

RE: Emergency Bill that Seeks to Remove the Religious Exemption for Vaccines – May 13, 2019

I am adamantly opposed to this proposed infringement on the religious freedom of American citizens. Here in America, we believe in freedom of religion. We believe in the rights of all people to peacefully practice their own religion. It DOES NOT MATTER if we agree with someone's religion, or whether or not we believe the same things. It DOES NOT MATTER if we think that someone's religion is false or even foolish. You do not have to agree with someone to protect their right to religious freedom. America was founded on the principle of religious freedom, and violating this right would violate the very core of what makes our nation (and our state) great.

I also think it is important to mention that I am not anti-vaccine. I think the same goes for most people here today. I fully support and respect the right of every person to choose to vaccinate their children. In fact, my children are vaccinated. I also fully support the right of every person to choose not to vaccinate their children. What I am firmly against is the idea of mandated vaccines. Vaccination is a personal medical decision that should be made after consulting with your doctor, not the government.

Forcing someone to inject something into their body, or the body of their child, against their will is a gross violation of bodily autonomy. The right to control our own bodies, to raise our children the best that we can, and to practice our religions without fear of persecution and discrimination are in fact not privileges granted to us by the government – they are inherent God-given rights. The founders of our country, and the authors of the Constitution, did not grant us these rights – they were merely acknowledging the fact that we are born with these rights simply by the fact that we are born as human beings.

Our children are also, by law, guaranteed the right to a free and public education. If you vote today to remove the religious exemption, you will be forcing parents to choose between these two rights – the right to practice their religion, and the right of their children to have a free and public

education. This law would allow the state to keep children out of school, not because they are sick or contagious, but simply because they are unvaccinated. The supposed justification behind this is the protection of children who are immunocompromised. While this is a worthy goal, and these children should of course be protected, children who are immunocompromised to the point that they cannot receive vaccines themselves are not in school, or in public at all – they are at the hospital or at home.

I have heard some legislators try to reconcile this proposed assault on the educational rights of children by saying that parents who choose not to vaccinate could simply homeschool. This statement is nothing more than a weak attempt to justify their agendas. My husband and I homeschool our children. That has been one of the best decisions we have ever made as parents – homeschooling is an amazing, personalized, and effective form of education (in my opinion, it provides the best education possible for children), but it is also an enormous commitment in terms of time, responsibility, and lifestyle. We are incredibly blessed to be able to homeschool our children, but there are many families for whom this is simply not possible, whether due to finances, careers, or many other individual considerations. There are also many other families who do not homeschool because they simply prefer the educational option of the public school system. Casually dismissing these concerns, as these legislators have done, is both uninformed and condescending, and I urge you all to vote today to protect the rights of all children to a free and public education.

I think it's worth mentioning that this proposed bill would not even directly affect my family. We homeschool, and do not use the religious exemption. Despite this, I am here today to stand for the rights of the people of this state. While a removal of the religious exemption would not directly affect my family, an attack on freedom in reality affects everyone.

Today, you as legislators are here to protect those rights from those who would trample them in the name of "public health." I'm sure that none of you do this job for the money; maybe a few of you do

it for the glory, but I believe that most of you here today ran for this position because you genuinely want to make the state of Connecticut better; you want to protect and serve the people of this state. Today, you have the chance to protect the rights of the citizens that you represent. You have the chance to stand against religious persecution and discrimination. Voting "NO" on the removal of the religious exemption does not mean that you are anti-vaccine, or that you agree with the religions of the people that you are protecting. Voting "NO" on this offensive and discriminatory bill simply means that you value religious freedom, the right to a free and public education, and the right of parents to raise their children.

Thank you for your time and support. Please VOTE NO, and leave the religious exemption intact!

Jennifer Hartley Saunders