

Testimony of Representative Frank I. Smizik
Before the Committee on Public Health
On Behalf of House Bill 2161
An Act Relative to Environmentally Safe Alternatives to Harmful Cleaning Products

May 5, 2009

What the problem is:

Massachusetts has one of the highest rates of asthma in this country with 9.5% of all residents affected by this condition. Recent studies have documented that the cleaning products being used in our schools and other public buildings are a trigger of increased asthma attacks, and may also cause chronic headaches, dizziness, nausea, and other severe conditions, including cancer. Because children are required to spend much of their time in schools with poor ventilation systems, fumes from toxic cleaning products can become trapped in buildings where these children learn and play and can trigger asthma attacks and other health problems. Furthermore, many children attending public schools need nursing help to provide them with anti-histamines and steroid inhalants, which only increases health care costs and take away from learning time. Beyond the effect on children, studies have shown that cleaning workers suffer among the highest rates of occupational asthma, and are at an increased risk for reproductive problems and poor birth outcomes such as stillbirth and birth defects. This bill will help protect the health of thousands of cleaning workers, vulnerable children, senior citizens and all of the citizens of the Commonwealth who work or live in a public building, and represents a thoughtful, preventive public health strategy.

What the bill does:

The Safer Cleaning Products Bill will work to address the asthma epidemic in Massachusetts, especially among children, while saving public institutions money. Not only will this bill effectively reduce asthma attacks and other health threats in our schools, but it will improve the health conditions in our day care centers and other public buildings.

The state already has developed a list of Environmentally Preferable Products (EPP). This bill mandates that the Commonwealth use the wide variety of cleaning products on the environmentally preferable purchasing list instead of cleaners that contain harsh chemicals. This list was created using an extensive approval process that looks at many health and environmental factors to determine the safest products on the market.

Why this bill is important:

This bill provides an opportunity to save money on multiple fronts. The safer cleaning products on the EPP list work as effectively at cleaning and disinfection and are often cheaper than products not on the list. Therefore, they can be used in smaller amounts to do the same job, providing schools and other public institutions with the chance to SAVE money. This preventative step will save families from costly trips to the doctor or emergency room, while reducing MassHealth case-loads. It will also cut down on sick days for school children as well as teachers, thereby allowing children more opportunities to learn and schools to devote more of their time and resources towards quality education and providing a safe learning environment.

Passage of this legislation will not unduly limit the effectiveness of cleaners to be used in the affected public areas, but will enhance public health in all of these areas. Given today's skyrocketing health care costs and medical expenses, implementing a cost-effective option to reduce these expenses and improve the health of our children and workers is a practical and economical solution.

Therefore, I urge this Committee to give this important bill a favorable report.