

DATE February 28, 2019
TO Oregon State Legislature, Senate Committee on Health Care
Re: Support for HB 3063

Honorable Chair and Committee Members,

My name is Sarah Wylie, and I live in Portland, Oregon. I am a public health professional at the Oregon Health Authority - Public Health Division, but I submit this testimony as a private citizen and parent. I am writing to ask that you support HB 3063, which would remove the non-medical vaccine exemption from Oregon law.

I urge your support for HB 3063 to ensure that one of our most valuable public assets - a public education - remains accessible for all Oregon children. This bill does not require parents to vaccinate their children. What it does require is that families who want to use the public, taxpayer funded education system do their part to protect the public good in return. This is not too much to ask.

Not long ago, our parents and grandparents lived with the fear, uncertainty, and very real consequences of vaccine-preventable illnesses. My grandmother is nearing her 90th birthday and tells me, every time I speak with her these days, of when her sister nearly died of measles. She asks me to imagine what it was like to see her sister, unconscious from encephalitis, carried from her bedroom in their father's arms to a waiting car. My father was born at the end of World War II and recalls the pervasive fear of polio during the summer, his mother keeping him from the public pool, and visiting a young classmate struggling to survive in an iron lung. He remembers lining up for the polio vaccine - and I think of the relief his mother must have felt at that line.

Becoming a parent is the most wonderful, exhilarating, and exhausting thing I have ever done. But the love I feel as a parent also came with new lessons in fear and anxiety. Every day, I worry about how to protect my children in a world that can be frightening, overwhelming, and unpredictable. I can understand parents who want the best for their children and worry for their safety, especially in an information environment that feels like a firehose and is full of falsehoods.

But as a parent, one of the easiest choices I made was to vaccinate my kids. In an unpredictable world, vaccines were a clear way to keep them safer. I knew the stories of my parents and grandparents, and as a public health professional, I knew the science. Vaccines are safe. They work. And when my kids got their first pokes, it was a relief.

Oregon and Southwest Washington are currently experiencing an outbreak of measles, a vaccine-preventable illness that was deemed eradicated from the United States less than 20 years ago. This outbreak was preventable, and it has brought back the fear and anxiety that kept my father home from the public pool 70 years ago. As a society, we seem to have forgotten what a privilege herd immunity is - and that it is not a gift to be taken for granted.

It is a privilege to live in a country where we have ready access to vaccines. Herd immunity takes a village. As a community, we vaccinate our children to protect both them and the people who depend on our vaccinated kids for their own health. People with weak immune systems, infants, cancer survivors, transplant recipients - these individuals do not have the privilege of choice. Vaccines are critical for health equity: herd immunity ensures that we all have the option to live without fear of vaccine-preventable illnesses.

We would do well to remember the stories of our parents and grandparents when faced with health risks that should have been eliminated years ago. Good legislation protects the public interest when individuals fail to do so. HB 3063 accomplishes that goal.

Thank you,

Sarah Wylie, MPH
Portland, Oregon