



February 13, 2024

To: Senator Beverly Gossage, Chair
Members of the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee

From: Brenda R. Sharpe, President and CEO
The REACH Healthcare Foundation

Subject: Senate Bill 391: An Act Concerning Public Health

I appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony on Senate Bill 391, which would limit the authority of the Secretary of Health and Environment (KDHE) to designate infectious diseases and hinder state health officials' powers to quarantine infected people and take other steps that would prevent the spread of an infectious disease.

The REACH Foundation's mission is centered around ensuring that children and adults can access quality, affordable and timely health care services so that they can live healthier lives. Senate Bill 391 reflects many of the troubling aspects of bills introduced over the past couple of years that would weaken core functions of public health and thereby the health of Kansans.

Disease outbreaks affect children and adults differently, depending on their constitutions, health conditions and physiological responses to disease. Highly infectious diseases such as measles, polio and whooping cough can be extremely harmful and result in hospitalization, lifelong complications and, in some situations, death. Kansas children and families, communities and businesses depend on well-researched, science-based medical guidance to protect their health and the health of loved ones and employees.

We have seen how untreated infectious diseases can spread rapidly. This is not an issue pertaining only to the Coronavirus outbreak: In fall 2022 through January 2023, the state worked with county health departments to address an outbreak of Ebola, a rare but highly contagious disease; in January 2024, there was a measles exposure at Kansas City International Airport. In both situations, actions were swiftly undertaken to identify the extent of the exposure and stop further outbreak using disease outbreak protocols. As Kansas becomes a state that seeks to attract new residents, new enterprise and visitors, there will always be the need for a reliable public health system that preserves the public's health.

Senate Bill 391 creates the potential to undermine public health by preventing health officials from acting according to researched best practices that mitigate health risks. Public health authority is paramount to health, and individual and community safety. During the pandemic, the REACH Foundation saw community health and mental health service providers and local public health departments draw upon federal and state medical guidance and direction to deploy efforts that helped to manage the harms that occurred during the pandemic. A healthy Kansas relies on the expertise and competence of KDHE and the state's public health practitioners. REACH urges Committee members to oppose efforts to restrict state public health authority.

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