

March 22, 2021

Verbal Testimony in Opposition to SB 212

Chairman Hilderbrand and members of the Committee on Public Health and Welfare,

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 212. My name is Shelby Ostrom and I am the program director for the Mid America Immunization Coalition (MAIC), which provides critical advocacy and education on the importance of vaccines. MAIC serves Johnson and Wyandotte Counties in Kansas. I am here to encourage the committee to vote no on SB 212 and maintain current law that places vaccine regulation within the purview of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. There is a rigorous process already in place, grounded in science, which best serves Kansans.

Included in my submitted testimony, I provided the story of my great aunt Joyce Berry. At 9 years old in 1952, Joyce was diagnosed with polio. Because of this illness, she became paralyzed from the waist down. While she eventually regained the use of her legs, she never received the vaccine against polio. Eventually got post-polio syndrome and once again lost the use of her legs and fell off a bus in 2015. If a vaccine had been available for my Aunt Joyce, she could have been spared the life-threatening illness and its debilitating effects over the course of her life.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment's continued oversight of all vaccinations is crucial in maintaining and improving public health. This is a process that has and should continue to be separate from the political arena. I look forward to answering your questions on this important public health measure and encourage you to vote no on Senate Bill 212. Thank you for your consideration.

Shelby Ostrom
MAIC Program Director

“I had Polio as a child ... and as an adult”

Imagine waking up one morning and being paralyzed, from the waist down, out of the blue. This happened to Joyce Berry when she was 9 years old. That morning in 1942, Joyce’s mother rushed her to the hospital where doctors were planning to put her legs into casts.

“The doctor told my mother it was Polio and that I most likely would never be able to walk again,” Joyce said.

Instead of leg casts, Joyce’s mother chose a different course of treatment that the Elizabeth Kenny Clinic prescribed to patients which included heat packs and exercises.

“My mom massaged my legs every single morning,” she said. “I’ll never forget those scalding hot baths either.”

Polio, which affects children and adults, is a viral infection that causes paralysis in the spinal cord. In extreme cases, it can cause fatal organ and tissue failure. When Joyce was diagnosed, there was no vaccine.

Road to recovery and acceptance

In total, it took Joyce more than 92 days to fully recover from Polio. By that time, she was told she couldn’t return to public school out of fear of holding back the other children. At best, she could be sent to a school where they helped students experiencing paralysis.

“My mom had to publicly petition the Kansas City, Missouri school board to let me come back to school. Eventually they did,” Joyce said. “Many of my friends were able to help me walk those first few years.”

Overall, Joyce lived a normal life. After graduating from Westport High School, she had the opportunity to model, travel the world and attend college at UMKC. One of her legs is three inches shorter than the other, but “I was still able to have a great life.”

Polio can return later in life

When Berry turned 70, things took a turn for the worse.

“My Polio came back,” she said. “It had laid dormant in my body for more than 30 years. Then, all of a sudden, I was stumbling and didn’t know why.”

A doctor in Texas confirmed her muscle spasms and paralyzes were caused by Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS). This condition gradually affects the muscles and joints originally impacted by the virus, and you become progressively weaker. Because of Joyce’s PPS, she fell off of a bus in 2015 and now permanently has to use a walker. More than 400,000 survivors of Polio experienced PPS, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

The Polio vaccine was originally introduced in 1955, over a decade after Joyce was inflicted with the virus. By 1979, the vaccine had completely eradicated the disease in the United States. But, due to growing hesitancy, it’s unfortunately making a comeback.

“I would have gotten the vaccine if I could have,” Joyce said. “Vaccines are so important, especially the Polio vaccine. Without it, you could struggle with paralysis your whole life.”

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