

Good afternoon, Chair White and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit this testimony in SUPPORT of S.158. I apologize I couldn't be there live with you and my other colleagues on this important Zoom Committee Hearing.

My name is Dr. William Reynolds, and I am a Doctor of Optometry currently practicing in Central Kentucky. I am also the most recent past President of the American Optometric Association (AOA), having served in that role beginning in June of 2020 through June of 2021, after having been elected and serving nearly a decade before that on the AOA's Board of Trustees. I am also the past Chair of the AOA's State Government Relations Committee.

Throughout my tenure in these various roles, I've worked closely with doctors both here in Vermont and in states across the country, to address the statutory limitations placed on our profession and ultimately our ability to serve our patients, via our scope of practice.

Optometry is a legislated profession, and we understand the impact this has on our practice abilities.

Since my early days of seeing patients where I was limited to only certain prescriptive authorities, to now providing a full suite of care which includes ophthalmic surgical procedures, scope of practice has continued to grow both in Kentucky and nationally to best meet the needs of a growing patient population.

Not only did Kentucky expand its scope of practice in 2011 to better reflect the skills and education Doctors of Optometry possess, but state legislatures nationwide are recognizing this as well.

Just last year, both Mississippi and Wyoming enacted scope of practice legislation for our colleagues licensed in those states, so they can perform laser surgical procedures, along with updating outdated prescriptive formularies.

In Wyoming's case, their law also allows the state board to judge what constitutes the practice of optometry as dictated by education and the limited restrictions defined by law.

These bills being passed were historic, in that it was the first time in the history of the profession, that more than one state has been recognized in a single legislative year, with these levels of surgical procedures. But these were not the only states to have their legislature realize the need for optometry to increase their scope.

Seven states gained greater scope of practice authority during the 2021 legislative cycle altogether. With the addition of Mississippi and Wyoming, eight states and the patients living in them, now have greater access to truly contemporary eye and vision care, which includes the use of ophthalmic lasers.

This trend of scope expansion is not a new one though. Since 1998, 49 states have enacted nearly 100 laws that increase their optometric scope.

More recently in states like Arkansas, legislative scope expansions initially won in the legislature, were taken without merit to the courts and the political ballot by the opposition, and ultimately, Optometry came out successful with a greater ability to serve our patients.

Doctors of Optometry have been providing contemporary optometric care, which includes the use of ophthalmic lasers, for over 20 years.

In all that time, not one negative outcome, complaint or formal action has been logged or taken by the state board of optometry against an optometrist utilizing these technologies.

In Kentucky where I practice, the Kentucky State Board of Optometric Examiners has credentialed over 440 optometrists to perform expanded therapeutic procedures and to date, 40,000 laser surgical procedures have been successfully performed by a Doctor of Optometry.

The Kentucky State Board of Examiners has yet to receive a single complaint or negative outcome related to the performance of these expanded laser surgical procedures.

This fact also holds true in the other three states (Alaska, Louisiana, and Oklahoma) who've been performing these procedures long enough to have a track record and accountability of outcomes through their state licensing boards.

The quality of care being provided cannot be questioned, considering the tens of thousands of procedures which have been successfully performed time and again on these patients in need.

The necessity of optometric care nationally is also not in question.

A 2019 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report titled *Reforming America's Healthcare System Through Choice and Competition* stated that more competition among clinicians and fewer government regulations can lower the costs of health care. It proposed eliminating policies that stifle competition, broadening providers' scope of practice and addressing physician supply shortages.

This report specifically addressed scope expansion for Doctors of Optometry, stating that we can provide the same services as other physician groups.

"States should consider changes to their scope of practice statutes to allow all health care providers to practice to the top of their license, utilizing their full skill set."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is not the only agency though, which has recognized the breadth of education and skills Doctors of Optometry possess.

In a report finalized this month by the Washington State Department of Health, Optometric Physicians were affirmed to receive the educational qualifications to perform advanced ophthalmic procedures.

Specifically, Washington DOH stated

“Department staff independently reviewed curriculum for 25 optometry schools across the country, as well as two post-graduate programs in Oklahoma and Oregon. All 25 optometry schools provided classroom instruction on oral steroid prescriptions, therapeutic injections, eyelid lesion removal, and in-office laser procedures.”

Regarding the advanced procedures specifically, the Washington DOH went on to say

“It appears all optometry programs in the United States include advanced procedures, such as injections, laser treatments, and certain surgeries in their curriculum. The underlying optometry training serves as the foundation for clinical knowledge and application of the proposed advanced procedures.”

These come as strong statements from a third-party state agency, for the robust education Doctors of Optometry receive during their rigorous education process.

Ultimately, ample information exists, which proves time and again that patients are best served when Doctors of Optometry are able to practice at the highest levels.

Despite the track record of positive patient outcomes, despite the continued confirmation of educational abilities and despite the issues such as access and cost, the unsubstantiated opposition to our efforts remain the same.

The same arguments we heard in Kentucky against our scope expansion then, are the same I’ve heard in every state that’s passed a scope expansion both before and after ours.

They weren’t true then and they’re still without merit now.

These meritless arguments against expanded scope unfortunately come not only from other provider groups, but also from state agencies lacking in perspective and the full breadth of information available.

Doctors of Optometry in Vermont stand trained and ready to better serve their patients. Outcomes, education, access, and need are defined and have been proven over the last 20 years.

Now is the time to extend comprehensive eye and vision patient care, to all those who truly deserve it here in Vermont.

I respectfully ask that you VOTE YES ON S.158 today here in committee. Thank you all very much for your time and consideration of this incredibly important issue.