

Washington state panel mulls bill to trim vaccine exemptions

17 February 2015, by Rachel La Corte



Sonja Wright, left, of Ellensburg, Wash., holds her daughter Iris, 4 months, as she waits to testify against House Bill 2009 during a hearing at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015. The bill would remove personal or philosophical opposition as an acceptable reason for parents to not vaccinate their school-age children. Currently, Washington allows school vaccination exemptions for medical, religious and personal or philosophical beliefs. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Personal or philosophical opposition to vaccines would not be an authorized exemption for the parents of school-age children under a measure that received a public hearing before a House committee on Tuesday, drawing at least two dozen opponents to the proposed change.

Rep. June Robinson, a Democrat from Everett and member of the House Health Care & Wellness Committee that heard her bill, said she introduced the bill in response to the current measles outbreak that has sickened more than 100 people across the U.S., including in Washington state, and in Mexico. No deaths have been reported.

"These are diseases that were eradicated and now

are coming back largely due to the fact that many people are choosing to not immunize their children," Robinson said at the start of the hearing. "I am introducing this bill to protect the health and safety of our kids and our communities."

Currently, Washington allows school-vaccination exemptions for children at public or private schools or licensed day care centers based on medical, religious and personal or philosophical beliefs. House Bill 2009 removes the personal or philosophical belief allowance for an exemption. The measure has the support of the Washington State Medical Association and Gov. Jay Inslee.

Washington's legislature is among several state legislatures that are debating vaccine-related measures as dozens of people have fallen ill from a measles outbreak that started at Disneyland in December and spread beyond the theme park. In Maine, a bill introduced by a Democratic lawmaker would eliminate the philosophical exemption that allows parents to skip vaccinations for their children. A separate proposal backed by Democrats aims to make getting exemptions more difficult. In California, three lawmakers, all Democrats, introduced legislation earlier this month that would require parents to vaccinate their children before they enter school unless the child cannot be immunized because of a medical condition. Parents would no longer be able to cite personal beliefs or religious reasons to send unvaccinated children to private and public schools. In Michigan, a statewide rule change that took effect Jan. 1 requires parents wanting a philosophical or religious waiver for childhood vaccinations to first be educated by a local health department about the risks.



Rep. June Robinson, D-Everett, speaks about her sponsorship of House Bill 2009 during a hearing at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., on Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015. The bill would remove personal or philosophical opposition as an acceptable reason for parents to not vaccinate their school-age children. Currently, Washington allows school vaccination exemptions for medical, religious and personal or philosophical beliefs. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)



Christine Hartman, left, of Arlington, Wash., waits outside a House hearing room with her daughter Natalie, 12, during a hearing for House Bill 2009 at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015. Hartman believes her daughter, who is developmentally delayed and faces multiple health challenges, was adversely affected by vaccines the child received as a baby, and was waiting to testify against the bill, which would remove personal or philosophical opposition as an acceptable reason for parents to not vaccinate their school-age children. Currently, Washington allows school vaccination exemptions for medical, religious and personal or philosophical beliefs. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

At the committee hearing in Washington state on Tuesday, former Secretary of State Ralph Munro was among several who testified in support of the bill, and he noted work he has done with the Rotary Clubs of America to vaccinate children in east Africa to eradicate polio. He said the danger of diseases like polio reemerging in the U.S. is a real threat.

"The danger is real," he said. "Every unvaccinated child is a health risk to our community."

Those opposed to the bill cited the rights of parents to make decisions for their children as well as concerns about the safety of vaccines themselves.

"I think we all agree that we want to make choices that will keep our kids safe and healthy," Marisa Delisle of Edmonds told the committee. "The issue before us today is about personal freedom."

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Washington is among 20 states that allow for personal-belief exemptions and 48 that allow for religious exemptions. National immunization data from 2013 shows 71 percent of Washington children between ages 19-35 months have received all of their shots on time. According to the state Department of Health 4.6 percent of all children in the state haven't received vaccinations under one of the three current exemptions; committee staff at the hearing said that 3.6 percent of that number were exemptions issued for either personal or religious reasons.

Dr. Beth Harvey, a pediatrician in Olympia, noted that there are schools in Thurston County where the number of children who haven't been vaccinated against measles runs higher than 30 percent. For measles, a 95 percent vaccination rate is needed for so-called "herd immunization," which means enough people are vaccinated to prevent the disease from spreading, she said.



Grant Keller, right, and his wife Charis, center, of Spokane, Wash., sit with their daughter Aille, 5 months, as they wait to testify against House Bill 2009 during a hearing at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015. The bill would remove personal or philosophical opposition as an acceptable reason for parents to not vaccinate their school-age children. Currently, Washington allows school vaccination exemptions for medical, religious and personal or philosophical beliefs. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Grant Keller of Spokane told lawmakers that he is the father of five children who are home-schooled. He said that while the proposed law would not affect his family now, the bill "represents a threat to our autonomy as parents, if not immediately, then soon."

The state law concerning exemptions was last changed in 2011 to require proof that a parent seeking an exemption had received information from a health-care provider about the benefits and risks of vaccinations. People who can demonstrate membership in a religious group that does not believe in medical treatment are exempted from this requirement.



Ralph Munro, former Washington Secretary of State, wears a Rotary International vest that reads "End Polio Now" after he testified in favor of House Bill 2009 during a hearing at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015. The bill would remove personal or philosophical opposition as an acceptable reason for parents to not vaccinate their school-age children. Currently, Washington allows school vaccination exemptions for medical, religious and personal or philosophical beliefs. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)



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APA citation: Washington state panel mulls bill to trim vaccine exemptions (2015, February 17) retrieved 19 June 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-02-washington-state-panel-mulls-bill.html>

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