



**Testimony Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
April 3, 2023**

IN OPPOSITION TO:

LD 51: An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements

LD 1098: An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions Regarding Immunization Requirements

LD 1209: An Act to Reinstate the Religious and Philosophical Vaccine Exemptions for Private Schools and Virtual Public Charter Schools

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jane Field and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Council of Churches, an ecumenical coalition of seven mainline Protestant denominations: Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), Methodist (UMC), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Quaker, Unitarian Universalist and the United Church of Christ, and two associate member churches, who combined have 437 congregations across the state with 55,000 parishioners in their care.

As you consider LD 51, 1098 and 1209, it is important for you to know that *none* of our seven denominations opposes a requirement that children be vaccinated in order to attend school. Furthermore, all of our denominations support protecting children and adults from diseases that can spread throughout a community and have the potential to cause extreme illness or even death.

Our member denominations uphold the fundamental religious value of loving neighbor as self. Although we are firm proponents of an individual's right to practice their religion, we do not believe the exercise of religious freedom should be allowed to promote a risk to public health. We are also concerned that parents may use the religious exemption to evade vaccination laws. This is precisely what a law professor at the University of California's Hastings Law School found when she was researching religious exemptions. Dorit Rubinstein Reiss reported in a law journal article in 2014 that parents in numerous posts on anti-vaccination websites openly admitted lying, saying they took the exemption just to get around the law. Here is one example she found: "I filed a religious exemption in Virginia and no one batted an eye or questioned my beliefs. I'm actually an atheist but it's the only exemption option, aside from medical." Prof. Reiss noted that the cases she found reflected only ones that had been publicly posted. "Consider that these are only those who are willing to admit their lies in an open forum on the Internet."

In Vermont, the religious exemption historically hadn't been exercised often, but something interesting happened in 2015 when the philosophic exemption was eliminated. The percentage of students whose parents opted out of having them vaccinated by using the religious exemption jumped from .9 percent to 3.7 percent in one school year.

We are concerned that the health of our state's children, at-risk adults, and indeed all Mainers would be severely jeopardized if the Legislature reverses its decision to eliminate the religious exemption and ignores the overwhelming majority of Mainers who voted to uphold that decision in the people's veto referendum three years ago.

For these reasons, we at the Maine Council of Churches have consistently offered strong public support for removing the religious exemption from Maine's vaccine rules and regulations—both during legislative deliberations and during the public referendum to veto the legislature's decision to remove the religious exemption—and why we now urge you to vote OUGHT NOT TO PASS on LD 51, 1098 and 1209.

Jane Field
Maine Council of Churches
LD 51

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jane Field and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Council of Churches, an ecumenical coalition of seven mainline Protestant denominations: Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), Methodist (UMC), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Quaker, Unitarian Universalist and the United Church of Christ, and two associate member churches, who combined have 437 congregations across the state with 55,000 parishioners in their care.

As you consider LD 51, 1098 and 1209, it is important for you to know that none of our seven denominations opposes a requirement that children be vaccinated in order to attend school. Furthermore, all of our denominations support protecting children and adults from diseases that can spread throughout a community and have the potential to cause extreme illness or even death.

Our member denominations uphold the fundamental religious value of loving neighbor as self. Although we are firm proponents of an individual's right to practice their religion, we do not believe the exercise of religious freedom should be allowed to promote a risk to public health. We are also concerned that parents may use the religious exemption to evade vaccination laws. This is precisely what a law professor at the University of California's Hastings Law School found when she was researching religious exemptions. Dorit Rubinstein Reiss reported in a law journal article in 2014 that parents in numerous posts on anti-vaccination websites openly admitted lying, saying they took the exemption just to get around the law. Here is one example she found: "I filed a religious exemption in Virginia and no one batted an eye or questioned my beliefs. I'm actually an atheist but it's the only exemption option, aside from medical." Prof. Reiss noted that the cases she found reflected only ones that had been publicly posted. "Consider that these are only those who are willing to admit their lies in an open forum on the Internet."

In Vermont, the religious exemption historically hadn't been exercised often, but something interesting happened in 2015 when the philosophic exemption was eliminated. The percentage of students whose parents opted out of having them vaccinated by using the religious exemption jumped from .9 percent to 3.7 percent in one school year.

We are concerned that the health of our state's children, at-risk adults, and indeed all Mainers would be severely jeopardized if the Legislature reverses its decision to eliminate the religious exemption and ignores the overwhelming majority of Mainers who voted to uphold that decision in the people's veto referendum three years ago.

For these reasons, we at the Maine Council of Churches have consistently offered strong public support for removing the religious exemption from Maine's vaccine rules and regulations—both during legislative deliberations and during the public referendum to veto the legislature's decision to remove the religious exemption—and why we now urge you to vote OUGHT NOT TO PASS on LD 51, 1098 and 1209.