

In the City Council, June 20, 2019

Upon the recommendation of Councilor Dennis Bidwell and Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra

R-19.096
A Resolution

Encouraging the Northampton Board of Health and the Massachusetts State Legislature to Take
Action to Increase Measles Immunization Rates in our Communities

Whereas, from January 1 to June 13, 2019, 1044 individual cases of measles have been confirmed in 28 states in the United States, including Massachusetts, which is the greatest number of cases reported in the U.S. since 1992 and since measles was declared eliminated in 2000;

Whereas, measles is eight times more contagious than Influenza and is over three times more contagious than Ebola, in part because an individual who has become infected can be contagious for four days prior to being symptomatic, and for 4 days after the appearance of a rash.;

Whereas, those not vaccinated and in close proximity of an infected person have a 90% chance of contracting measles;

Whereas, measles can result in encephalitis and/or deafness, and in some cases can cause death;

Whereas, “herd immunity” to measles occurs when approximately 95% of the individuals in a group have immunity – either through vaccination or previous exposure to the disease -- and that immunization rates below that number put individuals at much greater risk of contracting the disease;

Whereas, low immunization rates pose a particular risk for immune-compromised individuals and infants too young to be vaccinated;

Whereas, one reason that some communities have relatively low immunization rates is that a large number of families in these communities assert their “religious exemption” to vaccinations, as permitted by state law.

Whereas, religious exemptions to vaccinations claimed in the Commonwealth increased from 0.18% of children in the 1987-88 school year to 1.08% in 2017-2018, which is a five-fold increase. This trend is despite a consistent downward trend in religiosity in Massachusetts over the same time period;

Whereas, Massachusetts law requires that children entering childcare or public schools offer proof of measles vaccination, unless they assert a medical or religious exemption to vaccination;

Whereas, Hampshire County and Franklin County have some of the highest rates in the state of exemption rates, with some schools reporting kindergarten age children with exemption rates as high as 25%;

Whereas, the MMR vaccine (for measles, mumps and rubella) has been repeatedly and invariably shown to be very safe and effective;

Whereas, the American Medical Association and the Massachusetts Medical Society have stated their opposition to all but medical exemptions to vaccinations;

Whereas, Northampton's Board of Public Health and Public Health Department have been proactive in their public information campaigns and their outreach to schools, hospitals and pediatrics practices regarding the dangers of not vaccinating against measles;

Whereas, the authority of local Boards of Health to act further in this area is limited by laws that can only be changed by the Massachusetts legislature;

Whereas, on May 24, 2019 Maine became the fourth state in the country -- joining California, West Virginia, and Mississippi – to disallow a religious exemption to vaccination;

Now Therefore Be It Resolved that the Northampton City Council commends the Northampton Board of Health and Northampton Public Health Department for their work in educating the public about the dangers of low vaccination rates; and

Be It Further Resolved that the Northampton City Council urges the Northampton Board of Health to explore further actions it could take to increase vaccination rates through such measures as requiring a sworn affidavit or signature from clergy to substantiate a claim of religious exemption from vaccination; and

Be It Further Resolved that the Northampton City Council urges the Massachusetts House to take up and approve HD 4284, which is co-sponsored by Representative Lindsay Sabadosa, which would eliminate the religious exemption to vaccinations, allowing only medical exemptions;

Be it Further Resolved that the Northampton City Council urges the Massachusetts Senate to take up similar legislation, with the intent of eliminating the religious exemption to vaccinations, allowing only medical exemptions;

Be It Further Resolved that the Administrative Assistant to the Northampton City Council shall cause a copy of this resolution to be sent to State Senator and Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Public Health Joanne Comerford, State Representative Lindsay Sabadosa, Senate President Karen Spilka, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, House Chair of the Joint Committee on Public Health John J. Mahoney, Governor Charles Baker, Northampton Board of Health Chair Joanne Levin and Northampton Public Health Director Merridith O'Leary.