

My body aches and my mind is a mess.
I am in a state of chronic distress.

I know there are others who can relate.
We are not alone and this is not our only fate.

If I quit now, what will my life story show
Some journal entries and pictures, but no one will be educated to truly know

Lyme disease and its sinister allies might be at war with me,
but they will not win this battle easily.

It's time to recognize that lives are on the line.
I must speak up now for others...while I have the strength and time.

Good morning everyone, my name is Dr. Rebecca Speelman. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my tick-borne disease testimony today with all of you. Thank you to State Representative Catherine Wallen for her compassion and commitment to bringing this bill forward. House Bill 2710 is incredibly personal and important to me, but not for myself. My battle with babesiosis and its impact on my life story has already been written: missed milestones, a shattered dream career, memories never made with children who are now grown. Precious moments that can never be relived. Instead, remembrances of spending days in bed with joint, muscle, and brain pain that cannot even be explained or mentally erased.

Twenty-six years ago, I had a tick bite with positive test results. Treatment options were limited for me because of an allergic reaction to standard protocols in 2000. In the following years, I gave birth to two wonderful children. I also pursued and successfully earned my doctorate degree...even as my red blood cells were being destroyed by babesiosis, sinisterly working on breaking down my body over the next fifteen years. It was also during this time that new technologies emerged, and paper health records transitioned to digital files, and during that transition...my medical records, including my babesiosis test results, were inadvertently deleted. Because there was no state reporting required, no evidence remained. My already compromised mind and body had to not only battle babesiosis but also fight for re-testing for several years. Phone calls to the PA State Department of Health fell upon deaf ears. I repeatedly called and said I would pay out of my own pocket for my testing. They continued to tell me I could not request my own tests. They sent me back to my doctors for testing, where I was told testing had already been done...based on the ELISA tests and CDC guidelines...which did not indicate babesiosis. (which, by the way, is not the correct test for babesiosis, yet is the test used for Lyme.) Though I was extremely discouraged at the time, I cannot fault them. As an educator, I believe you cannot blame people for not knowing something if it has never been taught to them. Unfortunately, their lack of tick-borne education changed the trajectory of my health. I worked with doctors, based on what they HAD been taught and they mis-diagnosed

me with multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, and Parkinson's...yet no mention of tick-borne illness, including babesiosis.

I began to doubt myself and what I innately felt was wrong with me. Sure, my job as a full-time tenured university professor, wife, and mother were all a balancing act. Yet, in my gut, I knew that my muscles, my joints, and my brain were screaming...reminding me of what we knew from the positive babesiosis test so many years prior...that I was dying a slow death. I chose to become an advocate for myself by educating medical professionals (and just about anyone who would listen) about my story. I continued to research, even as my health failed; I began typing and talking incoherently...I was rapidly losing mental acuity. I continued to seek out different medical professionals, but none seemed to truly understand or were able to requisition the testing I so desperately needed. If there had been state reporting in place even 10 years ago, my quality of life could be vastly different today. In 2018, I finally found an ILADS (International Lyme and Associated Diseases)-educated medical doctor who I believed saved my life. He rendered a clinical diagnosis for babesiosis (and other tick-borne illnesses) during my first appointment. He requested extensive Lyme testing and there in my results was babesiosis, still present and wreaking havoc on my body. By this point in time, so many years later, my health had declined so much that I was placed on medical leave from my dream career as a university professor and academic leader, never to return. My life changed forever. Even with treatment, it has been an uphill climb.

Because there was (and currently still is) no state level reporting or deeper testing, no required education for our medical professionals related to babesiosis; because the CDC guidelines require multiple markers to indicate a positive tick-borne illness...my life and my children's lives will never be as I envisioned. Missed teenage talks with my son and daughter, holiday gatherings spent without me, and important life lessons that were taught by someone else. The bitter reality is that I will never be able to recover those lost years. In addition, the hundreds of undergraduate teacher education students who I never had a chance to educate, to share my passion for learning and the intense responsibility they were going to take on as they began their own teaching careers. Time is a thief and we do not get a chance to hit rewind. Today I stand before you...still struggling with the effects of babesiosis, but fervently asking for YOU to help others, so they do not experience what I have.

Please pass House Bill 2710 not only for those who have and/or are currently battling babesiosis, but also for yourself, your colleagues, your friends, and your family. Someone you know will encounter a tick-borne illness in the coming months, weeks, or even days. The gravity of this illness will continue to be undocumented, the faces of those fighting to recover will be unseen and their voices unheard. But...there is hope. Be the voice for those who have been advocating for themselves while fighting a disease few recognize, not out of ignorance, but out of lack of guidance. Pass HB2710! Thank you for your time and attention.