

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 27, 2025

SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL: 304-342-7025

Patrick Morrissey
Governor
State of West Virginia
1900 Kanawha Blvd. E.
Charleston, WV 25305

Re: Concerns over religious exemption from vaccine mandate

Dear Governor Morrissey:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our membership regarding your recent announcement of an ill-advised religious exemption for childhood vaccines in your state. That unnecessary religious exemption will create a loophole that risks the health and safety of the citizens of West Virginia. FFRF is a national nonprofit educational association with more than 40,000 members, including members in West Virginia, that works to defend the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public about nontheism.

It should be a matter of state pride that West Virginia historically has never granted non-medical exemptions. Now we understand that you unfortunately recently directed state officials to exempt public schoolchildren from vaccination requirements if their parents object on religious grounds. This order undermines the efficacy of vaccines, endangering West Virginia students and immuno-compromised adults for no good reason. We strongly urge you to change course and rescind this order.

Vaccine opposition is most often politically motivated and not based on a sincerely held religious belief. No major religious denomination in the U.S. opposes vaccination outright.¹ In the context of the COVID-19 vaccine, many religious leaders have actually encouraged their members to get vaccinated. Pope Francis has urged Catholics to receive the vaccination.² Leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have done similarly.³

Furthermore, religious exemptions are not necessary. For over a century, courts have upheld mandatory vaccination laws without religious exemptions under the Free Exercise Clause and Equal Protection Clause. There is a compelling government interest in requiring vaccination against a variety of deadly infectious diseases, and the State need not accommodate a parent's

¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5141457/>.

² <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-08/pope-francis-appeal-covid-19-vaccines-act-of-love.html>.

³ <https://lynnwoodtimes.com/2021/09/17/lds-vaccine-mandates-exemption/>.

religious beliefs if the accommodation compromises student safety, which it most certainly would in this case.

Vaccines provide tangible health benefits and protect communities from an array of potentially deadly illnesses. Vaccinating children protects not only the child themselves, but the entire school community—especially those who are unable to be vaccinated due to allergies or prohibitive medical conditions. Thanks to widespread vaccination, diseases like polio, measles, and smallpox have been virtually eradicated in the United States.⁴

We urge you to reconsider this religious exemption to childhood vaccination to protect the public health of West Virginians, particularly the youngest and most vulnerable.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

⁴ <https://www.hhs.gov/immunization/get-vaccinated/for-parents/five-reasons/index.html>.