Invest in Texas’ Public Health Infrastructure

Testimony of the Texas Public Health Coalition
Submitted by Thomas Kim, MD
Department of State Health Services Exceptional Items
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Chair Davis and Committee Members:

My name is Thomas Kim, MD, testifying on behalf of the Texas Public Health Coalition and its 37 member organizations. TPHC supports fully funding all nine Department of State Health Services’ exceptional item requests and would like to emphasize strong support for five priority items and one rider change:

Exceptional Item 1. Safeguard the State Public Health Laboratory
With funding, the laboratory can continue to deliver accurate, reliable, and prompt test results for high-risk, high-consequence diseases, such as Zika, Ebola, HIV, measles, foodborne illness, and rare genetic disorders in newborns. Dozens of the tests are required by state statute to confirm reportable diseases and cannot be performed at any other laboratory in Texas.

DSHS must be equipped to build upon existing efforts to keep new mothers in Texas healthy and safe. Funding Exceptional Item 3 to expand implementation of maternal safety initiatives, and Exceptional Item 4 to improve upon the state’s recently updated vital statistics reporting system will contribute to better surveillance of maternal health and improved quality of maternal death records, and ensure state resources are targeted efficiently toward protecting the health of mothers and babies.

Exceptional Item 7. Increase Usefulness and Accessibility of the State’s Public Health Data
DSHS’ capacity to manage, analyze, and disseminate public health data directly influences whether the state and its local public health entities can make decisions with the best available information. Enabling DSHS to continue supplying accurate, up-to-date data increases the likelihood that public resources will be used responsibly.

Exceptional Item 8. Bolster Public Health Capacity to Monitor and Respond to Outbreaks
When disease outbreaks occur, the infectious disease reporting-and-response infrastructure at DSHS is one of the first and most critical resources tapped. Exceptional Item 8 will permit rapid identification and investigation of infectious disease outbreaks, and stabilize the state’s outdated disease reporting system currently at risk of failure due to aging infrastructure.

Permit DSHS to Use Paid Media to Combat Tobacco
The tobacco industry deploys multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns to cultivate a new generation of smokers in Texas. Last session, a budget provision prohibited DSHS from using paid media in antismoking campaigns. TPHC supports DSHS Rider 20 in the House budget eliminating the paid media restriction. The state must not disadvantage itself in challenging predatory tobacco industry messaging.

Conclusion
Strong public health infrastructure saves lives and delivers value to Texans every day. As Texas’ population grows and new health threats emerge, we must continue to invest in Texas’ public health infrastructure to prevent paying an even higher price in the future. TPHC encourages this committee to prioritize these important measures to protect Texans’ health and well-being.