

Janet T. Mills
Governor

Sara Gagné-Holmes
Commissioner



Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
11 State House Station
286 Water Street
Augusta, Maine 04333-0011
Tel; (207) 287-8016; Fax (207) 287-2887
TTY: Dial 711 (Maine Relay)

Testimony of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

In opposition to LD 174, *An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements*

Sponsor: Representative Drinkwater
Hearing Date: April 7, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Jessica Shiminiski, and I serve as the Program Director for the Immunization Program of the Maine Center for Disease Control (Maine CDC) in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. I am here today to testify in opposition to LD 174, *An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements*.

LD 174 reinstates exemptions from immunization requirements based on a sincere religious belief for students in elementary, secondary and postsecondary schools and employees of nursery schools. It also provides the same exemption to health care practitioners. Religious exemptions for students in elementary, secondary and postsecondary schools, employees of nursery schools, and certain healthcare facilities were removed through Public Law 2019 chapter 154.

Since *non-medical exemptions* were repealed effectively on September 1, 2021, Maine has seen significant improvements in immunization rates, as shown in data from the Immunization Program's Annual School Immunization Assessment Survey. These increases demonstrate the effectiveness of Maine's current immunization laws in protecting public health. For example, a comparison of statewide kindergarten rates from 2019-2020 to 2023-2024 school years shows the following:

- MMR rates increased from 94.1% to 97.4%.
- DTaP increased from 94.1% to 96.9%.
- Polio increased from 94.2% to 97.4%.

Additionally, non-medical exemptions decreased from 5.6% to 0.1% while medical exemptions remained steady, disproving the argument that medical exemptions are difficult to obtain in the State of Maine. Prior to September 1, 2021, most of Maine's school-age exemptions were for non-medical reasons. Reinstating religious exemptions could lead to an increase in individuals opting out of vaccinations, potentially reducing statewide vaccination rates.

Protecting individuals and communities from communicable diseases such as measles, mumps and pertussis remains a fundamental purpose of Maine CDC's disease prevention mission. By maintaining strict immunization requirements, Maine continues to reduce the risk of outbreaks of

serious diseases. Reinstating religious exemptions will reverse the progress Maine has made in protecting its communities, especially the most vulnerable among us. Evidence clearly shows that states with tighter exemption laws have higher immunization rates and fewer outbreaks.

The scientific evidence supporting immunization is sound and is supported by the professional medical community. The evidence overwhelmingly supports the importance of maintaining Maine's current immunization requirements to ensure the safety and health of all Mainers. The Maine CDC strongly opposes the passage of LD 174 for the reasons stated.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have and to make myself available for questions at the work session.