



**Public Health**  
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## **Unified Government Public Health Department**

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Opponent Testimony :: SB6

Elizabeth Groenweghe with the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, KS Public Health Department

Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare

February 10, 2023

Chair Gossage and Members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 6 regarding the authority of local health officers to take steps to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in our community. I am the Chief Epidemiologist at the Unified Government Public Health Department of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, KS. One of my primary job duties is to prevent the spread of serious and potentially life-threatening infectious diseases in Wyandotte County. SB 6 would have a pivotal impact on my ability to carry out this job duty.

SB 6 proposes to remove the authority of local health officers in each county in Kansas to require individuals to isolate or quarantine while infectious or possibly infectious with disease. Isolation is the practice of separating sick people with an infectious disease from healthy people. Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to an infectious disease for a specific amount of time in case they become ill. Isolation and quarantine are both foundational control measures necessary to stop the spread of infectious diseases in a community. For as long as human history has been recorded, communities have used isolation to prevent the spread of disease—in the Bible’s Book of Leviticus, passages describe isolation, and in medieval Europe, quarantine was used to slow the spread of the Black Death. In fact, the word quarantine originates from the Venetian word for 40-days—the amount of time ships were required to wait at bay before disembarking to stop the spread of plague.

Isolation and quarantine remain essential, tried-and-true methods for infectious disease containment. These measures stop the spread of not just COVID-19, but also other grave infectious diseases including tuberculosis, measles, and mumps. Many of these diseases will have harmful health impacts for community members if left unchecked; some can have lifelong health consequences or even result in death. For example, in the past the Kansas City metro region has battled outbreaks of measles, mumps and pertussis. All three of these diseases spread rapidly in the community and most often target our most vulnerable community members—young children. Measles and pertussis in particular can cause severe illness in babies and young infants and even death.

In addition, this bill will remove the authority and thus call into question the expertise, of the local public health department and the local health officer. Crucial decisions about key public health measures should be left to those who have the expertise and training to appropriately make those decisions. Local public health authorities have both the training and the expertise needed to make such



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decisions. Further, SB 6 will sow doubt into the public's faith in the abilities of the local health department and health officers to make these crucial decisions.

Finally, it is important to note that isolation and quarantine are not used often by public health authorities. This authority is limited to preventing the most severe and contagious of diseases from spreading. In fact, there are only eight diseases in Kansas that require an individual to fully isolate while infectious—measles, diphtheria, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), rubella (German measles), tuberculosis, varicella (chickenpox), and COVID-19. It is essential that public health takes action to prevent these diseases from spreading in our community as they could have dire health outcomes, especially for babies and young children who can die from diseases like whooping cough or tuberculosis.

As we move forward from responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential we work together to continue to strength our public health system to protect our most vulnerable community members, including children, who are most vulnerable for many of these diseases. SB 6 will weaken our public health system's ability to respond to the threat of infectious diseases in the future, and thus put the wellbeing and lives of Kansans at risk. Infectious diseases are a serious threat to the wellbeing of our community and limiting public health's ability to appropriately respond the next, and possibly worse, infectious disease threat will set Kansas up for failure. For these reasons, I oppose SB 6 and ask that the committee not recommend it for passage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elizabeth Groenweghe'.

Elizabeth Groenweghe

Chief Epidemiologist and Epidemiology/Tuberculosis Program Manager, Unified Government Public Health Department