



Maine Public Health Association
Dedicated to assuring the health of Maine's people & places

Testimony of the Maine Public Health Association in Support of L.D. 798, An Act To Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Room 208, Cross State Office Building
Wednesday, March 13, 2019

Good afternoon, Senator Miller, Representative Kornfield, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Rebecca Boulos and I am the executive director of the Maine Public Health Association. I grew up in Maine, and currently reside in South Portland. I am here today in support of L.D. 798, "An Act To Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements." This bill will end non-medical exemptions from childhood vaccinations required for school attendance.

MPHA is a professional membership organization, representing nearly 750 public health professionals across Maine. Our mission is to improve and sustain the health and well-being of all Maine residents through health promotion, disease prevention, and the advancement of health equity. As a statewide association, we advocate, act and advise on critical public health challenges, assuring that all Maine residents have the opportunity to lead healthy lives, regardless of their income or where they live. We are not tied to a national agenda, which means we are responsive to the needs of Maine's communities and we take that responsibility seriously.

We are only as healthy as the world around us, which is why strengthening immunization laws is one of the most effective ways to improve the health of our communities statewide. With infectious disease outbreaks increasing across the country after being well-controlled with vaccines for decades, this is a critical time for Maine to act in the best interest of all.

The safety, efficacy, and cost-effectiveness of routine childhood vaccines has been well-established and is supported by sound, scientific studies. The legality and constitutionality of school and daycare immunization requirements held in all 50 states has been vigorously upheld in courts, and these laws have led to increased immunization rates and a reduction in U.S. morbidity and mortality associated with infectious diseases. Thus, what we must focus on now is how to close the loopholes in existing immunization laws to ensure that we do not backslide to a time when childhood illness and death from infectious disease was the norm.

With the 7th highest school immunization exemption rate in the country, Maine cannot afford to continue to allow philosophical and religious exemptions under the law. There are many

different policy options for improving immunization rates, such as improving access to vaccines, implementing immunization registries, requiring provider and parent education, improving reporting requirements, and increasing funding for vaccine research and development. Maine has expanded vaccine access for all Maine children by eliminating financial barriers, and our healthcare providers follow recommendations to engage families in conversations about the benefits of vaccines. Other states that have eliminated philosophical exemptions, only to see their religious exemptions increase, and states that have mandated parent-provider education did not see a significant reduction in opt-out rates. These approaches simply aren't enough to get us where we need to be. In fact, vaccine hesitancy due to false information and myths has grown so large, that the World Health Organization listed vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten threats to global health in 2019.

Exercising a choice to not vaccinate a child is dangerous. It is a choice that jeopardizes the health of the child, and also other children and their families. For example, measles was declared eliminated in the U.S. in 2000, but with the decreases in immunizations, this once-gone disease is now making a comeback. Already this year, there have been more than 206 confirmed cases in the U.S. In January, Washington State declared a State of Emergency because of a measles outbreak. Strengthening our existing immunization laws by only allowing for medical exemptions is the fastest, most cost-effective way to increase and maintain high immunization rates in schools now and for generations to come.

Maine is one of only 17 states that allow for both religious and philosophical exemptions. West Virginia, Mississippi and California have successfully strengthened their laws to eliminate religious and philosophical exemptions. Data from immunization surveys indicate that states with stronger immunization laws have higher immunization rates and sufficient herd immunity to prevent outbreaks. For example, Mississippi and West Virginia had impressive measles immunization rates of 99% and 97% respectively during the last school year. California saw a jump in their measles immunization rate from 94% to 97% the year after they eliminated non-medical exemptions.¹

Maine is in a position to join Mississippi, West Virginia and California as a national public health leader. We are not alone – all major medical and public health organizations have issued policy statements in support of eliminating non-medical exemptions,² and other states and Congress are discussing ways to strengthen immunization laws to protect and uphold the rights of all – to keep everyone safe, including those who cannot protect themselves.

