



DATE: April 3, 2023
TO: Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations
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RE: ***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 1148, An Act to Prohibit COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates for Students Enrolled in Public Institutions of Learning

LD 1228, An Act to Prohibit Certain Higher Education Institutions from Requiring Vaccines Approved Under Emergency Use Authorization for Admission or Attendance

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Samantha Warren and I am the Director of Government Relations for the University of Maine System (UMS). I write today to inform your consideration of the postsecondary immunization bills before you.

Maine's public universities support immunizations that rigorous research has proven safe and protective of public health, especially given the high risk for transmission of communicable diseases on residential campuses. We also acknowledge that immunization requirements without both exemption processes and resources for education and expanded vaccine access can create barriers for some students to postsecondary education and opportunity for economic and social mobility that we must work together to mitigate.

UMS is helping our students comply with P.L. 2019, Ch. 154 and its accompanying State rules, including by offering immunization at campus health centers (sliding fee scale for those who are un- or under-insured) and connecting our own student electronic health record system with the Maine Immunization Information System.

In March 2020, just one week prior to the Legislature's adjournment due to COVID, UMS encouraged this Committee to support LD 2046, which would have **expanded the State's universal free child vaccination program to the postsecondary students who are held to the same school immunization requirements.** Today, our universities continue to have students who are not up-to-date with current measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria and tetanus vaccination requirements. For example, the University of Maine at Augusta, which enrolls mostly Pell-eligible adult learners and does not have a campus health clinic, reports that their students have difficulty getting copies of their immunization records and/or do not have primary care doctors and thus struggle to get scheduled for immunizations, titers or boosters. **To support all students, we again ask you to consider granting**

in-state postsecondary students access to the same free vaccine program already afforded to those Mainers who are 18 and under.

Regarding our ability to require additional immunizations beyond what is already required by law, **the legislatively confirmed UMS Board of Trustees and the university leaders they designate must maintain their authority to develop and implement policies that are appropriately responsive to emerging and evolving needs in our System and state.**

Informed by an advisory group of world-class university researchers in relevant fields like virology and epidemiology, in 2021 UMS announced that it would require students to receive an FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccination to participate in on-campus academic and activities. To support this pandemic policy, UMS provided medical and religious exemptions, education, access to free immunization including through on-campus clinics, and incentives for compliance including release from regular COVID testing. We also implemented other proven risk mitigation practices like wastewater testing.

UMS policies and the inclusive science-based process that informed them were lauded nationally as a model and embraced by the local communities where our campuses are located. Most importantly, **students and families responded positively to the requirement and the promise it provided of safer in-person learning, and the prevalence of COVID on our campuses remained well below the state's low rates.** UMS bucked national trends with enrollment from the pre-pandemic fall 2019 to the fall 2021 declining by just 1.1%, compared to a 6.6% drop nationally, and we actually experienced a 3.4% enrollment increase among students from out-of-state from fall 2019 to fall 2021.

*"I came back to Farmington this year because **the university is so committed to the safety and success of its students,**"* noted one University of Maine at Farmington student from Connecticut at the time. *"If there is anywhere in the country where students can count on a traditional campus experience next fall, it is going to be at our universities in Maine."*

Prior to UMS evolving its COVID immunization requirement to a recommendation in March 2023, the rate of compliance was 98%. Over the course of the pandemic, more than 900 students requested and were granted medical or religious exemptions, though we recognize some prospective students may not have enrolled or enrolled entirely in online courses due to the prior mandate.

Our System must always err on the side of protection of our campus and community members. To the extent allowable by law, we will continue to adhere to State and federal law and rules, and adapt university health policy based on guidance from civil authorities and public health experts, peer-reviewed science, localized data, and the best interest of our students, employees and Maine citizens.

Thank you for your support of Maine's public universities and our students. Please let me know if I can provide additional information in advance of your work session.