

4/3/2023

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

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennen and Esteemed Members of Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Sarah Staffiere, I'm from Waterville, Maine and am here to testify in opposition to LD 51.

In early 2019, I came here to the state house for the first time, compelled to testify in support of a new bill, LD 798. Now here again in 2023, my family still serves as a real example of one of many families who were ignored under the old immunization rules, and who are now strongly protected by LD 798 becoming Public Law 154.

In 2017, after my son Gabe nearly died from a newly diagnosed medical condition, we were attempting to return to our lives and send him back to daycare. When Gabe's doctors communicated how essential vaccination would be for his close contacts--many vaccines don't work for him due to his chronic condition--I approached his daycare about whether his classmates were vaccinated. They told me that some were not vaccinated against childhood illnesses but that the law protected those families' philosophical beliefs to not vaccinate. Confused, I read the law myself. It was clear that at that time, in 2017, personal preference, often led by misguided anti-vaccine rhetoric, was placed ahead of the legitimate health dangers of children like my three year old little boy, who relies on herd immunity to stay safe. It frankly was mind blowing. Where was the protection for the most vulnerable?

The work to pass the new law, and later to defend it, was intense, but science and compassion to protect Maine children was on our side. When Mainers showed up at the polls in March of 2020, we decidedly shut that debate down. 73% of voters said No, we will not allow misinformation about vaccine safety to guide public health. Claims that this resounding victory was only a byproduct of the Presidential primary aren't backed by numbers: 27% of voters who voted No on 1 did not vote in the primary at all. They only showed up to uphold common-sense vaccine law in Maine.

Since it's been enacted, vaccination rates have substantially increased. Before the new law, Gabe's elementary school had kindergarten immunization rates for pertussis, chickenpox, mmr, and polio at an average of 92%, well below the 95% goal for herd immunity . Now in 2023, the four average 96.4% and all are at or above the 95% goal. Plenty of children in this class--10 out of 130-- have secured medical exemptions for specific vaccines, squashing the claim that medical exemptions are impossible to obtain. Gabe is now 9 and one of his biggest risks is contracting bacterial meningitis. He will be entering middle school soon where age-based risk for this infection significantly increases. But schools are much safer for him now: Across Maine the 7th grade immunization rate for meningitis has gone from 89% to nearly 95% in only two years. Amazingly, 12th grade has gone from 82.8% to nearly 93% in that short time alone. Gabe's high school meningitis immunization rate has increased from 91 to 99%. We are so thankful and relieved.

Please continue to protect Maine's children, particularly our most vulnerable--including children like Gabe--by voting down LD 51 and other other bills that serve to undermine our strong common sense vaccine law, PL 154.