

Parents seek way around VT vaccination law

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(Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)

Leslie Rodriguez of Richford has opted against immunizing her four children for several years.

"I don't trust my children to pharmaceutical companies that are most probably only out for a profit," Rodriguez says.

Despite lacking mandatory vaccinations for school admission, her 13-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son are allowed to attend school because Rodriguez claimed a philosophical exemption. Her other two daughters, ages 2 and 6 months, are too young for school.

A philosophical exemption is based on parents' personal beliefs and might arise from moral objections or safety concerns. That exemption is the one most commonly used in Vermont, which also offers medical and religious exemptions. Some 3,566 students, or 4 percent of students in the state, use a philosophical exemption this school year, according to Vermont Department of Health.

The state has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the nation. About 87.7 percent of students entering kindergarten in 2014-15 had all required school vaccinations. That is below the 95 percent mark identified by the medical community as creating "herd immunity" against vaccination-preventable diseases.

In an effort to boost the rate, the Legislature in May made Vermont the first in the nation to repeal the philosophical exemption.

Yet Rodriguez and her husband, Richard Rodriguez, still plan to decline vaccinations for their children.

"We are probably going to claim a religious exemption," Leslie Rodriguez says.

The Rodriguezes are among a growing number of parents who say they will simply switch their philosophical exemption to a religious one. School nurses report that some parents already have done so.

"I had a student switch from a philosophical exemption to a religious exemption when they had heard about the bill" to repeal the philosophical exemption, said Louise Mongeon, school nurse at Burlington's Integrated Arts Academy. The academy has one of the lowest vaccination rates in and around Burlington.

That raises the question: Will repeal of the philosophical exemption accomplish the stated goal of boosting required vaccination rates?

"I really can't predict, since Vermont is the first state to eliminate the philosophical exemption," says Christine Finley, immunization program manager with Health Department. "However, research has shown that states with only religious exemptions tend to have lower non-medical exemption rates."

Nothing in Vermont law prevents parents from switching their choice of exemption. Unlike some other states, Vermont requires no documentation of religious beliefs to obtain the exemption.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's another loophole," Mongeon says of the Vermont law. "You could argue that breaks down the system designed to protect children with vaccinations."

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are no scientific studies showing vaccinations are unsafe. But some parents still have strong opposition often rooted in distrust of government regulation of vaccines.

At Windham Elementary School — which at 50 percent has the lowest vaccination rate among public schools in Vermont — at least two parents have indicated they plan to switch to a religious exemption, head teacher Mickey Parker says.

"It seems like the logical thing to do if you're opposed to vaccinations," Parker says. "I can't imagine just because of the repeal, they're going to go vaccinate their children."

Lisa Beshay claims the philosophical exemption for her two children who attend Windham.

"I will become religious, if need be, to get a religious exemption," Beshay said. "I will believe whatever I have to believe to not have my kids vaccinated. If all else fails, I will leave the state with my children."

Under Vermont law, Besnay has no need to choose a religion to defend her decision not to vaccinate her children.

All she has to do is check a box for the religious exemption and sign a form on an annual basis confirming she has reviewed evidence-based educational material from the Health Department regarding the risks associated with failing to vaccinate children.

Certain states require documentation to acquire a religious exemption.

In New York, for instance, parents must provide a written explanation of religious principles that guide their objection to immunization. The Department of Education is entitled to request additional documentation within 10 days of receipt of parents' request.

Some 162 children — 0.2 percent of Vermont schoolchildren — have a religious exemption this school year, according to the Health Department.

Any significant rise in that number would be notable, Mongeon said. Few religions prohibit vaccinations, she said. On top of that, Vermont has the highest percentage of residents who are religiously unaffiliated in the United States, according to Pew Research Center.

"If parents have religious beliefs, I honor that," Mongeon said. "If they want an exemption because of misinformation, I feel they need to do their research."

Finley, the Health Department's immunization program manager, says state agencies are coordinating to prepare for elimination of the philosophical exemption in 2016. The Health Department, Education Agency and Department for Children and Families jointly will develop rules required by the new law, including how schools should address non-adherence, Finley says.

Jill Remick, spokeswoman for the Education Agency, says schools and child care centers, public and private, are required to follow the law.

Remick says parents without a medical or religious exemption who decline to vaccinate their children have the choice of home schooling.

"We cannot predict with any certainty what choices families would make for vaccinating their children, so we would have no way of knowing the enrollment impacts," Remick says.

"The vast majority of families who choose not to vaccinate cite philosophical reasons," Remick says. "Therefore, this change should mean that the proportion of kids attending Vermont schools who are fully vaccinated increases."

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