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Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Deborah Hagler, MD, MPH and I am a pediatrician and past president of the Maine AAP and resident of Brunswick. I am testifying against LD 51, "An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements."

Have you ever seen a 4- or 5-year-old with croup? They wake up in the middle of the night, feverish bug eyed and frightened, making a horrible harsh sound as they try to gasp for air. They are panicky, and their parents are panicky. Thanks to widespread uptake of vaccines against Diphtheria and Hemophilus Influenzae, there are tricks of the trade to help families manage so they can make a trip into the provider office in the morning, instead of racing to the emergency room.

This was not always the case - 100 years ago in the United States, before we had the Diphtheria vaccine, about 1 in 5 people died from diphtheria infections, and this included the adult caregivers. Diphtheria essentially has vanished in the United States due to vaccination, but globally this illness has not gone away and there are still outbreaks of this deadly illness.

Hemophilus Influenzae type B can present as a deadly illness that looks like croup, and can also cause meningitis - a deadly infection of the brain in infants and young children.

I began my career as the Hib vaccine, first licensed in 1985, was increasing uptake in the population. I saw far fewer patients with this deadly illness, but still cared for a few with infections of their brains, and one that had a presentation like croup and was exceptionally ill requiring a breathing tube and a prolonged stay in the pediatric intensive care unit.

I have seen children die from chicken pox and meningococcal meningitis during my career and have seen children endure severe complications from measles.

We have vaccines to prevent these deadly illnesses. They are safe and effective. They prevent outbreaks of mumps, measles and chickenpox and allow children to remain in school. Following the COVID outbreak, I believe we understand just how critical it is for kids to stay in school as we've seen such an escalation of mental health issues in youth being kept from typical interaction with peers and the learning environment. For those not able to receive vaccines for medical reasons, there are exemptions available from physicians and nurse practitioners.

Vaccines not only protect children, but they protect the wider community, and our immunocompromised children have a right to be in school and be protected.

Our state has decided by referendum, and all major religions have also concluded that we have a duty not only to protect our children, but to protect the community and the most vulnerable amongst us.

Please do not pass LD 51 and the fleet of similar legislation reinstating religious and philosophical exemptions to vaccines.