



**House State Affairs**  
**Senate Bill 966 by Sen. Lois Kolkhorst**  
**Testimony by John T. Carlo, MD**  
**Texas Public Health Coalition**  
*May 10, 2021*

Honorable Chair Paddie and members:

My name is Dr. John Carlo, and I am a public health and preventive medicine specialist from Dallas and the former chair of the Texas Public Health Coalition (TPHC). TPHC appreciates this opportunity to testify on behalf of more than 30 public health stakeholder organizations across the state and to share the public health perspective and considerations on Senate Bill 966.

COVID-19 has certainly shined a light on ways Texas can improve to prepare for the next public health disaster, including ways to foster stronger collaboration among state leadership to respond effectively. As we look to bolster Texas' public health response, TPHC would like to point out that public health disasters are complex scenarios, involving communicable disease threats that pose a high risk of death, serious long-term disability, or high levels of contagion. Often communicable disease outbreaks demand rapid responses to defend the health of the public. Requiring the Department of State Health Services commissioner to address a legislative body in the middle of what requires an expeditious response may be challenging and slow down the response. We appreciate and thank the senator for addressing this concern by adding language that would allow an order or declaration to continue if the legislature or oversight board is unable to meet, unless the order or declaration is ended by the commissioner or governor.

A state health commissioner should have the authority to make public health declarations independently, based upon exigent medical and public health priorities. Perhaps a broader body of consultants could be assembled to review or confirm a state public health disaster. That group ideally should have the best understanding of the science involved and contain, at a minimum, experts in medicine and law/ethics, and faith-based leadership. The addition of a consulting board for the commissioner could provide the right expertise to guide potentially sensitive decisions.

We would urge that if SB 966 must move forward, the focus be tied to those events impacting the vast majority of Texas counties, rather than applying a new layer of nonexecutive approval, which may encumber the response in a smaller region.

TPHC appreciates the efforts of this committee to improve Texas' public health response in light of lessons learned from COVID-19. We ask for your consideration of these public health implications moving forward. Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Deanna Cureton, TPHC staff coordinator, at [Deanna.Cureton@tex.med.org](mailto:Deanna.Cureton@tex.med.org).