

## **Testimony Submitted to the Legislature Concerning**

### **HB 6949 AN ACT CONCERNING CHILDHOOD VACCINATIONS.**

**March 18, 2015**

**I am submitting this testimony as the Chair of the Connecticut Vaccine Advisory Council – an entity created by the State of Connecticut to provide recommendations to the Department of Public Health’s Vaccine Program.**

**At our most recent meeting on March 11<sup>th</sup> we took up the matter of proposals to strengthen the requirements for exemptions for children to receive immunizations prior to entering school and daycare settings. As you are aware, this matter has taken on added urgency in light of the increasing number of vaccine preventable illnesses across this country in recent years. The current outbreak of measles that started in Disney Land is but one of many such illnesses that have affected thousands of people and represent an overall decline in the percentage of children who are immunized. Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is another recent example of a life-threatening illness that we had virtually eliminated from this country, but have now seen cases rise over 20-fold to levels we have not seen in 60 years.**

**Immunizations have been universally recognized as one of the most important public health achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, measles vaccine alone is credited with saving over 15 million lives world-wide since 2000. As was the case with smallpox – a disease arguably the cause of more infectious deaths than any in human history - we have the capability to permanently eradicate diseases such as polio and measles and thus remove these scourges forever from the face of the earth. But for this to happen, we must insure that we achieve and maintain high levels of vaccination across all populations until the diseases are truly extinct – a goal that we had hoped, until recently, was within our reach in this decade.**

**In my lifetime I have seen people with faces scarred by smallpox, limbs withered from polio, eyes blinded from measles and hearing lost from haemophilus influenza meningitis, and I have seen children die of diphtheria and pertussis, of**

tetanus and pneumococcus. But it has been over two decades since I have last seen a case of one of these diseases and for this we owe thanks to vaccines capable of preventing these tragedies from ever happening again.

But we have been the victims of our own success, for how can we appreciate how devastating and how frequently children were stricken when so few people alive today can recall such times as those I have recounted. Such times as those depicted in the picture I've provided to you of a group of physicians' children – including myself and my two siblings - taken in the early 1960's as we all received the then new Sabin vaccine to prevent polio – a disease that terrified parents across this nation with images of children dying and whole wards of others paralyzed and struggling to survive in iron lungs.



But while it is understandable that our sense of risk has been distorted by our seeming distance from these problems, as these new outbreaks of measles and pertussis demonstrate, we have only to let our vigilance down and they will come roaring back with a vengeance. And I am sure there is not a parent today that would want to see their child struck down with an illness that could have been so easily prevented.

It is for this reason that the Children's Vaccine Advisory Council passed a motion calling for Connecticut to recognize only medical exemptions to the

immunization mandates for school and daycare, a position that also has been advocated for by the Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. While our preferred stance does not recognize a religious exemption, we are respectful of the fact that some families may harbor genuine religious objections to the concept of immunizations. So, as a compromise position, the Council's motion also stated that if a religious exemption was to be preserved, it must be strengthened so as to require that those who seek to invoke it are practicing members of an organized faith that actually believes in proscribing immunizations, that the tenets of this faith extend to all immunizations and that they be required to have a leader of that faith attest to the existence of these tenets and the participation in this faith by those seeking the exemption. We believe that only by setting a high bar can this exemption deter those who seek to mask personally held beliefs as religious ones and thus undermine the goal of the population-based immunity that is critical to our efforts to succeed in controlling these preventable diseases.

With regard to the language now being considered, we do not believe that merely having a family be required to review materials about the importance of immunizations will be effective. In fact recent evidence suggests that such a requirement may actually increase parental resistance. While it might be better to require the receipt of counseling from a primary care provider, we do not believe that this has been shown to be effective enough to curb the rising number of non-medical exemptions.

It is essential for everyone to recognize that by asking someone to immunize their own child, we are also asking them to protect other children who medically may not be able to receive such vaccines, who may not have had the vaccine effectively protect them, or who may still be too young to have received such vaccines. We are asking parents to realize that we all have a societal responsibility to protect others around us, especially those most vulnerable who cannot protect themselves. So I am submitting this testimony today to ask this legislature to strengthen the laws governing exemptions in the ways I have outlined because as the representatives of our society, you have the ultimate responsibility to establish the expectations for our duties to one another.

I greatly appreciate your taking up this matter and would be happy to answer any questions. My email is [supdegrove@yahoo.com](mailto:supdegrove@yahoo.com). Specific examples of the

kind of stronger language others have suggested or utilized have been added to the end of my written testimony - the more explicit and comprehensive, the better to our minds.

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**From the CCMC Religious Exemption Form:**

If you believe that you have a religious reason that exempts you from receiving the influenza vaccine, you must submit a completed **Influenza Vaccine Religious Exemption Request Form** by **October 1, 2014**. Your completed Exemption Request Form must include a written explanation of the religious reason from the leadership of your house of worship. Such communication must be on official letterhead from your house of worship.

**From a New Jersey Senate Panel Proposal:**

A parent's notarized letter must explain "the nature of the person's religious tenet or practice that is implicated by the vaccination and how the administration of the vaccine would violate, contradict or otherwise be inconsistent with that tenet or practice." The statement also must show the tenet "is consistently held by the person," and is not merely "an expression of that person's political, sociological, philosophical or moral views, or concerns related to the safety or efficacy of the vaccination."