



The Honorable Susan R. Donovan Chairwoman
House Committee on Health and Human Services
82 Smith Street, House Lounge
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: In support and with recommendation for Expanding Vaccine Access for Underserved Communities and Children - 2025 H-5427 - Relating to Businesses and Professions - Pharmacies

Chairwoman Donovan:

I am writing to express my strong support for and recommendation to adjust 2025 H-5427 and its potential to improve healthcare access in our community. I would like to recommend a critical amendment that I believe will ensure the bill truly addresses the needs of underserved populations, including children.

Honorable committee members, I present before you today as a dedicated Community Health Worker at Asthenis, serving our underserved populations. My experience spans decades and ranges from working in free health clinics for undocumented patients, nonprofit group homes for individuals with disabilities to civil rights advocacy for the disabled population. I have witnessed first hand how children and the uninsured in these communities are impacted by the shortage of primary care providers. Recently, I worked with an undocumented family from Guatemala - a single father of two girls, ages 6 and 14, who walked into Asthenis seeking assistance because the father was frustrated with not being able to find an available provider who could vaccinate his daughters in time for school. I also worked with a single mother from Liberia, whose 8 year old daughter with autism was in need of vaccines for school and was placed on a 6 month waiting list for a pediatrician visit.

Amending this bill to allow pharmacists, embedded in underserved communities, to continue providing all vaccines down to age 3 as they were able to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial to ensuring high-risk populations receive the care they need.

Our primary care system is in crisis, leaving many children without timely access to necessary vaccines. Families are facing hardship in securing pediatrician appointments for non-infants. For the few providers still accepting patients, it can take up to six months for a child to get a visit.. Why should these families wait for 6 months when their children can receive required vaccinations with a pharmacist? The accessibility of pharmacists, with their extended hours and proven ability during the COVID-19 pandemic, offers a vital solution for parents who struggle to find a pediatrician or cannot take time off work during regular medical office hours. By empowering pharmacists to administer childhood vaccines, the same way they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can ensure that every child has a fair chance to receive timely and critical preventative healthcare.

For the health and safety of our communities, I urge you to amend this bill to allow pharmacists to continue administering all vaccines to individuals down to age 3. This will not only alleviate strain on our healthcare providers but will also ensure that children, particularly those in underserved communities, can get the vaccines they need to stay in school and stay healthy.

Thank you for considering this recommendation. I look forward to seeing this important bill move forward.

Respectfully,


Barbara R. Okoro, CHW
Asthenis



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