

Testimony in SUPPORT of
HB 5044: An Act Concerning Immunizations

Representative Jonathan Steinberg, Senator Mary Abrams and Members of the Public Health Committee,

I am writing in support of HB 5044, which will eliminate all non-medical vaccine exemptions for school entry. As an aunt to eight and parent of two children here in Connecticut, I am gravely concerned about the increased rate of exemptions here in our state. I have served as the Executive Director of Vaccinate Your Family since 1996, beginning my career in Washington, D.C. and relocating to CT in 2005 to raise my family.

The founders of our organization, Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter and Betty Bumpers, former First Lady of Arkansas, worked diligently alongside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the 1970s to protect the children of their own home states of Georgia and Arkansas. During the Carter Administration, Mrs. Bumpers and Mrs. Carter encouraged national efforts to improve access to immunizations and **to encourage state legislators to pass laws requiring proof of immunization for school entry, the one place where all children could be accounted for and protected.** These efforts took place during a time when outbreaks of measles were ravaging the country and children were dying from diseases such as whooping cough (also known as pertussis), mumps, diphtheria and more.

In 1991, Betty and Rosalynn founded our organization on the heels of a measles outbreak that infected over 50,000 people taking the lives of too many children. Sadly, now thirty years later we are seeing diseases return. Nearly 20 years after the U.S. eliminate measles, our country nearly lost its elimination status. Across 31 states including Connecticut, the CDC confirmed 1,282 cases of measles - the highest number of cases in any year since 1992. Of these individuals with measles, 128 people were hospitalized and 61 had serious complications, including pneumonia and encephalitis. The fact that the majority of people in the U.S. are vaccinated against measles is the only thing that prevents these clusters of measles cases from becoming even more serious epidemics.

Beyond measles, outbreaks of hepatitis A continue to occur throughout the country, with 29,804 cases, 18,143 hospitalizations and 302 deaths reported by states between 2016 and January 2020. Cases of mumps, pertussis (also known as whooping cough) and hepatitis B continue to occur as well. Each year, HPV causes approximately 35,000 cancers in the U.S. including about 10,900 cases of cervical cancer. HPV vaccination could prevent 90% of these cancers from ever developing. Flu has taken the lives of 92 children thus far this season.

While these numbers are startling, it is the real-life victims of these diseases that leave a lasting impact on our lives. Many families come to Vaccinate Your Family after losing their loved ones of all ages, hoping to help others avoid the same tragedy. It is their amazing strength and concern for others that motivates us to pursue the mission of our organization and strive for a world where families are not forced to grieve the loss of loved ones due to preventable diseases.

Our families in Connecticut are being targeted by a concerted campaign to spread doubt about the life-saving necessity for vaccines and, as a result, many schools are now at risk of outbreaks.

Community immunity is essential to keeping diseases from spreading like wildfire among our communities and yet most parents believe that their fully vaccinated children are not at risk. Diseases such as measles can easily spread if a community/school falls below the herd immunity level.

There are 134 Connecticut schools where the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination rate for kindergarten students falls below the 95% needed to ensure community immunity. The data shows a 31.1% increase in the number of schools that fell below the 95%, and 41 schools have MMR rates below 90%. There has been a 25% increase in religious vaccine exemptions in the past two years. Because vaccines are effective, many parents no longer understand the seriousness of these diseases.

Two issues will be raised by those who oppose vaccines here in CT, religious freedoms and civil liberties. The first claim, that vaccination is in opposition to religious teachings, is baseless as all major organized religions support vaccination including Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Catholic and other faiths. The second claim that the removal of exemptions threatens the civil rights of Connecticut's residents is not valid. Vaccinate Your Family supports that removal of religious exemptions does not single out any particular religion, protects the civil rights of families who choose to vaccinate their children but rely on community immunity and agrees with Attorney General Tong's opinion that "There is no serious or reasonable dispute as to the State's broad authority to require and regulate immunizations for children: the law is clear that the State of Connecticut may create, eliminate or suspend the religious exemption in Section 10-204a(a) in accordance with its well-settled power to protect public health and safety."

Our children, including both healthy and medically compromised children, have the right to attend our schools without fear that those around them are leaving them at risk. This is about supporting good public health policy and protecting our children. HB – 5044 is an important step in helping parents understand the importance of vaccinating their children on time and will protect children. Both my organization and my family supports the removal on non-medical exemptions wholeheartedly.

Sincerely,

Amy A. Pisani

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Executive Director

Vaccinate Your Family

Resident, New London County, CT

