Invest in Texas’ Public Health Infrastructure

Testimony of the Texas Public Health Coalition
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Senate Bill 1, Article II
Department of State Health Services Exceptional Items
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Chair Nelson and Committee Members:

The Texas Public Health Coalition (TPHC), representing 37 member organizations focused on health care and public health in Texas, appreciates the opportunity to submit written testimony on the Texas Department of State Health Services’ (DSHS) requests for exceptional item funding. The coalition supports fully funding all nine of the department’s exceptional item requests, each of which strengthen the department’s capacity to sustain critical public health services as required by Texas law. The coalition would like to emphasize support for five priority exceptional items and one rider change:

Exceptional Item 1. Safeguard the State Public Health Laboratory
TPHC strongly supports funding Exceptional Item 1 to safeguard the state’s public health laboratory. With these funds, the laboratory can continue to deliver accurate, reliable, and prompt test results for high-risk, high-consequence diseases and disorders. Notable tests the laboratory conducts are those for Zika virus, Ebola, HIV, rabies, 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.

TPHC urges the legislature to equip DSHS to build upon existing efforts to prevent premature death and poor health outcomes among mothers in Texas. TPHC supports 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. Together, these items will contribute to better state 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 state and local public health entities can make decisions with the best available information. Enabling DSHS to continue supplying accurate, up-to-date public health data increases the likelihood public resources will be used responsibly. TPHC supports fully funding Exceptional Item 7 to uphold efficient and evidence-driven public health decisionmaking.

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. TPHC strongly supports funding Exceptional Item 8 to permit rapid identification of infectious disease outbreaks and prompt outbreak investigations, and to stabilize the state’s outdated disease reporting system currently at risk of failure due to aging infrastructure.

Eliminate Senate DSHS Rider 19 Provision Prohibiting Paid Media to Combat Tobacco
The tobacco industry deploys hundreds of millions of dollars in paid media and marketing campaigns to cultivate a new generation of smokers in Texas. However, last session, a provision was included in DSHS Rider 19 and carried forward into this budget prohibiting DSHS from using paid media in antismoking campaigns. TPHC asks the committee to eliminate the paid media restriction from DSHS Rider 19, allowing DSHS to pursue all available tools to educate Texans about the dangers of nicotine products. The state must not disadvantage itself in challenging predatory messaging from the tobacco industry.

Conclusion
Strong public health infrastructure saves lives and delivers value to Texans every day. As Texas’ population grows and new health threats emerge, our coalition of health stakeholders believes we must continue to invest in Texas’ public health infrastructure to prevent paying an even higher price in the future. As this committee considers DSHS’ Exceptional Item requests and other public health funding measures, our members remain committed and eager to work with committee members to protect the health and well-being of Texans.