

Janet T. Mills  
Governor

Jeanne M. Lambrew, Ph.D.  
Commissioner



Maine Department of Health and Human Services  
Commissioner's Office  
11 State House Station  
109 Capitol Street  
Augusta, Maine 04333-0011  
Tel: (207) 287-3707; Fax: (207) 287-3005  
TTY: Dial 711 (Maine Relay)

Testimony 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

In Opposition to LD 51, *An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions  
to Immunization Requirements*

Sponsored by: Representative Gary Drinkwater  
Hearing Date: April 3, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Jessica Shiminski and I am the director of the Maine Immunization Program within the Department of Health and Human Services - Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention - Division of Disease Surveillance. I am here today to provide testimony on behalf of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) and I will be speaking in strong opposition to LD 51, *An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements*.

This bill seeks to reinstate the religious and philosophical exemptions recently removed from Maine's immunization laws for students in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools, employees of nursery schools, and certain healthcare facilities.

Public Law 2019, Chapter 154 was enacted for three reasons: to keep our children safe and healthy from unnecessary disease, to ensure safe schools and childcare centers, and to protect vulnerable people against serious disease. The removal of religious and philosophical exemptions was decided through legislative process and upheld by a referendum vote in 2020 with 72% of Mainers in favor of this decision.

The requirement to remove non-medical exemptions for required immunizations was effective September 1, 2021. Data obtained through the Maine Immunization Program's annual School Immunization Assessment Survey shows a significant increase of immunization rates from the 2020-21 school year to the 2021-22 school year. MMR rates increase from 94.3% to 96.7%. DTaP increased from 94% to 96.3%. Polio increased from 94.2% to 96.5%. Additionally, non-medical exemptions decreased from 4.1% to 0.3% and medical exemptions increased from 0.5% to 1.5%, disproving the argument that medical exemptions are difficult to obtain in the State of Maine.

Prior to September 1, 2021, most of Maine's school age exemptions were non-medical, with the highest rates of non-medical exemptions being reported in Hancock and Waldo counties. These two counties also represented two of the four counties with the highest reported rates of pertussis cases in

2018. Not only did high exemption rates likely contribute to higher rates of pertussis, or whooping cough, in these two counties, but also for the entire State, with Maine reporting the highest rate of pertussis in the country for 2018. More recently, states across the country are facing outbreaks of both polio and measles. These vaccines are all required for kindergarten entry in Maine's public and private schools. Reinstating allowances for exemptions for non-medical reasons would threaten the public health of Mainers.

When someone chooses not to vaccinate, that decision can jeopardize the health and safety of entire communities, especially the most physically vulnerable among us. Evidence shows that states that have more restrictive exemption laws have higher immunization rates and less disease transmission.

In summary, the Maine CDC opposes LD 51. Health policy is best driven by evidence, and the scientific evidence is overwhelming, sound, and supported by the professional medical community and majority of Maine voters. Vaccinations are proven to be safe and effective.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter and for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I can address questions from Committee and I will be available to participate in the work session.