

Mass. considers scrapping religious exemptions for vaccinations

By [Angela Mathew](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated June 22, 2025, 10:00 a.m.



Miranda Harris, 14, is immunocompromised and a cancer survivor, and can't get vaccinated due to the treatment. Children like Miranda depend on others to get vaccinated to stop the spread of infection. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Sarah Harrison worries about [growing skepticism](#) around vaccines. Her daughter Miranda, 14, is a survivor of kidney cancer who went through multiple bouts of chemotherapy. Miranda's immune system was so weak that even a small cold could be lethal, but because of her treatment, she could not get vaccinated. Children like Miranda

[depend on others](#) to get vaccines so that herd immunity is higher and infection can't spread to her as easily.

"It's all fun and games until someone dies of a preventable disease," Harrison said.

Massachusetts has one of the highest rates of vaccination in the nation but of late, [vaccination rates among kindergarteners have been falling](#). This brings a familiar debate to the fore — should religious exemptions from vaccinations be scrapped?

In Massachusetts, parents can write a letter stating that a vaccine conflicts with their "sincerely held religious belief" in order to exempt their children from vaccination requirements needed to enroll in public schools. State Representative Andy Vargas and state Senator Edward Kennedy both [filed bills](#) to eliminate this religious exemption. The bills replace the exemption with language saying that all K-12 schools, whether public, private, or charter, must report the vaccination rates of students annually to the state's Department of Public Health. Neighboring states like Connecticut, New York, and Maine have passed bills eliminating the religious exemption.

Advocates who oppose the exemptions say that religious exceptions are being misused by parents who are hesitant about vaccinating their children.

"It's definitely a general pattern of people abusing the exemption, especially since [there aren't really any major religions](#) that oppose vaccination," said Katie Blair, director of an advocacy group called Massachusetts Families for Vaccines. "It just doesn't match with the numbers of people who use the exemption."

But parents across the state came to Beacon Hill to testify in support of religious exemptions at a hearing of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Public Health. They said exemptions were essential to their First Amendment right to practice their religion and to honor the concept of informed consent.

“I’m curious why diversity, equity, and inclusion is not being applied to those with sincerely held religious beliefs,” Lisa Ottaviano said while testifying at the hearing.

Some speakers at the hearing said they were uncomfortable with the components of certain vaccines.

“We should not be forced into violating our moral conscience by injecting products developed from aborted fetuses such as the MMR, the varicella vaccines,” said Nicholas Kottenstette, a Catholic father of four from Sterling.

Vaccines don’t contain fetal cells, [according to the American Academy of Pediatrics](#). In the 1960s, two aborted fetuses were used to grow viruses in human cell cultures to develop some vaccines. But no new aborted fetuses have been used since then.

Others testifying against the bill said they wanted to protect religious exemptions because they felt that accountability measures for vaccine manufacturers were insufficient.

“I started meeting more people whose children had reactions to vaccines that were adverse, so I started doing my own research and learned a lot of concerning things like how pharmaceutical companies have legal protection against being sued,” Maureen Trettel, a grandmother from Milford, said.

Similar bills have been filed in previous sessions, so the debate over religious exemptions for vaccines in Massachusetts has been going on since at least 2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic that made vaccines a polarizing issue. The elevation of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a vaccine skeptic, to US secretary of Health and Human Services has drawn even more interest to the issue. Earlier this month, Kennedy [disbanded a scientific committee](#) that advises the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on vaccine recommendations and pledged to replace them with his own picks, raising concerns that millions of people will have reduced access to the shots.

Logan Beyer, an aspiring pediatrician pursuing an MD/PhD degree in public health at Harvard, spoke in favor of eliminating religious exemptions. While volunteering at a Special Olympics event, Beyer spoke to a parent who told her that she was worried that vaccines caused autism. The mother told Beyer that she was planning to apply for a religious exemption because she was unsure about vaccinating her children.

“She told me that her family ‘didn’t really go to church,’ but you don’t have to prove anything to get the exemption,” Beyer said.

Beyer said that this incident made her concerned about growing vaccine hesitancy and inspired her to testify.

“At the hearing, so many parents said they just want to do what’s best for their children ... I love that instinct,” Beyer said, “But I know that passing policies that help facilitate more kids getting vaccinated is really what can keep children safe.”

Harrison, the mother of cancer survivor Miranda, also understands the instinct of parents on the other side of the issue, even if she disagrees with them. In addition to Miranda, Harrison has twin six-year-old boys who both have autism.



Miranda Harris (left) and her mother, Sarah Harris photographed in their home. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

“I can know the grief and shock that parents experience when they find out their kid has autism. I get it,” Harrison said. “But vaccines are not to blame ... autism is a result of [genetics and environment](#).”

Around 16,000 children in Massachusetts are unvaccinated without claiming an exemption — a group that the state describes as “noncompliant students” in its documents. Many parents in opposition to the bills questioned why the bills were trained just on the 2,000 students who did have religious exemptions.

“I’m curious why the Legislature is targeting the small percentage of children with religious exemptions and ignoring the huge gap population,” said Ottaviano, testifying at the hearing.

Advocates for the bills said the new provisions that mandate that all schools must report vaccination numbers to the state’s public health department would address these

noncompliant students as well.

“That’s what the data reporting is about, we want to make sure that schools have accurate records,” Blair of Massachusetts Families for Vaccines said. “If there is a gap ... they should reach out to those students to find out why the records are not on file.”

Speakers in favor of the bills were focused on eliminating religious exemptions in order to protect children who cannot be vaccinated due to medical reasons like allergies or problems with their immune systems.

“It’s actually those people ... that we’re really doing this for, because they’re the ones who depend on herd immunity,” Blair said.

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