

HOUSE BILL 609
Local Health Officers – Removal – Grounds and Process
WRITTEN TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
HEALTH AND GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE
Maura J. Rossman, MD, Howard County Health Officer
Position: Support – February 23, 2022

I am writing to register my support for SB 548: Local Health Officers - Removal - Grounds and Process. I have served as Health Officer for Howard County for ten years, and I am the past president of MACHO, the professional association of the chief officials of Maryland's 24 local public health departments. This bill will allow for a more transparent process for removing the Health Officer, an appointed public health professional, based upon legitimate reasons and documentation.

The 24 local Health Officers are public health professionals devoted to protecting the health and safety of our communities. This is accomplished by data driven decision making, backed by science, facts and subject matter experts. Some of these decisions, made for the greater community good, negatively impact individuals. For example, public health staff inspect restaurants and grocery stores to ensure food safety to prevent the public from getting sick after eating spoiled or contaminated food. The Health Officer can close a food establishment if the inspection does not meet standards. This usually results in very angry business owners and sometimes cries to fire the Health Officer. Health Officers also work to control communicable diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis, head lice and most recently COVID-19. Health Officers historically make decisions to isolate persons, close classrooms or test persons to prevent further transmission of an infectious agent. These decisions may also lead to angry and retaliatory responses from those impacted.

Some of the greatest improvements in health and life expectancy over the last 100+ years are due to the very measures implemented by Health Officers during COVID, including vaccination and infection control. Unfortunately, the pandemic has politicized the role of Health Officers and made them targets for bullying, intimidation, personal threats and unemployment. Individuals, not liking the decisions and recommendations of Health Officers, have asked their local elected officials or the Secretary of Health to fire the Health Officer. It is not unusual for me to receive emails telling me that I should be fired simply for adhering to the facts, science and medicine. As a pediatrician, I fully anticipated my patients not liking to take medicine, to get a shot, or to stay home until they are better. But I never anticipated the fury of adults asking for me to be fired for doing my job by following medical and public health standards of care.

This bill allows Health Officers to continue making decisions based upon medical knowledge and scientific facts without worrying about losing their jobs because someone doesn't like or understand what is needed to keep our community from getting sick. I strongly encourage support for SB 548. For more information, please contact me at mrossman@howardcountymd.gov.