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NEMAHA COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT



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Testimony by Heaven Schuette with the Nemaha County Health Department to

Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

Written Opponent for SB 6 – February 13th, 2023

Chair Gossage and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in opposition to Senate Bill 6 regarding restrictions on the authority of the secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) and local health officers to prevent the introduction and spread of infectious or contagious diseases. My name is Heaven Schuette, and I am the health officer and health department administrator for Nemaha County, which sits against the Nebraska boarder and has 10,216 residents. I have been in my current role since November of 2021. I also have a background in K-12 public school nursing for six years and long-term care for over 20 years.

A little back story on who I am and why I am submitting my testimony. I am the proud granddaughter of the late Senator Donald L. Montgomery. My grandfather proudly served the 22nd District and the State of Kansas for over 12 years. But he continued to serve in many roles throughout Northeast Kansas. I too have that same desire to serve and keep my fellow Kansans safe and healthy. My grandfather lost his life to COVID-19 on December 7th, 2021, while holding my hand. That is why I accepted the job as Nemaha County's Health Officer and Administrator for Nemaha County Health Department. In hopes that I could make a difference in the fight against contagious and infectious diseases.

I as Health Officer for Nemaha County have several concerns with SB 6 and the negative impacts, I believe it will have.

- SB 6 modifies K.S.A. 65-119 removes the ability of the county/joint board of health, or the local health officer, to prohibit public gatherings when necessary to control infectious and contagious diseases.
- SB 6 modifies K.S.A. 65-129b so that local health officers can no longer order individuals who have been exposed to an infectious or contagious disease to seek appropriate and necessary evaluation and treatment or go into isolation and quarantine (instead making those mere recommendations).

I do not take lightly if the need arises that I might have to recommend to my local board of health on prohibiting a public gathering, in the event of controlling infectious and contagious diseases. I believe every county is not a one size fits all. Every county board of health should continue to have the ability to review, amend, or revoke any orders or recommendations made by the county health officer. Many of the health officers in the State are new in the last two years, like me. I can speak for myself that I have worked tirelessly on mending the relationship between my position and the County Commissioners. It is a relationship that has healed, trust has been re-established, communication is our key to success, and we are working together for the best interests for the constituents of Nemaha County. My commissioners trust that I am not going to isolate or quarantine an individual unless it is warranted. The modification of SB 6 inhibits our good working relationship.

It is leaving critical decisions regarding when it is appropriate for individuals to isolate or quarantine due to a contagious or infectious disease up to individuals who are sick. Unfortunately, some of those individuals will not have the knowledge on how to possibly handle the contagious or infectious disease. As a former school nurse, I cannot tell you how many parents send their kids to school running fevers. Thus, removing the ability for the health officer to isolate or quarantine sick individuals, it is creating a recipe for disaster. We aren't just talking about COVID-19, this change would affect all of the other 50 plus contagious or infectious diseases. We cannot fully assist in protecting the great people of Kansas if we do not have safeguards in place to do so.

I second KALHD that these changes would make disease control nearly impossible in Kansas, and thus would put the health and safety of Kansas at risk. As a health department administrator, county health officer and concerned mother I ask that you oppose SB 6 in its entirety and ask the committee not to recommend it for passage.

Sincerely,

Heaven Schuette
Nemaha County Health Department Administrator/Health Officer