

Kaylee Knudsen  
Topsham  
LD 174

Testimony in Support of An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements

April 7, 2025

Subject: Support for An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements

Dear Honorable Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements. This critical piece of legislation is essential to preserving the fundamental right of individuals to make decisions regarding their health in accordance with their deeply held religious beliefs.

Immunization may be an important aspect of public health, but it is equally important to recognize and protect the constitutional right of individuals to practice their religion freely. There is certainly more than one way to keep ourselves healthy, with immunizations being just one way, but not the only way. Throughout history, our nation has been founded on principles that safeguard religious liberty, ensuring that individuals are not coerced into actions that conflict with their faith.

Religious exemptions to vaccination requirements provide a necessary balance between public health and religious freedom. While I fully acknowledge the importance of vaccinations in preventing the spread of disease, it is equally important to protect individuals' rights to opt out of vaccinations based on sincere religious convictions. For many people of faith, the decision to not vaccinate may be guided by a deeply held belief in the sanctity of the body, or concerns about the ethical implications of certain vaccine ingredients.

The restoration of religious exemptions would ensure that individuals who are morally or religiously opposed to vaccinations are not penalized or forced into a position where they must choose between their faith and their rights as citizens. These exemptions are not a threat to public health when the broader community remains vigilant in its approach to ensuring herd immunity and when individuals who may have valid religious concerns are treated with dignity and respect.

Moreover, denying religious exemptions creates an undue burden on individuals and families who already face significant challenges in adhering to their religious practices in a modern, pluralistic society. It is crucial that we uphold religious freedom and provide people with the autonomy to make decisions that align with their moral and spiritual convictions.

As a School Nurse, I have seen the impact LD 798 has had on families who respectfully choose not to vaccinate their child. They are barred from access to public schools, while statistics for immunized enrolled students are falsified. We do not have more vaccinated children in Maine, we have simply not allowed families to enroll children who are not immunized. This has also created a barrier between schools and families in Maine, as prior to LD 798, Maine was already statistically high in immunized students, rendering this law to be ineffective and harmful to the holistic needs of Maine children as their access to public school services have been withheld. It has negatively impacted my relationships with families and students, as their constitutional right to choose what is best for their children has been stripped away. Per LD 798, Children and families who hold sincere religious or philosophical beliefs against vaccinations are not allowed to attend school and form relationships with peers, play sports with friends, and may experience judgement from others about their personal decision.

During my tenure in nursing school, we are taught to always respect cultural and religious practices with our patients, even if they differ from our own beliefs. The same respect needs to be upheld for our students and their families. We give respect

to the patient who identifies as a Jehovah's Witness and refuses a lifesaving blood transfusion, the patient or student practicing Ramadan with a headache and feeling unwell and has not had anything to eat or drink for hours, the patient who would rather use alternative therapies to treat their ailment; We, as medical providers, lose rapport and trust with our patients when we make decisions for them, not with them.

I respectfully urge you to support the passage of LD 174, An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements. This legislation is vital in preserving the rights of religious individuals and ensuring that public health policies do not infringe upon fundamental freedoms.

Thank you for considering my testimony in support of this important bill.

Sincerely,

Kaylee Knudsen, MSN, RN, NCSN