



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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SEN. RAUSCH, REP. DONATO HIGHLIGHT NUMEROUS MA COMMUNITIES BELOW HERD IMMUNITY OR NOT REPORTING DATA, SHOWING NEED FOR COMMUNITY IMMUNITY ACT

Healthcare providers, public health experts, and educators endorse the Community Immunity Act to fix the current holes in vaccination and exemption policy in the Commonwealth

Boston, MA – **Senator Becca Rausch** (D-Needham) and **Second Assistant Majority Leader Paul Donato** (D-Medford), lead sponsors of the Community Immunity Act, today released a map displaying the shockingly large holes in Massachusetts’ localized protection against the spread of infectious diseases.¹ In the 2018-2019 school year, more than 125 programs reported student vaccination rates below herd immunity for at least one disease.² An additional 400 schools did not submit their immunization data to the Department of Public Health (DPH). These holes put the health and safety of all Bay Staters at risk, particularly the elderly, those who are immunocompromised, and children too young to receive vaccines.

Senator Rausch, Leader Donato, dozens of legislative cosponsors, and organizational allies support the Community Immunity Act as a comprehensive package to fix the flaws in existing immunization policy. Those problems include: no direct statutory authority for DPH to manage or implement immunization policy, no mandatory immunization data reporting, and inconsistent immunization requirements and exemption processes among different youth programs. Effectively, each daycare, K-12 school, summer camp, and college is left to fend for itself to implement immunization policy, when that policy should be administered at the state level.

The Community Immunity Act will standardize immunization requirements and exemptions for all covered programs statewide, centralize the exemption application process within DPH, and ensure DPH has complete vaccination data. The bill also requires each covered program to notify families if the program population falls below protective herd immunity rates.

Senator Rausch said, “This map represents all the proof in the pudding necessary to support and advance the bill, and of course there is plenty more evidence. We have serious inconsistencies among various communities and regions in the state with regard to immunization rates, exemption protocols, and data reporting. Diseases do not know school district lines, town boundaries, or county borders. We need comprehensive immunization policy, implemented at the state level, to

¹ The map was developed by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), using data from the Department of Public Health, available at: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/school-immunizations>.

² Herd immunity rates used to calculate the number of schools below critical thresholds can be found here: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/herd-immunity>.

protect the health and safety of everyone in the Commonwealth, and particularly the elderly, those who are immunocompromised, and children too young to receive vaccines.”

While the number of communities with protective herd immunity is declining, the number of cases of deadly, preventable disease is on the rise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed 1,250 cases of measles in 31 states this year alone.³ This is the greatest number of reported cases since 1992. Massachusetts health officials have confirmed three cases in the Commonwealth this year, including the first confirmed cases of measles in Boston since 2013.⁴

“This is a scary time for anyone who cares about protecting themselves and others from deadly, preventable disease,” said **Leader Paul Donato**. “Standardizing the immunization schedule and the exemptions process for daycares, K-12 schools, summer camps, and colleges brings clarity to Massachusetts immunization policy while preserving flexibility for private providers to go even further to protect their participants.”

By enacting the Community Immunity Act, Massachusetts will join at least 14 other states that manage the immunization exemption process at the state level rather than the local level, or as is the case in existing protocol, school-by-school basis. **Beth Kontos, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) - Massachusetts**, said, “Schools are on the front lines of immunization policy in Massachusetts and they shouldn’t be. The Community Immunity Act relieves educators of the burden and properly puts the responsibility for safeguarding public health with the public health professionals.”

“There are real consequences to falling below herd immunity rates and incomplete monitoring of those ‘hot spot’ pockets,” said **Amy Delaney, a pediatric nurse practitioner representing the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP)**. I have seen infants with month-long admissions to pediatric ICU settings when diagnosed with pertussis (whooping cough). Several of these infants spent time on lifesaving mechanical ventilatory support, followed by markedly more time in pediatric rehabilitation units re-learning how to swallow, breathe, and recondition muscle tone. These infants were too young to complete the vaccination series, so their only potential protection would have come from herd immunity. We have social and moral obligations to protect children who cannot be immunized due to age or medical condition.”

“Vaccines safely and effectively keep people and communities healthy,” said **Dr. Regina LaRocque, MD, MPH, representing the Massachusetts Infectious Diseases Society**. “When an entire community is well vaccinated, we protect everyone by interrupting an infection’s ability to spread. That’s what ‘community immunity’ means.” Importantly, the Community Immunity Act also ensures that DPH receives complete and accurate data, enabling the agency to identify potential problems or holes in our protective herd immunity fabric. “Without sufficient data, public health officials cannot make appropriate decisions based on scientific fact to protect everyone in Massachusetts,”

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/cases-outbreaks.html>

⁴ <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/Boston-Resident-Measles-Case-Exposure-562641591.html>

Dr. LaRocque continued. “The Community Immunity Act will provide the Department of Public Health with the data it needs to support and promote sufficiently high immunization rates in all communities across the Commonwealth.”

“All communities have the right to know if they are at risk of contracting a deadly disease,” said **Representative Maria Robinson (D-Framingham)**, a cosponsor and contributor to the crafting of the Act. “This past year, over 400 schools did not provide DPH with data on immunization rates in those schools. I believe those parents deserve to know if their children are surrounded by others that lack immunity to deadly diseases. I hope that, empowered by this knowledge, more parents will make the decision to follow medical best practice and make sure their children are immune from preventable, deadly disease.”

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Additional quotes from endorsing organizations:

“As a profession dedicated to enhancing human well-being, social workers across the state stand behind efforts to safeguard the health of vulnerable and at-risk populations. We have a responsibility to enhance herd immunity through standardization of the state’s immunization exemptions and data collection.”

Rebekah Gewirtz

Executive Director, National Association of Social Workers – MA Chapter

“Immunizations are one of our most effective public health tools. This legislation will ensure patients have the appropriate vaccinations and will prevent outbreaks which have recently been more common.”

Todd Brown MHP, R.Ph.

Executive Director, Massachusetts Independent Pharmacists Association

“As leading providers of both pediatric and preventive care across the Commonwealth, community health centers are pivotal resources for ensuring a healthy and immunized population. The League is proud to endorse this first step by Senator Rausch and Representative Donato to streamline our immunizations process in Massachusetts, collect and synthesize greater amounts of data, and to create impactful public health campaigns to ensure high immunization rates. Additionally, it is the hope of the League that, while outside the scope of this legislation, the Legislature will continue to debate and give serious consideration to striking certain statutory immunization exemptions as a matter of protecting the public health of our Commonwealth.”

Michael A. Curry, Esq.

Senior Vice President & General Counsel

Government Affairs and Public Policy

Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers

The Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action (JALSA) is deeply concerned about the sharp rise of vaccine-preventable illnesses. While religious belief is often put forward as a justification for not vaccinating, as a faith-based, member-driven organization, the moral voice of our tradition instead emphasizes collective responsibility, and calls on us to publicly speak out as advocates for full herd immunity. In addition, we are taught that the preservation of life (pikuach nefesh) is the most important religious value for a community to hold, superseding even the observance of Shabbat (the Sabbath), Judaism's holy day. For these reasons, we support efforts such as this legislation, to promote increased vaccination.

Cindy Rowe

Executive Director, Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action (JALSA)

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