



SEK Multi-County Health Department  
411 North Washington Ave.  
Iola, KS 66749

Senate Public Health & Welfare Committee  
Committee Room 142S  
Office 445S  
State Capitol 300 SW 10th Ave. Topeka, KS 66612

2/12/2024

Dear Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare and Chair Gossage,

I'm Becky Johnson, the Administrator of the SEK Multi-County Health Department (SEKMCHD) and the Local Health Officer for Allen, Anderson, Bourbon and Woodson Counties. I was hired in 2019 and approximately 11 months after I started in my role at SEKMCHD, COVID-19 hit within our 4-county region and thus began a game we had to play but knew we wouldn't win. Our first COVID-19 case was the first person to die in our region from the disease. This person and their family will forever be in my thoughts because I'll always wish I would have been able to do more to help them. I am proud of the work our organization provided to our region during the pandemic but wish we would have been able to prevent more deaths from the disease. We experienced so much push back, changes in guidelines and even changes in law during the pandemic that it made it almost impossible to do our jobs. Over the last 5 years more than 60% of the Local Health Department Administrator's and Local Health Officers in Kansas have left their positions. That has made it extremely difficult for me in my role since I was so new to Public Health when COVID-19 hit. Because of the pandemic I've lost connection with friends, my children have missed out on certain school experiences and family and friends have died because of COVID-19. I've found out that Public Health is not for the faint of heart and you really must develop a thick skin and have a great support system to last very long. But, I love what I do and can see that we are making a difference in the lives of our residents!

I am in opposition of SB 391 which would change the authority of the KDHE Secretary and Local Health Officers in infectious or contagious disease management.

As the Local Health Officer, I feel like I constantly have to monitor what decisions our law makers are making. I was hired to exercise and maintain supervision over infectious and contagious disease within our region, but these 2 bills will revoke that authority. What happens next? When our "anything goes" lifestyle that our country is changing to gets out of hand because we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings and disease has taken over our schools, businesses, nursing homes, hospitals, etc. who is responsible? Are you going to get another bill pushed through quick enough to save us all?

Before you make any decisions, I would like to ask, why am I here? Why do we have Local Health Officers? Why do we have the KDHE Secretary? Why do we have the Kansas Department of Health and Environment? Why do we have Local Health Departments? When you revisit the reasoning and



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look at the history of disease locally, within our state, at a national level and globally, why were these disease prevention measures created and where are we now that we have them compared to a time when we didn't even know that washing our hands could prevent the spread of disease?! That really wasn't that long ago! I ask that you consider the decisions of your predecessors and what problems will ultimately be faced if authority is stripped. Please consider contagious and fatal diseases such as Tuberculosis, Measles, Meningitis, and Polio. Do your homework, don't just pick one side or the other.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca (Becky) Johnson BSN, RN  
Administrator/SEK Local Health Officer  
SEK Multi-County Health Department