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LEGISLATORS CALL FOR ENDING NON-MEDICAL EXEMPTIONS TO SCHOOL VACCINE REQUIREMENTS

New York State has over 400 confirmed cases of measles in an ongoing outbreak, heavily concentrated in communities which have below average vaccination rates.

**For Immediate Release
April 4, 2019**

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NEW YORK, NY – State and city legislators gathered along with medical professionals and other vaccination proponents on Thursday afternoon, with the unified goal of expanding vaccination efforts and reducing the number of people who choose to not vaccinate for non-medical reasons. Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz (D-Bronx), State Senator Brad Hoylman (D-

Manhattan), and Council Member and Health Committee Chair Mark Levine (D-Manhattan) organized the rally, which was directly inspired by a rapid rise in measles infections over the past several months.

Assemblyman Dinowitz and State Senator Hoylman currently have legislation which would eliminate non-medical exemptions to school vaccine requirements in New York State. Current New York law exempts “children whose parent, parents, or guardian hold genuine and sincere religious beliefs” from these requirements. However, many observers have anecdotally noted that parents appear to be using the religious exemption as a de facto philosophical exemption. While 17 other states permit philosophical exemptions, New York State does not. There are numerous instructions on how to apply for vaccine exemptions being circulated on various [websites](#), social media, and in [online](#) forums, lending credence to the argument that some religious exemptions are being applied for based on personal or philosophical grounds and not religious canon.

Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz (D - Bronx) said: “It is essential that we eliminate all except medical exemptions to school vaccine requirements. There are many individuals who are claiming a religious exemption, but in reality are exercising a philosophical objection to vaccination. We cannot let a small number of people dictate public health policy in New York State. While I fully support free expression and freedom of religion, I believe that the assertion of religious freedom should not be allowed to infringe on the rights of others or to endanger the lives of others, especially children. Choosing not to vaccinate without a medical reason is putting the rights of other children and their parents in jeopardy – the right to be healthy and safe from preventable diseases. We must rely on scientific fact and not allow the false information being spread on social media to dictate how to protect our children.”

State Senator Brad Hoylman (D-Manhattan) said: “Just a few decades ago, we assumed measles was defeated, but now it’s roaring back. In the last couple of months, over 400 cases in children have been confirmed across the city and state— most of which are in Brooklyn and Rockland County. A direct correlation can be drawn between recent outbreaks of measles and the growing number of non-medical vaccine exemptions. That’s why we’re calling for Albany to reject the anti-vaxxer propaganda and join California to end non-medical exemptions by passing my and Assemblymember Dinowitz’s legislation (S2994/A2371) for the lifesaving vaccinations that keep our children safe and healthy.”

“Parents who oppose vaccinations for measles and all other illnesses not only put their own children at risk, but endanger other children and families as well,” **said Council Health Chair Mark Levine.** “As Israel and other nations are facing outbreaks, the risk of measles affecting our New York communities is particularly acute in neighborhoods where international travel is common. I strongly urge all parents across the city to ensure their children are up to date on all AMA recommended vaccinations, and I'm grateful to my colleagues in the State Legislature, Assemblyman Dinowitz and Senator Hoylman, for sponsoring this critical legislation.”

As of April 3, which is the most recent date for which [NYC DOH data](#) is available, there were 259 confirmed cases of measles in Brooklyn and Queens – including 41 additional cases in the week prior. There are also 161 confirmed cases of measles in Rockland County, as of April 3

(most recent date for which [Rockland County DOH data](#) is available). Rockland County recently issued an emergency order to prohibit non-vaccinated individuals from public spaces in response to the current measles outbreak. Individuals with non-medical reasons for not vaccinating were not exempt. The order led to an increase of at least 700 MMR vaccinations since it took effect on March 26th, according to the Rockland County Department of Health. Since the outbreak in October of 2018, 17,654 MMR vaccinations have been given.

State Senator David Carlucci (D-Rockland) said: “I represent Rockland County and the numbers there do not lie. We have an emergency, with one of the largest Measles outbreaks in the state. I co-sponsor legislation to remove non-medical vaccine exemptions because this is about following the science and stopping the spread of disease. We must stand united in protecting the public's health and safety in New York.”

Public health officials have also gone into overdrive in New York and around the country to combat vaccine hesitancy, which the World Health Organization has identified as one of the [ten largest threats to global health in 2019](#).

Aside from one debunked study performed in the late 1990's by discredited physician Andrew Wakefield, the overwhelming body of scientific research indicates that vaccines are both safe and effective. The study is frequently cited for its purported linkage of vaccines and autism, however many anti-vaxx advocates [neglect to acknowledge](#) that the original study relied only on 12 cases and did not include a control group of children who were not vaccinated.

Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between reduction in deaths and infections from viral diseases following the introduction of vaccines. Data from the World Health Organization shows that prior to the development of a measles vaccine in 1963, there were 2.6 million deaths from measles worldwide per year. Following the implementation of this vaccine, that number fell to 110,000 in 2017. Similarly, CDC data shows the number of paralytic polio cases fell from over 21,000 in 1952 to just 61 in 1965 following the development of an effective vaccine. The World Health Organization estimates that 10 million lives have been saved globally in just one five-year period (2010-2015) due to expanded vaccination programs.

Medical experts frequently cite the importance of herd immunity as a reason for reducing the number of non-vaccinated individuals. When a population has high vaccination rates, estimated at 93-95% by immunological experts, there is a significantly reduced chance for secondary infections when a virus is introduced. This is important for people who cannot get vaccinated for medical reasons, such as those with childhood leukemia or HIV/AIDS. According to the World Health Organization, the global percentage of children who received their first dose of measles vaccination rose from 72% to 85% and corresponded with an 80% decline in the measles death rate. Vaccination rates in outbreak areas of Clark County, Washington hover around 78% of school-age children. Similarly, at least 81% of confirmed cases in Rockland County did not receive any MMR vaccination.

“Vaccinations are one of the greatest public health achievements of the last century. They are most effective when universal immunization is achieved. Those who are unable to receive immunizations like young children and those with serious allergies or compromised immune

systems are only protected if those around them are vaccinated. In order to preserve the progress of eradicating these diseases, it is essential that children receive all necessary immunizations to attend school, unless they are precluded from doing so for medication reasons,” **stated Dr. Linda Prine, President of the New York County Chapter of the NYS Academy of Family Physicians.**

“New York State has had recent outbreaks of measles, of whooping cough and mumps. All of our children are just one plane ride away from infection. We firmly support Medical Exemption only as a reason not to immunize children for school, infant and child care, camp and other children’s group activities. We cannot allow overconfidence to weaken our children’s safety net and once again have to care for children disabled by measles and polio, and other crippling childhood diseases. The children of New York are depending on you to help keep them safe,” **said Dr. Sheila L Palevsky, MD MPH FAAP of NYS American Academy of Pediatrics, District II, Chapters 1, 2, & 3.**

The legislation to end non-medical exemptions to school vaccine requirements is currently in the respective Health Committees of each the Assembly and State Senate. Currently, only three states have eliminated non-medical exemptions: California, West Virginia, and Mississippi. Several more states are considering similar legislation to combat measles outbreaks in Washington State and elsewhere.

“We have to remember, this is a public health issue,” **said Assemblyman Pat Burke (D-Buffalo).** “While I firmly believe in the right to practice one’s religion freely, that right does not extend to putting the health of others at risk. Living in a society comes with certain responsibilities, and one of those is to not harm those around you.”

Assemblymember Karines Reyes (D-Bronx) said: “Vaccination is the socially responsible action to take, especially during a time in which great strides have been made in the medical field which show the countless benefits associated with the practice. The fears associated with vaccination come from a period at which uncertainty existed around vaccination’s effects. Earlier this month, a study published by *Annals of Internal Medicine* that reiterates the widely accepted conclusion that there is no correlation among measles, mumps, or the rubella vaccine and autism. In fact, the risks associated with vaccinations are few and rare. The benefits of vaccination go beyond those that affect the individual. The practice of receiving vaccinations contributes greatly to herd immunity. In other words, if a high number of individuals are immune to a disease through vaccination, there is a higher resistance to the spread of potential epidemics which could plague communities at a time. Additionally, herd immunity protects those who cannot receive vaccinations due to health conditions or young age. As an oncology nurse and a mother, I prioritize the wellbeing of my patients and my children—the future of our state. Keeping our communities safe and healthy is dependent on all of us being compliant and taking active roles in ensuring the wellbeing of all.”

Rabbi Dr. Mosche D. Tendler, Professor of Biology, Medical Ethics, and Senior Rabbi at Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University said: “Measles which has just about disappeared, is a medical concern, and the strong group of Hasidic people (largely) who opposes vaccination have now been plagued by the appearance of measles in their community. I live in Monsey in

New York, which is one of the epicenters of the epidemic. This is not a religious issue. The Hasidic community is not complaining that they are violating their religious principles by vaccinating their children. They are saying they know better than their doctors based upon the false medical report attributed to a doctor in London, who went to jail because of it. This is not a religious issue. It violates Jewish law not to vaccinate your children. Jewish law makes people responsible for the health of their children and the good health of their children is designed by the medical profession, not by the rabbinic profession.”

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