Vaccinations fall under the purview of public health, and when individual's decisions impact populations, efforts to reduce the negative impact of those decisions fall on policymakers. In your capacity, you are responsible for ensuring the health and wellbeing of your constituents. Please do your part to help protect the rights of all Mainers to attend school and work, and to thrive in communities free of vaccine-preventable diseases. We respectfully ask you to vote LD 798 "Ought to Pass." I would be happy to answer any questions you may have, and will be available for the work session.

¹ CDC immunization data <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/imz-managers/coverage/schoolva/view/data-reports/coverage-trend/index.html>

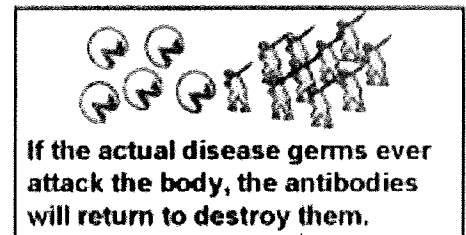
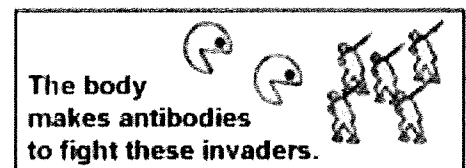
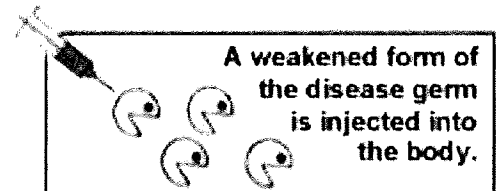
² Immunization exemptions <http://www.immunize.org/laws/>

Vaccines Protect Public Health.

“A decision not to immunize a child also involves risk and could put the child and others who come into contact with him or her at risk of contracting a potentially deadly disease.”
– National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases. 2018

What are vaccines?

- Vaccines are treatments that protect us from serious, deadly, and often highly contagious diseases.
- Vaccines contain either weakened or killed forms of germs, so our bodies can create antibodies, which then fight the germs when we're exposed to them, protecting us from the disease.
- Vaccines are like a dry run, preparing our bodies for a stronger and quicker response prior to the main exposure.

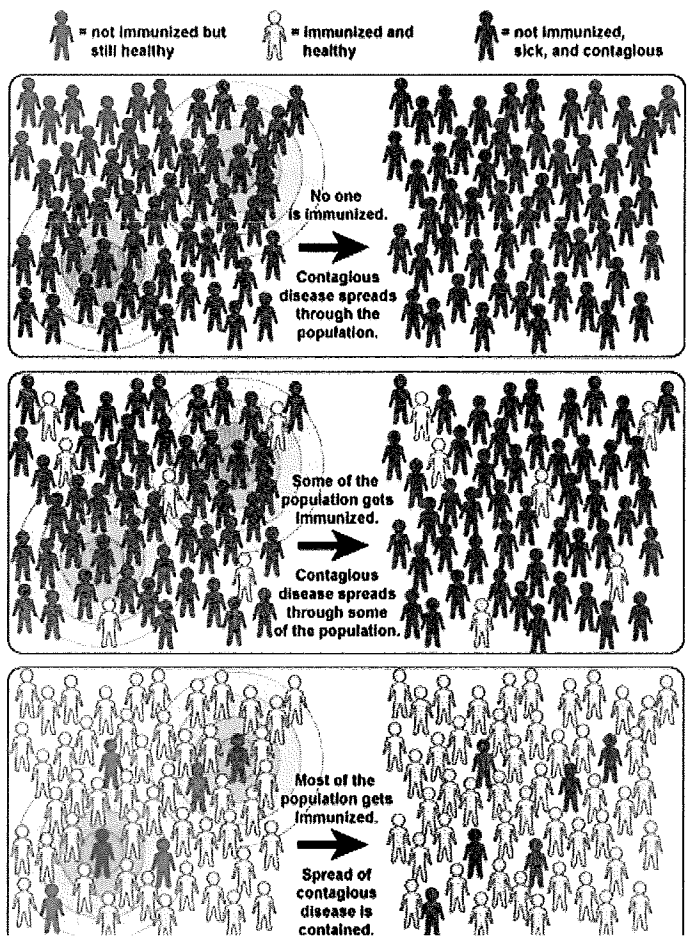


Are they safe?

