

7 Feb 2019

Dear Esteemed Members of the Committee on Children:

I am witting to express my opposition to H.B. No. 7005 (RAISED) AN ACT PROHIBITING THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF PARENTAL STATEMENTS CONCERNING RELIGIOUS OBJECTIONS TO VACCINATION BY SCHOOL NURSES AND PERMITTING MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY TO ACKNOWLEDGE SUCH STATEMENTS.

This bill, as proposed, would remove the school nurse from the list of people able to acknowledge the religious exemption from mandatory school vaccines and add clergy instead. The role of the person acknowledging the exemption is to confirm the identity of the person signing the form. It is not for the person acknowledging it to agree or disagree with what they are signing or to verify the religious objection to vaccination. While this is in regards to an exemption based off of religious beliefs, this is still a medical form and contains information regarding a child's vaccination status.

In this respect, the school nurse as an option protects the privacy of the child and exposes sensitive health information to least amount of people since the religious exemption gets filed with them at school. The school nurse was added in 2015 for this very reason.

Rep. Liz Linehan has said that some school nurses don't feel comfortable signing the religious exemption, which is why she is recommending that option to be removed. I feel that with proper education on what exactly an acknowledgment means, there shouldn't be any discomfort. Again, the nurse is not agreeing or disagreeing with the religious objection. They are only confirming the identity of the person signing.

In addition to removing the school nurse, the proposed bill would add the option to have clergy acknowledge the religious exemption. I oppose this addition on the grounds that this is not only unconstitutional, but also directly discriminates against religions that do not have clergy. Not only does this reveal private health information to someone who, frankly, has no need to know and has no legal repercussion from sharing this privileged information, but it also encourages citizens to disclose their religion. This is not separation of church and state.

Our country was built on freedom of religion to the point the very First Amendment to our Constitution allows individual citizens freedom from governmental interference in both private and public religious affairs. This was later incorporated at the state level in the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This also infringes on the Fourth Amendment, which protects the rights of people to be secure in their persons. This proposed bill disregards these constitutional rights.

In 2017, during the public hearing for proposed HB 7059 AN ACT CONCERNING IMMUNIZATION EDUCATION, Rep. Linehan stated that she was concerned about the potential misuse of the religious exemption and would like to add an informational session to educate parents on the science of vaccinations. When opponents of this bill gave their testimony saying this was trying to influence parents to turn away from their religious beliefs, Rep. Linehan suggested that the bill could be amended to add clergy and remove school nurses as an option for acknowledgement instead of the informational session, as this would help separate what might be a religious objection from a philosophical objection. When concerns were voiced about not all religions having clergy, Rep. Linehan said that would be considered a philosophical objection. This is evidence that the goal of removing the most convenient and secure signature, the school nurse, and adding clergy is to try to validate or qualify the religious beliefs of parents using the religious exemption.

There is truthfully no way to verify what anyone's beliefs are other than for them to say, "this is against my beliefs." This is exactly what the exemption does as it currently stands. When trying to explain what I mean, Thomas Jefferson's words came to mind, "We hold theses truths to be self evident." There shouldn't be any government expectation to authenticate a person's religious beliefs.

If the concern is that people are incorrectly using a religious exemption, then the short answer is to also allow a personal belief or philosophical exemption. This option gives parents an opportunity to object to mandatory vaccination based on reasons other than religion. Seventeen other states have this type of exemption in addition to religious exemptions.

That public hearing made it clear, it's not about the religious exemption being used improperly, but about lowering the number of people using the exemption. What is the states interest in changing the religious exemption? Why now? There isn't any compelling evidence that shows there is any reason to change this now. Statistically, there just is not a large portion of the population even using a religious exemption to indicate any type of misuse. There are only 1255 religious exemptions, or 1.5% of all kindergarten and seventh graders, being used in the state for 2017-2018 school year according to the Department of Public Health and Connecticut already has one of the highest vaccination rates in the country.

In addition, the testimony provided by the CT Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, gives me concerns the true intention of this bill is to completely eliminate the religious exemption and as the AAP has a vested monetary interest in increasing vaccination rates, I believe their testimony should not be considered.

Regards,  
Jessica Y.  
41<sup>st</sup> District