



**County
Health Officials
of New York**
Leading the way to healthier communities

OPPOSES

S.3424-A (Martinez)

AN ACT to amend the education law, in relation to providing a statewide, uniform religious belief exemption form to be available in all schools

The New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO) **strongly opposes** the above-referenced legislative proposal that would weaken current statutory and regulatory requirements for religious exemptions to immunizations. The bill would allow individuals to simply complete and submit a form citing a “religious objection” to immunizations as an acceptable reason for non-compliance with the law, with no further review or action allowed on the part of school officials. This bill, if enacted, could significantly lower the levels of immunization and put children at risk of death or serious illness and longer-term negative health effects.

Vaccines are responsible for the control of many infectious diseases that were once common in this country. Vaccines have reduced, and in some cases, eliminated, many diseases that routinely killed or harmed infants, children and adults. The viruses and bacteria that cause vaccine-preventable diseases still exist and can be transmitted to people who are not protected by vaccines.

New York State is experiencing firsthand the health risks created by allowing broad religious exemptions to immunization requirements. Currently, Rockland County, NY and New York City are combatting significant measles outbreaks. These outbreaks, which started in the Fall of 2018, have resulted in illness and hospitalizations, as well as lost days of school and work due to the need to halt transmission of disease among unvaccinated individuals. The outbreaks occurred in communities with higher rates of religious exemptions. A 2013 outbreak in the Bronx in a religious community cost the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene close to \$400,000, with health department staff spending over 10,000 hours in working to stop the spread of the disease. Additional costs to health care providers, and individuals due to treatment and lost workdays were also incurred.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends an immunization rate of 95% in order to maintain herd immunity, but according to 2017-2018 New York state data, 467 public and private schools in New York had immunization rates below 85%. This included 323 schools below 70%, most of which were private schools. 88% of private schools reported immunization rates of 85% or less, including 311 private schools with rates of less than 70%.

Before polio vaccine, 13,000 to 20,000 cases of paralytic polio were reported **each** year in the United States. If measles vaccinations stopped, projections for measles related deaths would be 2.7 million worldwide. Hib meningitis killed 600 children annually and left many survivors with deafness, seizures or mental retardation. In 2008, there were four cases in New York State, two of which were

fatal; in all four cases, the child was unvaccinated. Hib was also responsible for the death of five children across the US in 2009, and again, each of the five children were unvaccinated. Before pertussis vaccine, nearly all children developed whooping cough, with up to 9,000 related deaths annually. Pertussis outbreaks still occur. Several studies have shown a strong association between vaccine refusal by parents and incidence of pertussis in unvaccinated children, with the risk of contracting the disease two-three times greater for those children. If we stopped rubella vaccine, pregnant women would be highly susceptible to infection of their fetuses, resulting in children born with heart defects, cataracts and deafness. These are just a few examples of the negative impact of lowering immunization rates. There is a wealth of evidence showing that under and unimmunized children are both at risk of death or serious illness themselves **and** put others at risk.

The continued prevalence and promotion of misinformation regarding vaccine safety unfortunately can lead parents to seek ways around New York's strong immunization laws. Increased incidence of disease has led a number of states to limit exemption laws. New York State already has a well thought out and rigorous regulatory process in place to address requests for religious exemptions, and this law would weaken that process and open the door to allowing philosophical exemptions under the guise of a sincere religious belief.

Vaccines are one of the greatest public health successes of the 20th century and immunizing our children is of the highest public health priority. Any legislation that will further impede immunization success puts our children at risk for severe illness and death. This bill is not in the best interests of the health of all New Yorkers and we urge legislators to oppose this bill.

Contact: Sarah Ravenhall, Executive Director, sarah@nysacho.org