- **Vaccines are safe.** Licensed vaccines are rigorously tested in multiple trials before they are approved for use, and are continuously reassessed when on the market. Scientists constantly monitor information from several sources for any sign that a vaccine may cause an adverse event. Most vaccine reactions are minor and temporary; in the rare event a serious side effect is reported, there is an immediate investigation.¹
- **It is far more likely to be seriously injured by a vaccine-preventable disease than by the vaccine.** Polio can cause paralysis; measles can cause encephalitis and blindness; and other vaccine-preventable diseases can result in death. Minor adverse effects from vaccines (sore arm, low-grade fever) often go away in a few days; more serious adverse effects are very rare.¹ The benefits of vaccines far outweigh the risks. Many more illnesses and deaths would occur without vaccines.
- **No links have been found between vaccines and Autism Spectrum Disorder.**²
- **What about preservatives in vaccines?** Thimerosal is an organic, mercury-containing compound that is added to some vaccines as a preservative; it is safe and the most widely-used preservative for vaccines.¹ **There is no evidence to suggest that thimerosal used in vaccines poses a health risk.**¹
- **What about animal products in vaccines?** Viral vaccines need to be produced in living cells, requiring the addition of complex growth components to be effective. Animal-derived products used can include amino acids, glycerol, detergents, gelatin, enzymes and blood.³
- **What about fetal cells?** Fibroblast cells hold skin and other connective tissue together; some vaccines (chickenpox, rubella, hepatitis A, and one version of shingles and rabies) are best developed from the virus growing in a fetal embryo fibroblast. Viruses require cells to grow, and tend to grow better in cells from humans than animals. These cells were first obtained in the 1960s from elective termination of two pregnancies; the same cells are used to make vaccines today. **No other fetal cell sources are used to make these vaccines.**

Why Vaccinate Against Diseases Not In My Community?

- In a highly inter-connected world, diseases easily cross geographical borders.
- We get vaccinated to protect ourselves and to protect those around us. Successful vaccination programs depend on the cooperation of every individual to ensure the wellbeing of all.
- We should not just rely on the people around us to stop the spread of disease. We, too, must do what we can.
- Herd immunity is quickly and dramatically weakened with even small decreases in vaccination rates.⁴ For example, measles was declared eliminated in the U.S. in 2000; however, as of March 2019, there have been more than 206 confirmed cases across the U.S.



What About Parents' Rights to Choose?

- Exercising a choice to not vaccinate a child is dangerous. It is a choice that jeopardizes the health of the child, and also other children and their families.
- All children have the right to attend a safe school. A heightened risk associated with an increasing prevalence of vaccine-preventable disease, especially for those children with weakened immune systems, is unethical; threatening their health is discriminatory.
- The side effects of not being vaccinated are that children can die from disease.

Policy Actions to Take

- End non-medical exemptions from childhood vaccinations required for school attendance.
- Strengthen Maine's public health system, including funding and workforce capacity and training. If there is a disease outbreak, we need to be able to respond.

To learn more, please visit www.MainePublicHealth.org.

¹ World Health Organization. 2019. <https://www.who.int/features/qa/84/en/>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (NCEZID), Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion (DHQP) 2015.

³ U.S. Federal Drug Administration. 2018. <https://www.fda.gov/biologicsbloodvaccines/vaccines/questionsaboutvaccines/ucm143521.htm>

⁴ Helft L., Willingham E. What is herd immunity? Nova. September 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/herd-immunity/>