

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Susan Wiswell. I am from Kittery, and I am here to speak in favor of LD51.

Restoring religious and philosophical exemptions to immunization requirements will correct an egregious wrong caused by the enactment of LD798. The free exercise clause of the first amendment to the US Constitution and Article I Section 3 of Maine's Constitution acknowledge the natural and inalienable right of all individuals to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences. "All individuals" includes school children, their parents, and employees of nursery schools and health care facilities, whose rights have been violated by LD798, and more recently by the state's response to COVID-19.

I cannot speak for all religious traditions, but as a Christian, I believe that my body is the temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19-20). I would not pollute my church with pagan idols; neither would I pollute my body or those of my children with known toxins. I trust the Great Physician, Jesus Christ, with my health, not the government. Even people with a more secular mindset may have a strong philosophical aversion to being injected with harmful substances.

The enactment of LD798, along with the state's COVID response, led me to retire from the nursing profession earlier than I had planned. Some of my children were forced to take the COVID injection in order to keep their jobs, and one had an adverse reaction, as did many others of my acquaintance. Many of my colleagues either resigned, retired, left Maine, or left the profession to avoid being forced to take the injection, leading to a worsening staff shortage, jeopardizing patient safety, and necessitating the expenditure of large sums of our tax dollars to bring in travel nurses and National Guard members to cover shifts. Not everyone has the luxury of retiring as I did. I turned 65 early in the shutdown. Not all families can afford to homeschool or to send their children to school outside Maine. Many families require more than one income just to get by. Their children lost valuable educational time during a shutdown for a disease that has minimal effect on children, and now they are being threatened with expulsion from school if not "fully vaccinated."

The reworked version of LD798 was supposed to expand the right of doctors to grant medical exemptions for their patients, then the Attorney General added the words "Maine licensed" after the bill was signed, preventing out of state doctors from granting exemptions. Many residents of Western Maine receive their medical care in New Hampshire. Some schools refuse to honor legitimate medical exemptions and expel children for not being "fully vaccinated," whereas others, including certain private schools, are not required to enforce the law. The Department of Education reinterpreted the chapter on titers to deny exemptions to students with full immunity, and the chapter on IEPs to deny ongoing exemptions to those supposedly grandfathered. Such disingenuous behavior on the part of government and the education system has violated any trust the public once placed in them.

The Commissioner of Education and Director of Maine CDC are tasked with issuing "rules specifying those diseases for which immunization is required." The current list does not include flu and COVID injections, but nothing in this law would prevent them from adding these or other injections to the list. Their draconian response to COVID and the addition of many required injections over the years do not engender public trust in these agencies.

I urge you to restore the religious and philosophical exemptions to mandatory vaccination and to vote that LD51 "ought to pass."