Testimony on L.D. 798, Education and Cultural Affairs Committee - March 13, 2019
By Paul Fidalgo (Saco), Center for Inquiry

Good morning. Chairs Senator Millett and Representative Kornfield, members of the committee, thank you for hearing my testimony.

My name is Paul Fidalgo, a resident of Saco, and I am here to <u>support</u> L.D. 798. I am the father of two children, ages 9 and 6, both in the public school system.

I am also the Communications Director for the Center for Inquiry, a national nonprofit organization that seeks to foster a secular society based on reason, science, and humanist values.

I support L.D. 798 for two reasons: First, public policy should be based on facts and evidence. Second, religious exemptions to public health laws undermine our constitutional separation of church and state by privileging religious beliefs over our public interest in health and safety.

The evidence in support of vaccines is in, and it is crystal clear: Vaccines are <u>safe</u> and <u>effective</u>. High rates of vaccination protect the most vulnerable Mainers, including children, the elderly, the sick, and those of us who can't receive vaccinations for legitimate medical reasons like a severe allergic reaction.

But here in Maine non-medical exemptions have increased since 2009, endangering our children's health by making it easier for preventable diseases to spread. [1], [2]

There are consequences when people claim non-medical exemptions to vaccination. In Washington State, a large number of exemptions has led to a measles outbreak that continues to sicken and endanger residents. I recently saw a TV news piece about a 5-year-old boy there named Kai, in treatment for leukemia. Unlike the vast majority of us, Kai *can't* safely take vaccines due to his severely weakened immune system. As a result, five year-old Kai can't go out in public, on playdates, or on errands with his mom, lest he contract a life-threatening illness that his body cannot fight off.

When we talk about the importance of getting vaccinated, this point can't be made strongly enough: <u>It's not just about you.</u> It's not even just about your own kids. It's also about kids like Kai. My kids are vaccinated because it protects them from dangerous diseases *and* because it protects *others*.

As to religious exemptions to public health laws: I unequivocally support every person's right to freedom of and from religion. But that freedom should never be an excuse to put other people at risk. <u>Viruses don't care what religion you believe in.</u>

Sadly, religious exemptions are also ripe for abuse. One prominent website explains "how to get a religious exemption like a boss," coaching people in the use of convincing religious rhetoric. The author warns vaccine deniers not to delve into their *actual* objections, those unrelated to religious belief. She says:

> "Anytime you find yourself talking about anything other than your religious beliefs, start over. No talking about the effects of toxins on the body. ...your argument needs to be religion-based, so stick to the Bible."[5]

It is time to end religious exemptions to our state's vaccination laws. It is time for all of us to recognize that privately held beliefs must never be used to jeopardize the health of *our* children or *anyone else's*. I'm happy to answer any questions that you have, and to provide the committee with the resources that I've cited today in my testimony. Thank you.

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[1] Researchers reviewed all the cases of measles in the U.S. from 2000-2015. They found that almost 42 percent of people who contracted measles had a nonmedical exemption from vaccination. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5007135/#R12
[2] https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002578
[3] https://komonews.com/news/local/vancouver-mom-cant-vaccinate-sick-son-in-wake-of-measles-crisis
[4] https://www.livingwhole.org/how-to-get-a-vaccine-religious-exemption/