



January 28, 2021

Testimony in Opposition to Maryland House Bill 17
Hearing of the Maryland House Health and Government Operations Committee
Written by Jason Lemieux
Director of Government Affairs
Center for Inquiry

Chair Prendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and members of the Committee, thank you for reading my testimony. My name is Jason Lemieux. I am the Director of Government Affairs at the Center for Inquiry (CFI), a nonprofit organization that proudly claims 4,238 members residing in Maryland. I write to oppose House Bill 17 because this legislation will undermine Maryland's ability to protect public health while serving no productive purpose.

CFI is a nonprofit organization that seeks to foster a secular society based on science, reason, and humanist values. To this end, we have in recent years supported legislative efforts in Virginia, Colorado, Louisiana, New Jersey, California, New York, Massachusetts, Maine, and the District of Columbia that would strengthen these jurisdictions' ability to protect public health through the administration of vaccines. This testimony is a continuation of that effort.

It's important to continually remind ourselves that vaccines are one of the most effective public health developments in human history—in almost no other case has a medical invention spared so many people from so much suffering at so little cost. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the lifetime of children who are born from 1994 to 2018, vaccination will prevent an estimated 936,000 deaths and 26.8 million hospitalizations.¹ And while no medical intervention is entirely without risk, vaccines are one of the safest medical interventions available today. Serious side effects are exceedingly rare.

Likewise, when devising vaccination policy to address the novel coronavirus pandemic, we must never forget the immense human cost inflicted by the virus. As of January 21, the virus claimed the lives of 6,560 Marylanders and injured many more. COVID-19 patients occupy 424 of the state's Intensive Care Unit (ICU) hospital beds, straining a precious resource that is critical for the treatment of many other urgent medical issues.²

It is possible that the pandemic will continue to worsen despite Maryland's efforts to halt its spread. In the United Kingdom, a new, more contagious strain of the novel coronavirus,

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Vaccines by the Numbers*. April 12, 2019. Video available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EymSgd2ubo>

² Maryland Department of Health. *Maryland COVID-19 Data Dashboard*. January 21, 2021. Accessible online at <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/>.



designated B.1.1.7, has taken hold in the population.³ As of January 20, three Marylanders are infected with this more transmissible strain.⁴ While an emergency vaccination mandate is not a decision to be made lightly, Maryland cannot take it off the table by the force of law. The risk of further uncontrolled spread of the virus is too high.

Disturbingly, opposition to novel coronavirus vaccines is heavily influenced by a pseudoscience-laden disinformation campaign that laid its roots long before the current pandemic began. In states such as Maryland, this disinformation movement has seized upon the misleading rhetoric of “health freedom” to advance legislation that undermines public health. In this extremist vision of “health freedom,” no consideration is made for the freedom of neighbors, friends, and family to live free of communicable diseases transmitted by individuals who needlessly declined the opportunity to vaccinate. H.B. 17 is similarly shortsighted. It will not bring real freedom to Marylanders.

In summary, this legislation is lose-lose: it provides no benefit to any Marylander, and it may well obstruct a critically important public health measure at an unknown cost in Marylanders’ lives. CFI urges you to reject it.

Sincerely,

³ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *New COVID-19 Variants*. January 15, 2021. Accessible online at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/transmission/variant.html>.

⁴ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *US COVID-19 Cases Caused by Variants*. January 20, 2021. Accessible online at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/transmission/variant-cases.html>.