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Written testimony submitted to the Committee on Professional Licensure

By Laura Scott, Executive Director, Families Fighting Flu

Chairwoman Harhart, Chairman Readshaw and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify.

My name is Laura Scott and I'm the Executive Director of Families Fighting Flu.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), during the 2010-2011 flu season, 122 children died from influenza. In the last eight years since the CDC started tracking pediatric influenza deaths, more than 1,000 children have tragically died from the disease and approximately 160,000 have been hospitalized. Families Fighting Flu was founded in 2004 to help stop these unnecessary deaths and hospitalizations from happening.

Families Fighting Flu is a nonprofit, volunteer-based advocacy organization dedicated to protecting the lives of children. In fact, we are the only national nonprofit dedicated solely to preventing influenza. Our members primarily include families whose children have suffered serious medical complications or died from influenza.

Member families like the McGowans from Nazareth, Pennsylvania who suffered the tragic loss of their 15-year-old son, Martin. On February 8, 2005, Martin McGowan took an afternoon nap before trying out for the high school baseball team. His mother noticed that he looked a little under the weather, but Martin insisted that he felt fine. He attended the baseball tryouts, but was exhausted afterwards. He also complained that his legs hurt from running. When Martin got home, he watched a little TV and went to bed.

The next morning at 2:30 a.m. Martin's mother heard him vomiting in the bathroom. He had a fever of 102 degrees. His mother gave him some medicine and he went back to bed. Martin later awoke at 4:30 a.m. and began to vomit once again. The pain in his legs had also increased. In addition to giving Martin plenty of fluids, his mother tried easing the pain in his legs by giving him a warm bath and applying ointment to the area, but nothing seemed to work. As the aching in his legs worsened, Martin's mother called the doctor who suggested that either Martin come in for an appointment that afternoon or his mother take him to the emergency room. Martin said he needed to go to the emergency room.

When he arrived at the hospital, the ER doctor took his vitals and did an initial evaluation. By this time, Martin's lips were white so they administered an IV. Martin was tested for influenza, which came back positive. As a result of the influenza disease attacking his muscles, Martin developed Compartment Syndrome, which limited his blood circulation and caused severe pain. The intense running that Martin had done the night before escalated his condition from muscle aches to Compartment Syndrome in his legs. The doctor explained that if the blood flowing to Martin's legs ceased for an extended period of time, they might have to amputate his legs. Martin needed to be operated on as soon as possible.

He was taken into surgery that afternoon. However, during the surgery, his heart stopped beating. Doctors attempted to revive him but they were unsuccessful.

On February 9, 2005, Martin died of complications from influenza just 24 hours after his first symptom appeared. He was an otherwise healthy teenager. He had no underlying medical condition. Martin was not vaccinated against the flu.

No one can talk about the real consequences of skipping the flu vaccine better than our members. This is why we believe that if pharmacists in Pennsylvania were authorized to vaccinate children and adolescents against influenza it would expand access to the vaccine and enable more families to get their kids and themselves vaccinated – all at the same time.

We have spoken to many parents and have seen the research. Convenience plays a big factor into whether or not children and families get vaccinated against the flu every year. It is not unusual to hear stories from families who had to go to three or more locations just to get every member of their immediate family vaccinated. Influenza is the only vaccine that everyone six months and older is recommended to get each year. Parents need every opportunity to get their children vaccinated, but it must fit into their busy lives. We all know that catching influenza is a huge burden and an inconvenience, but protecting yourself from the disease should not be. This is why we urge the Committee to pass this bill, which will amend the act to allow pharmacists to administer immunizations, including the influenza vaccine, to children and adolescents in pharmacies across the state of Pennsylvania.

According to the CDC, as of November 2011, 21 percent of adults had been vaccinated against influenza in pharmacies or stores across the United States, but only two percent of children had been vaccinated in these same locations – and overall only 36 percent of children (ages six months to 17 years) had been vaccinated to date. I can't help but think that if more pharmacists were able to immunize children these vaccination rates could be higher.

We know first-hand that the flu is serious and does kill. But, the more kids that get vaccinated against influenza each year, the more lives will be saved. Annual vaccination is our best defense against this very serious disease.

We've been fortunate this flu season in that, unlike past years, there have been fewer childhood deaths due to the disease. But even one death is still one death too many, and I worry that this mild flu season will give a false sense of security to those most at risk, including children, next season and beyond. With two new flu strains anticipated to be circulating next season, it's critical that we make it as easy as possible for families in Pennsylvania to get vaccinated against the flu each and every year.

It breaks my heart to see news headlines from Pennsylvania and all across the country detailing the loss of a promising athlete, an aspiring artist, a friend, a son or a daughter due to the flu. Please pass this bill. The McGowans and other families in Pennsylvania like theirs whose lives have been turned upside down because of influenza, will be forever grateful.

Thank you for this opportunity.