October 27th, 2022
Governor Tom Wolf
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Opposition to HB 103 P.N. 3500 (SCHMITT)

We, the undersigned 67 organizations and 180 individuals concerned about the health and wellbeing of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and all people of color, gay, lesbian and bisexual people, trans and gender diverse people, people living with HIV and other communicable diseases in Pennsylvania strongly urge you, Governor Wolf, to veto House Bill 103.

HB 103 would create two new, unnecessary, and broadly applicable felony offenses and subject people with communicable diseases, such as HIV, all forms of hepatitis, influenza, chickenpox and COVID-19, to harsher penalties under the law. The bill was amended modestly in September 2022, but remains contrary to public policy and public health.

As amended, HB 103 (PN 3500) proposes two new felony offenses, now under § 2702.1 (assault of law enforcement officer):

1. A third-degree felony offense for the intentional or attempted act of throwing, tossing, spitting, or expelling saliva, blood, seminal fluid, urine, or feces at a police officer, punishable by up to 7 years in prison and $15,000 in fines
2. A second-degree felony offense if (1) a person knows, should have known, or believed that the fluid or material was infected by a “reportable communicable disease”; and (2) that the communicable disease was transmissible by the saliva or other bodily fluid that was used—or attempted to be used—against the officer, punishable by up to 10 years in prison and $25,000 in fines

We are deeply troubled that, even as amended, HB 103 retains its problematic communicable disease provision. The amended version of HB 103 allows any “reportable communicable disease,” including HIV, to trigger a second-degree felony charge. Pennsylvania already criminalizes its citizens who are living with HIV and other communicable diseases. The use of criminal law to address public health concerns is stigmatizing, discriminatory, and ultimately targets people based on health status for acts that would not otherwise be so harshly penalized.

The communicable disease provision of HB 103 remains problematic because it:

- **Allows any “reportable communicable disease” to trigger the felony charge:** HB 103 uses the list of reportable diseases by regulation to define the second-degree felony offense. There are 75 reportable diseases on this list, including HIV, all forms of hepatitis, influenza, chickenpox, whooping cough, and COVID-19, creating a dangerous expansion of police pretext to arrest.
- **Does not require substantial risk of transmission:** As it is written, the second-degree felony provision could apply even if the action has a scientifically negligible risk of transmitting the communicable disease.
- **Does not require proof of transmission:** The second-degree felony provision does not require proof that the defendant is living with a reportable communicable disease, nor proof that the bodily fluid or material at issue actually contain any traces of the reportable communicable disease.

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1 As amended, the second degree felony offense in HB 103 applies if the person knew, had reason to know, should have known or believed the bodily fluid contained “a communicable disease declared reportable by regulation authorized by the Act of April 23, 1965 (1955 P.L.1510, NO.500), known as the Disease Prevention and Control Law of 1955.”
Does not require actual transmission: The offense does not require that transmission has occurred. Arrests could be made and felony charges filed solely on an unsubstantiated, falsely perceived, or negligible risk of harm.

Does not require actual contact: HB 103 defines the second-degree felony charge to include even attempted contact with a police officer; no actual contact with saliva or bodily fluids is necessary.

Ultimately, this legislation has the trappings of antiquated, harmful, and stigmatizing HIV criminalization laws while being more broadly applicable to any "reportable communicable disease." By punishing people living with a "reportable communicable disease" with more severe penalties under the law, HB 103 is discriminatory and stigmatizing. This carceral approach to health conditions only harms our state's public health response and further alienates people living with communicable diseases, such as HIV.

Like other parts of the criminal legal system, the criminalization of HIV and other communicable diseases is deeply rooted in racial biases. Several studies by The Williams Institute have found that HIV criminalization laws are disproportionately enforced against women of color, women who do sex work, and women of trans experience. Black, brown, and low-income communities – communities which are already vulnerable to over-policing, police brutality, and police surveillance – are especially harmed by policies, like HB 103, that criminalize health conditions.

We are opposed to HB 103 because of its regressive and harmful approach to public health. We are also opposed to the bill as a whole.

HB 103 would expand police power to arrest and prosecutorial power to stack charges against defendants. Any time a "new" crime is created, it gives prosecutors the power to "stack" charges for the same act. For one action, prosecutors will charge every possible applicable offense, each with a separate term of incarceration. This gives prosecutors extraordinary, sometimes coercive, leverage to secure a plea deal.

It is likely, for example, that someone would be charged under both § 2702.1 (assault of a law enforcement officer, which HB 103 would create) and § 2702 (aggravated assault, which already exists) for the same action. In other words, they would be charged with a second-degree aggravated assault and with HB103’s new third-degree assault of a law enforcement officer.

Offenses against police officers already carry serious penalties, and the penalties proposed in HB 103 are wildly disproportionate to the actions it would criminalize. As written, someone could face up to 7 years in prison for simply spitting in the direction of a police officer; if the person "knew, had reason to know, should have known or believed" they had a reportable communicable disease, that penalty could jump up to 10 years in prison, and this is before "stacking" occurs.

