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Testimony by Rabbi Moti Rieber in Opposition to SB 315, Exemptions from Immunization Requirements
Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee, Sen. Beverly Gossage, chair
March 21, 2023

Mme. Chair, Members of the Committee,

My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber; I serve as executive director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith issue-advocacy organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical racial, economic and climate justice issues. We are the state public policy office of the Central States Synod of the ELCA, as well as an advocacy partner of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the UCC, the Mercy & Justice Team of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, and the Council of Unitarian Universalist Congregations of Kansas.

We are opposed to this legislation because it is ill-considered and dangerous. Our opposition focuses on the expansion of a so-called “religious exemption” to immunization requirements. None of the denominations that make up our coalition, nor any denomination of which I am aware (with the exception of Christian Science, with its well-established opposition to medical intervention), has any such thing as a religious exemption to immunizations. To cite only one example, please see the ELCA’s Social Statement entitled, “Regarding the Question of Vaccination and of Individual Religious Objections to Required Vaccination,” which I link here.¹ It’s worth reading in its entirety, but this sentence will capture the main point: “[I]n the Lutheran tradition and in ELCA teaching there is no evident basis for religious exemption [to vaccination]. On the contrary both the Lutheran heritage and ELCA social teaching documents... urge participation in public health efforts because health is a shared endeavor.”

We believe that so-called religious exemptions (or the expanded philosophical exemptions which this bill, for the first time, would put into Kansas law) are an argument of convenience for those who decide for various other reasons to not have their children vaccinated, and that such claims have no basis in established religious practice or tradition. In fact, such “exemptions” should be considered anti-religious, counter as they are the well-established prioritization of human life, as in Deut. 30:19, where it says, “I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live.”

In the past, someone claiming a moral exemption to vaccinations had to establish a long-term commitment to a religious denomination or a moral tradition that had this as its teaching. This bill not only wildly expands the basis on which such a claim can be made, but it prohibits the institutions affected by this legislation, particularly schools, colleges and childcare facilities, from even inquiring into the sincerity or previous establishment of the claimed belief.

In my own Jewish tradition, there is no greater imperative than the preservation of human life. It is so important that virtually any ritual commandment can be broken for the sake of saving a human life. How much more when the lives of thousands of our fellow Kansans are at stake?

We are very concerned that this bill will undermine our state’s commitment to childhood immunizations, including for measles, polio, rubella, etc., which have so dramatically lessened childhood illnesses, and extended human lifespans. Vaccines are an issue of science, not one of “belief”; although we recognize there are some long-established traditions that oppose vaccines, we do not believe that this exemption should be expanded to include the stew of politics and conspiracy theory that characterizes the contemporary anti-immunization movement.

¹ https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Vaccinations_ELCA_Soc_Teaching.pdf

Until the COVID pandemic, the anti-immunization position was marginal and couldn't get traction in the Kansas legislature. Opposition to COVID precautions has strengthened this "anti-vax" position, but this is a mistake with the potential for devastating consequences. Immunizations for childhood diseases are a vital part of public health and have saved countless lives from preventable diseases. This commitment must not be undermined by the expansion of specious "belief" exemptions.

I urge you not to allow this bill to leave this committee. Thank you for your attention.