

February 15th, 2024

Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare
State Capitol
300 SW 10th Street
Topeka, KS 66612

Re: Health Forward Foundation opposition to Senate Bill 391 – on the removal of authority of the Secretary of Kansas Department of Health and Environment to institute measures during an infectious disease outbreak.

Chair Gossage and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Health Forward Foundation (Health Forward), I submit this letter of testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 391. Health Forward works to support and build inclusive, powerful, and healthy communities characterized by racial equity and economically just systems. We oppose this legislation as it would jeopardize community health and the health of first responders, health equity, and is resource inefficient.

SB 391 would harm communities and their first responders. It would limit the ability of local and state public health officials to propose reasonable restrictions on gatherings and would prohibit quarantine orders. This would take away necessary tools to save lives in the event of an infectious disease outbreak. Moreover, this legislation would limit the ability for these public health officials to save lives of police, paramedics, and firefighters by barring them from proposing safer ways to do their jobs in an outbreak. This would lead to an even greater loss of in-duty lives than in COVID where, according to the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, that disease was the leading reason for police deaths in 2020.

Furthermore, SB 391 will make it harder for public health officials to perform their duties to mitigate or eliminate racial disparities in health outcomes, especially during an infectious disease outbreak. For example, COVID deaths have been disproportionately high amongst Hispanic/Latino, Black, and Native Americans, relative to whites, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Similarly, COVID death rates were higher in rural versus urban counties, according to a 2022 study in the *Journal of Public Health Management Practice*. The NAACHO/Network for Public Health Law report indicates that limits on authority have exacerbated these disparities by creating barriers to communities of color to access the care they need and to equitably distribute recovery resources.

Last, SB 391 would drastically increase the economic and other associated costs of an infectious disease outbreak as public health officials will not have the authority to contain the spread. A recent study published in the *National Institutes of Health National Library of Medicine* shows that prevention measures cost an estimated 1/20th of the overall cost of life lost and other expenses from emerging infectious diseases.



**OUR
PURPOSE**

Every day we work to support and build inclusive, powerful, and healthy communities characterized by racial equity and economically just systems.

Health Forward asks legislators on this committee to vote no on SB 391. Not only does it hamper public health professionals' ability to take reasonable, appropriate actions to limit the spread of dangerous disease, it would also lead to real harm to people, especially Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. This sort of legislation would have negative effects on the Kansas economy and our ability to keep our communities safe and healthy during an infectious disease outbreak.

Please feel free to reach out to me at nmadden@healthforward.org if you have any questions or requests for additional information.

Respectfully,

Nathan J. Madden, Ph.D.
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Health Forward Foundation