Governor Wolf, you must act quickly to ensure that HB 103 does not dangerously and recklessly expand special protections already afforded to police officers. If HB 103 is not stopped, the consequences will be severe, especially for Black women, women who do sex work, women of trans experience, and people living with communicable diseases, such as HIV. We urge you to veto HB 103 and ensure Pennsylvanians, particularly Pennsylvanians of color are not further subject to over-policing, surveillance, and brutality at the hands of law enforcement.

We would be happy to provide you with additional data, research, and information about the harms of criminalizing public health issues. For more information or should you be interested in speaking more, please contact: Michelle Troxell, Co-chair of Positive Women’s Network-Pennsylvania and Lead of the Pennsylvania HIV Justice Alliance (mtroxell100@gmail.com)
Elena Ferguson, Policy Specialist of Positive Women’s Network-USA (elena@pwn-usa.org)
Kelly Flannery, Policy Director of Positive Women’s Network-USA (kelly@pwn-usa.org)
Cindy Stine, Development Director of The Sero Project (cindy.stine@seroproject.com)

Organizations
1Hood Power
Action Wellness
ACT UP Philadelphia
ADL Philadelphia
Advocates for Youth
AIDS Foundation Chicago
AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania
All Under One Roof LGBT Advocates of Southeastern Idaho
Allies for Health + Wellbeing
ALPHA Pittsburgh, Inc.
Amistad Law Project
Black and Pink Massachusetts
Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center
Center for Asian Health, Lewis Katz School of Medicine, Temple University
Center for Coalfield Justice
Colorado Organizations Responding to HIV/AIDS - CORA
Community Care Management
Community Liver Alliance
Desiree Alliance
Elevyst
Equality Ohio
Free the Ballot
GIRL U CAN DO IT, INC.
Greater Philadelphia Health Action
Hacking//Hustling
Hep B United Philadelphia
Hepatitis B Foundation
Hepatitis C Allies of Philadelphia (HepCAP)
HIV Justice Network
HIV Modernization Movement-Indiana
Housing Works
Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation
Human Rights Campaign
Hyacinth AIDS Foundation
Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc.
Lancaster LGBTQ+ Coalition
LGBT Center of Greater Reading
LGBT Elder Initiative at William Way Community Center
Mazzoni Center
Mississippi Positive Network
National Working Positive Coalition
New Voices for Reproductive Justice
Northeast Philadelphia Chinese Association (NEPCA)
Ohio Health Modernization Movement
PA Budget and Policy Center
Pennsylvania HIV Justice Alliance
Pennsylvania Youth Congress
Philadelphia Mayor's Office of LGBT Affairs
Positive Women's Network-PA
Positive Women's Network-USA
Positively Trans
PrEP4All
Project Safe Philadelphia
Rainbow Rose Center
Reframe Health and Justice
RISE IMPACT
Tennessee HIV Modernization Coalition
The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation
The Pennsylvania HIV Justice Alliance
The Reunion Project
The Sero Project
The Social Justice Center
The Well Project
Treatment Action Group
Vivent Health
Western North Carolina Aids Project
Woodhull Freedom Foundation

