

## Ohio House moves closer on bill that would let Ohioans refuse vaccines without punishment



Credit: NYT

FILE — A COVID-19 booster is administered at the Portage Park Senior Center in Chicago, Sept. 13, 2022. In nearly two dozen interviews by The New York Times, voters who like Robert F. Kennedy Jr. say he shares their grievances about health care and share their interest in alternative medicines and natural remedies. (Jamie Kelter Davis/The Ne...

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POLITICS

By [Avery Kreemer](#)

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Progress was made Tuesday on an Ohio House bill that would establish the “conscientious right to refuse” in Ohio law and bar private and public employers and businesses from taking action against Ohioans who opt not to take vaccines and other medical treatments.

The bill, [House Bill 319](#), was voted along party lines out of committee Tuesday following testimony from a handful of opponents, which had been preceded by a marathon of proponent testimony back in June.

But, that progress may be short-lived. Ohio House Speaker Jason Stephens, R-Kitts Hill, who has the authority to block or bring committee-passed bills to the House floor for a full vote, may stand in the way.

“I don’t know if that one will make it to the floor or not,” Stephens told statehouse reporters Monday. “We’ll see with the committee, how that goes.”

The bill would enact a right in Ohio law for Ohioans to refuse “any biologic, vaccine, pharmaceutical, drug, gene editing technology, RNA-based product, or DNA-based product for reasons of conscience, including religious convictions,” according to a nonpartisan analysis of the bill.

Under the bill, private and public entities would be barred from denying someone employment, terminating their employment, denying them services, denying them access to commerce, segregating them, penalizing them, or treating them differently based on their decision to forgo vaccines and other medical interventions.

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H.B. 319 also sets up legal recourse for Ohioans who feel their medical freedom rights have been violated, allowing petitions to the court for immediate relief and the ability to bring private civil lawsuits against the business in question.

Despite Stephens’ reticence with the bill, H.B. 319 has garnered wide support from his caucus, a sign that “medical freedom” issues that arose during the pandemic have moved from the fringes of the Republican platform and inched closer to the mainstream, even as COVID-19 related restrictions have subsided.

Rep. Tom Young, R-Washington Twp., supports the bill and helped vote it out of House committee. He told this outlet Tuesday that he believes businesses made many mistakes that violated Ohioans’ medical freedom and believes that H.B. 319 “is a bill that can provide some element of healing to that.

“Rarely do you get a bill that has this robust support across a caucus, especially this one,” Young said.

Young added that he hoped Stephens would take the caucus’ position on the bill as a sign to bring the bill to the House floor for a full vote.

Even if the bill were to pass the House floor, it would have to be quickly vetted and approved by the Ohio Senate before the end of the year to become law, and there are questions over whether Senate

President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, would take up the bill.

If not, the initiative would have to be taken up again next year under a legislature likely to be heavily steered by Huffman, who will jump over to the House and is expected to become speaker, despite late-in-the-game opposition from medical freedom advocates.

Today, the only official statehouse opposition to the bill is from House Democrats, who hold concerns on H.B. 319's impact on public health.

"If we push laws like this, we, as physicians, will see illnesses that we've never seen before," Columbus-area Democrat Rep. Anita Somani, a practicing OBGYN, told this news outlet Tuesday. "(Measles, mumps and rubella) are diseases that have been eradicated. We are in a place of privilege where people can say, 'We don't need vaccine mandates because nobody gets these diseases' — well, no one gets these diseases because we have vaccines."

The bill is jointly sponsored by Butler County Rep. Jennifer Gross, R-West Chester, a registered nurse who testified in committee that the bill is necessary to protect Ohioans' religious freedom.

"Until now, we as a legislative body have failed to protect citizens as their freedoms were being held in contempt during the height of the vaccine mandates. As a result, Ohioans are being forced to put aside their conscientious or religious beliefs or face the reality that they may be unable to operate as productive members of our state, face job loss, or denial of education or job training," Gross testified back in April 2023.

Somani, meanwhile, questioned why Republicans are pushing a bill that contains government mandates on businesses — an angle similarly brought by the Ohio Chamber of Commerce to oppose the bill minutes before it was passed out of committee.

"Where I work at the hospital, people can abstain from getting the flu vaccine for religious reasons, so there's no one stopping you from doing that," Somani said. "But why regulate businesses?"

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## About the Author



Avery Kreemer



Based in Ohio's capitol, Avery is focused on using local angles to bring relevant and straightforward statewide news to our readers. You can send tips, questions or comments to his linked email.

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