

Good Afternoon Senator Gerratana, Representative Ritter and Esteemed Members of the Public Health Committee -

As a concerned mother of two young children and public health advocate, I am writing today in strong support of Connecticut HB 6949 – An Act Concerning Childhood Vaccinations. According to a recent report of vaccine exemptions for Connecticut school children, religious exemptions for vaccination in Connecticut have steadily increased from around 300 in 2003 to over 1000 in 2014. As an active member of many online parenting groups, I believe that this steady increase can be directly correlated to the plethora of misinformation being published on the internet regarding vaccination, which began with a now retracted and debunked study linking vaccines to autism. Currently, religious exemption in Connecticut only requires that parents simply select a statement that vaccination would be contrary to the religious beliefs of the child. HB 6949 is a sensible approach to address possible abuse of religious exemptions, which are most likely disguised as parents clinging tightly to a belief that has no medical or scientific merit. HB 6949 would not take away the choice of these parents not to vaccinate, rather, it would ensure that the parent has been through the proper avenues to claim a true religious exemption required for school entry. It would also ensure that these parents have been adequately educated on the risks of refusing vaccination.

Along with those 1000 religious exemptions filed in 2014 there were over 200 medical exemptions, which means that there are currently over 200 Connecticut school children who have a doctor certified, medically legitimate reason for not vaccinating. These children depend on their classmates to be vaccinated to decrease the likelihood that they will contract a vaccine preventable disease, which could be deadly for them. If parents want to reap the benefits of living in society by having their children attend Connecticut schools, they should also be required to contribute to those benefits by having their children vaccinated if there are no medical contraindications. The overall immunization rate of Connecticut schools is high at over 98%, however, I firmly believe that we will see this rate decrease if this lax approach to vaccine exemption continues. We are already seeing resurgences of diseases that were once considered eliminated, such as measles, and a recent study indicates that this resurgence can be directly linked to individuals who purposely choose not to vaccinate (<http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=2203906>). More needs to be done at the state level to preserve and even improve our high immunization rates, and the passing of HB 6949 would ensure that our immunization rates stay high.

While anti-vaccine proponents are loud, I can assure you that they are the minority. According to a Reuters/Ipsos survey of 6,012 adults from Feb. 3-23, 78 percent said "all children should be vaccinated unless there is a direct health risk to them from vaccination," while 13 percent said they oppose vaccines. A CNN poll showed similar results. Still, we are seeing resurgence of once eliminated diseases due to a very loud minority. Public health advocates like myself try desperately to correct the myriad of misinformation presented online surrounding this issue, but we also need laws in place to help contribute to these efforts. HB 6949 is a small but important step in speaking up for the greatest achievement in public health to date.

Thank you so much for your time.

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