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**Testimony of Nancy Beardsley  
Acting Director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention  
Department of Health and Human Services**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs  
LD 798 “An Act to Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by  
Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements”**

Hearing Date: March 13, 2019

Good Afternoon Senator Millett, Representative Kornfield, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Nancy Beardsley and I am serving as Acting Director for the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention which is tasked with providing essential public health services that preserve, promote, and protect the health and safety of Maine people.

The Maine CDC supports LD 798 because it will keep our children healthy and safe from unnecessary disease, ensure safe schools and child care centers, and protect vulnerable people against serious diseases.

Currently, nursery school licensees, administrators, or other staff members are allowed religious or philosophical exemptions for immunizations. This bill removes these exemptions.

This bill also directs the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to amend their rules to remove any exemptions from immunization requirements because of their religious or philosophical beliefs. This includes students in elementary, secondary and postsecondary schools and employees in health care facilities.

**The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) supports these changes.**

Protecting individuals and communities from communicable diseases such as measles, mumps and pertussis, is a fundamental purpose of Maine CDC's disease prevention mission.

According to “*Vaccination Coverage for Selected Vaccines, Exemption Rates, and Provisional Enrollment Among Children in Kindergarten — United States, 2017-18 School Year*,” Maine ranks 7<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the highest non-medical exemption rates among school age children. This survey represents 12,527 students resulting in a 5.3% overall exemption rate.

Medical exemptions for Maine students account for 0.3% while nationally, medical exemptions are 0.2%. Non-medical exemptions, which include religious and philosophical reasons, were reported at 5.0% for Maine, compared to the national rate of 2.0%. Most of Maine's school age exemptions are non-medical, with the highest rates of non-medical exemptions being reported in

Hancock and Waldo counties. Hancock and Waldo counties also represent two of the four counties with the highest reported rates of pertussis cases in 2018, 56.7 and 158.3 per 100,000 respectively. Not only did high exemption rates likely contribute to higher rates of pertussis disease in these two counties, but also in the entire State, as Maine reported the highest rate of pertussis disease in the country for 2018.

When someone chooses not to vaccinate, that decision can jeopardize the health and safety of entire communities, especially the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Those who are unable to be vaccinated, such as young infants, pregnant mothers or children with cancer, face the most risk from disease complications.

Thirty-three states do not allow any personal belief exemptions. Maine is an outlier in this regard. Evidence shows that states that have tighter exemption laws have higher immunization rates, and less disease.

The scientific evidence supporting immunization is overwhelming, sound, and supported by the professional medical community. Vaccinations are proven to be safe and effective. We at the Maine CDC and Department of Health and Human Services strongly support the passage of LD 798 for all these reasons, and thank you for your time.