

To: Members of the House Health, Welfare and Institutions Sub-Committee #1

From: Erin Camia, Antonella Nicholas and Andrew Block

Re: Testimony in Support of HB 229 (Del. Carrie Coyner)

Date: January 31, 2022

Dear Mr. Chairman and members of House Health, Welfare and Institutions Sub-Committee #1,

Our names are Erin Camia and Antonella Nicholas, and we are law students with the University of Virginia School of Law's State and Local Government Policy Clinic, under the supervision of Professor Andy Block, and have been working with Delegate Coyner on House Bill 229. The views we express in this letter are our own, and not those of the law school or UVA.

We urge you to pass HB 229. This bill will

- **Provide valuable information and collection for communities to help with comprehensive health planning, especially in struggling communities where social determinants of health, like proximity to hospitals, and lack of access to transportation and broadband have such a negative impact on health outcomes.**
- **Give citizens the information and tools necessary to better understand the external factors impacting the health of their communities.**
- **Enshrine an important practice in law and ensure Virginians will be able to access this vital information in years to come - a move that the Virginia Department of Health supports.**

HB 229 mandates the collection and reporting of social determinants of health data by the Virginia Department of Health (VDH).

Social determinants of health are the conditions in the places people live and work that, beyond their own personal health situation, affect their health risks and outcomes. Put another way, social determinants track factors such as if someone lives in a food desert, or if their community is polluted, or if they have access to broadband services or not.

These factors are not always measured at a doctor's office but still have a major impact on people's health and can contribute to negative health outcomes. They also can impact different parts of the Commonwealth in different ways.

HB 229 will provide valuable information and collection for communities to help with comprehensive health planning, especially in struggling communities.

HB 229 will ensure that healthcare providers and local leaders in all parts of the state, from the Southside and Southwestern Virginia to Northern Virginia, continue to have access to information about which social determinants are impacting their particular communities - which will, in turn, help them craft local responses to these issues. The availability of this information will aid and improve the community health assessment process and identify necessary steps for a community health improvement plan. By revealing and addressing the issues a doctor might not be able to fix or even see, social determinants of health reporting will act as a crucial first step in improving the health and wellness of all Virginians.

And while this data will continue to be of value in all parts of the state, it will be of particular value to those communities whose disparately worse health outcomes are so closely connected to these social determinants. According to researchers from Texas Tech's Institute for Rural and Community Health, the rural mortality rate in Virginia is 30% percent higher than in urban communities.¹ And the COVID-19 pandemic revealed how at-risk low-income populations are - Virginians in the census tracts with the highest percentage of people living in poverty were 2.3 times more likely to die from the virus than those living in the richest census tracts.²

HB 229 will give citizens the information and tools necessary to better understand the external factors impacting the health of their communities.

With the publication of social determinants of health data, citizens will be empowered to take control of their own health. Instead of being at the mercy of unknown external factors adversely affecting their health outcomes, they can explore and understand what social determinants are impacting their communities. And in being able to name the weaknesses in their communities, they will be empowered to advocate for improvements.

HB 229 will enshrine an important public health practice in law and ensure Virginians will be able to access this vital information in years to come - a move that the Virginia Department of Health supports.

While this collection and reporting by region and locality is an existing practice of the Department of Health, it is vitally important that this practice is enshrined in law and that it become a fixture of VDH's work. This work is necessary to reveal what factors, beyond those that a doctor can discover, are making Virginians unhealthy and how we can address them.

In closing, we urge you to pass HB 229. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Erin Camia & Antonella Nicholas

¹ Gordon Gong, et al., *Higher US Rural Mortality Rates Linked to Socioeconomic Status, Physician Shortages, and Lack of Health Insurance*, Health Affairs, December 2019.

² Va. Dep't of Health, *COVID-19 Vaccination Disparities and Social Determinants*, <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/category/rural-urban/>.