



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

March 18, 2025

The Honorable Rep. Susan R. Donovan
Chair, House Health & Human Services Committee
82 Smith Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Re: OPPOSE H 5856, Endangering Public Health by Allowing Non-Medical Exemptions to Vaccine, Mask, and Testing Requirements

Dear Chairperson Donovan and Members of the House Health & Human Services Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents in Rhode Island, writes in opposition to H 5856, a harmful bill that will needlessly endanger the lives of Rhode Islanders. The expansion of non-medical vaccination exemptions proposed by this bill will harm evidence-based efforts to prevent the transmission of serious diseases, including polio, mumps, rubella, measles, and future pathogens. Vaccination is a vital public health measure, and we support vaccination requirements based on medical best practices for the benefit of everyone. We strongly urge you to reject this dangerous bill.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building, and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists objects to efforts that subordinate the health and well-being of all to the religious beliefs of a few.

Public health experts believe no exception should be made to neutral immunization requirements that protect public health. Non-medical exemptions, such as those proposed H 5856, unnecessarily endanger everyone to accommodate the religious or philosophical beliefs of a few. This is unacceptable from both a medical and moral perspective. Successful population immunity to disease depends upon a significant level of vaccination, with some diseases requiring at least a ninety-five percent vaccination level to prevent mass

outbreaks.¹ Because some individuals have legitimate medical conditions that prevent them from receiving life-saving vaccinations, it is imperative that everyone who is physically capable of receiving a vaccine stay up-to-date.

Non-medical exemptions place vulnerable individuals and entire communities at significant risk for contracting debilitating and deadly diseases. For example, children who are exempt from immunization requirements are thirty-five times more likely to contract measles² and nearly six times more likely to contract pertussis³ compared to immunized children. History demonstrates that outbreaks are more common in communities that are unsupportive of vaccinations.

Measles is one vaccine-preventable disease that has plagued multiple religious communities that are either hesitant to vaccinate or completely opposed to vaccination.⁴ States across the country are currently battling unprecedented outbreaks of measles. In Texas, nearly 160 people have become dangerously ill after contracting measles, and 22 people have been hospitalized.⁵ Rhode Island, along with Alaska, California, Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, New Mexico, and New York, have all confirmed alarming measles outbreaks this year.⁶ H 5856 would remove the tools Rhode Island needs to address this crisis.

In addition to recklessly endangering public health, H 5856 would create a special privilege for residents of Rhode Island who practice certain religions. At a time when nearly one in three Americans is religiously unaffiliated,⁷ this proposal would establish a broad loophole that applies only to adherents of a specific religious belief system. As a result, nonreligious residents of Rhode Island and those whose religious beliefs do not prevent them from following medical best practices will bear the burden of increased consequences from even a small percentage of the population failing to vaccinate, refusing to follow mask mandates,

¹ Nearly 40 Million Children Are Dangerously Susceptible to Growing Measles Threat, Ctr. for Disease Control (Nov. 23, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p1123-measles-threat.html>.

² Salmon DA, Haber M, Gangarosa EJ, Phillips L, Smith NJ, Chen RT. Health consequences of religious and philosophical exemptions from immunization laws: individual and societal risk of measles. *JAMA* 1999;282:47-53.

³ Feikin DR, Lezotte DC, Hamman RF, Salmon DA, Chen RT, and Hoffman RE. Individual and Community Risks of Measles and Pertussis Associated With Personal Exemptions to Immunization. *JAMA* 2007;284:3145-3150.

⁴ See, e.g., Genes, N., Measles in Boston: Collision of Church and State, Science and Journalism (June 20, 2006), http://medgadget.com/2006/06/measles_in_bost.html; Vaccination Fear Causes Measles Spate, CBS News (Aug. 1, 2006), http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500368_162-1857987.html.

⁵ Neha Mukherjee, CDC Says It's on the Ground in Texas as Measles Outbreak Grows to 159 Cases, CNN (Mar. 4, 2025), <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/04/health/measles-texas-cdc-rfk-response/index.html>.

⁶ Alix Martichoux, 9 States Report Measles Cases as Outbreaks Grow, The Hill (Mar. 4, 2025), <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/5173803-9-states-report-measles-cases-as-outbreaks-grow>.

⁷ Smith, G. A. (2021, December 14). About three-in-ten U.S. adults are now religiously unaffiliated. Pew Research Center. Available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated>.

or test for infectious disease after exposure. No Rhode Islander should be subject to harm or illness based on the religious beliefs of a classmate, colleague, or neighbor.

The spread of infectious diseases threatens every aspect of American life, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The best and most reliable tools available to combat the utter chaos that occurs during such an outbreak and protect human life are mandatory vaccination with no non-medical exemptions, mask mandates, and widespread testing. H 5856 would needlessly endanger vulnerable Rhode Islanders and the public by permitting the necessary population immunity levels to decline and risking the otherwise preventable resurgence of dangerous and deadly disease. We strongly urge you to reject this bill.

Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' opposition to H 5856, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Victoria Anderson
State Policy Specialist
American Atheists