Concerned Pennsylvania Residents
Aaron Arnold, MPH
Adrian M Lowe, JD
Adrienne Standley
Alice Bell, LCSW
Amanda Geraci, LCSW
Amber Barcel, MSW
Amy Harada, Assistant Director of HIV/AIDS Service Organization
Amy Herlich
Andrea Johnson, Community Advocate and Activist
Andrea Sample
Anna Klahr, Program Coordinator Ryan White Part B
Anna Peeples
Aviva Tevah, MPA
Bart A Rauluk, Long Term Survivor of HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Benjamin Norris, PhD
Brenda Anastasio, RN, BSN
Brian LaVoie
Brittney Taylor, Community Advocate
Cameron Collar
Carrie A. Reighard, CPA
Catherine Freeland
Chantelle Lebeau, Community Advocate and Sex Industry Worker
Chari Cohen, DrPH, MPH
Christy Owens, Medical Case Manager
Cindy Stine
Clint Steib, MPH
Corrine Bozich, MPH
Crystal Saviour, Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Cyè Jacobs, Community Advocate
Daryl Riley, Community Advocate
David Givens, PhD, Public Health Community Planning Specialist
David Griffith, MSW
Daysha Clement
Elizabeth Randol, Ph.D.
Gina M Simoncini, MD, MPH
Gladyne Confident, MD
Grace O Rutha, PWN-PA Member and Health Education Instructor
Hannah Zellman, MSW
Heather Buck
Jake Goodman
Jake Nussbaum
Jazmyn Henderson
Jessica Sadeghi, Medical Assistant
Jimmy Trinh
Joanna Stoms, MPA RRT
Joseph Glackin, HIV Advocate
Julia Hilbert, Social Worker working with People Living with HIV
Julie Graham, Community Advocate, Licensed Practical Nurse, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Justin Acheampong
K. Foley, Community Advocate & Therapist (LCPC)
Kaitlin Bailey, Community Advocate
Katie Huynh, PA-C, AAHIVM-S
Kelly Flannery, JD, MA
Kelly Hutchinson, RN
Kelsey Leon, Patient Care Technician, MSc
Kenya L Moussa, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Kevin J. Burns, LCSW
Khosrow Sadeghi
Kiara Aye
Kirk Fordham
Kristin Walker, RN, MSN, CNM, ACRN
Lamont Skinner
Leila Raven, Community Advocate
Lura Auel
Lydia Lutz, Medical Student
Lyn Chavis, MSW
Mack Finkel
Marc C. E. Wagner, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Marc Stier, Ph.D.
Marci Egel-Guzowski, Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Mary Beth Wyko
Mary Hanlon
Michael Hellman, Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Michael Latady, Social Worker
Michael Zolovich, HIV Prevention and Care Project
Michelle Dech
Michelle Troxell, Registered Nurse (RN), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Monica G. Cole
Montita Sowapark, Medical Student, M.A.
Nikki Grant, JD
Pamela Clement
Philip Siu, M.D.
Rebecca Altman, CRNP, MPH
Rebecca Fishman
Ricci Levy
Richard Troxell
Robin M. Dadzie
Rochelle Sadeghi, Ph.D.
Rose Mccloud, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Samm Pheiffer
Sarah McBeth, MD, MPH
Sean DeYoung, LCSW
Sean Fogler, MD
Sean Strub
Seneca Joyner
Shawn McGinley, Case Manager
Solange Azor
Staci Saunders, RN
Stephanie, RN
Stephanie G Knupsky
Sterling Johnson, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Susan Mull, B.S., M.Div., Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Suzanna Masartis
Tara Tarawneh
Teresa Sullivan, Community Organizer, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Tesla Taliaferro, Community Advocate, President of LGBTQIA+ Focused Nonprofit
Theo Loftis
Theresa Hrzić-Colimon
Thomas W. Ude, Jr., JD
Tinisha Hunt
Tom Hang, RN
Tonya Bah, Strategist
Tran Huynh, Professor (Assistant), PhD, MPH
Tyrell Brown, Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Valerie Bai, RN
Veronica Fike
Waheedah Shabazz-El, Community Organizer, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Yin Tan, MD, MPH
Zachary Scarpaci

**Concerned Individuals Outside of Pennsylvania**
Allen Murray (TX)
Amanda Le (CA), JD
Angela F. Hawkins (TX)
Anna Forbes (MD), MSS, Direct Service Provider and Educator, Writer and Co-Author of numerous books and published articles on HIV/AIDS and its social and political effects
Anthony Feliciano (NY), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Antoinette Jones (GA), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Audrey Moody (SC), Social Worker
Axel Torres Marrero (NJ), MPH
Barb Cardell (CO), Community advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Brandi Velasquez (OR)
Brittany Moore (TX)
Carrie Foote (IN), Ph.D
Cherrako A. Boone (Washington, DC), MSW, MPH, MA
Chunnika L. Hodges (MI), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Cristine Sardina, BWS, MS
Crystal Townsend (TX)
Daniella Martinez (OR), Community Advocate
Edwin J Bernard (Amsterdam), Global Coordinator, HIV JUSTICE WORLDWIDE
Eric Pfleider (IN), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Elena Ferguson (TN), JD
Fran Ricardo (GA)
Franceina Hopkins (SC), PWN-SC Regional Outreach Coordinator
Gracie Borns (NJ)
Gretchen Roberts (OR), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Ieisha McClain (NJ), RMA
Jake Arman (CA)
Jason Velasquez (OR), Community Advocate
Jeremiah Johnson (NY), MPH
Jessica Erves (TX), Community Advocate
Jody Cross (NC), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Josh Mica (TX), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Kate D’Adamo (MD), Health Equity Trainer and Consultant
Kate Goldstein (NY), BSN, RN, FNP-S
Keonta Spurlock (LA)
Kevin Lish (ID), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Krista Martel (NY)
LaDawn Tate (MI), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Lashanda Salinas (TN), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Laurie Priddy (CO), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
M. Alfredo Gonzalez (NY), PhD, Activist, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Marcya Gullatte (AL), Subject Matter Expert
Margaret Bordeaux (NC)
Mark Harrington (NY)
Mark Misrok (NY), MS Ed
Mary Jane Maestas (CO), PWN-CO Co-chair, Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Melanie A Reese (MD), Community Advocate, Older Woman Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Meriam Issa (MI), MSW
Michelle Yancey Harris (IN)
Morgan Benson (MA), MPP
Nadeen Israel (IL), MA
Nimisha Srikanth (TX), Community advocate
Penny DeNoble (GA), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Rita McDaniel (NC), Community Advocate, Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Robin Webb (MS), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Sattie Nyachwaya (TX)
Shay Gonzales (TX), LCSW, CAADC
Sofia Lakhani (TX)
Tana Pradia (TX), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Terry Lowman (IA)
Tiffany Moore (TN), Person Living with HIV and Subject Matter Expert
Yolanda Diaz (NY), Community Advocate