health reasons.

KALHD believes Kansas should be focused on modernizing the public health system to ensure the health and safety of all Kansans. SB 489 does not advance that goal; it removes a proven public health tool from the toolbox and politicizes the infectious/contagious disease designation process. Given the nature of today's global economy we need to remember that diseases far more devastating than COVID-19 could be in our future, and we need to be ready. Thus, KALHD opposes SB 489 and asks that the committee not recommend it for passage.

Sincerely,

Dennis Kriesel

Executive Director, Kansas Association of Local Health Departments