

Bills banning most vaccine exemptions fail in Northwest

By Sheila V Kumar/Rachel La Corte
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — Legislative efforts to increase pressure on parents to get their kids vaccinated failed in Oregon and Washington state Wednesday amid stiff opposition as a handful of other statehouses consider similar bills prompted by a measles outbreak at Disneyland.

Oregon's measure, which had the support of Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, would have made the state the third in the country allowing exemptions from immunizations only for medical reasons, and no longer for religious, philosophical or personal reasons. Mississippi and West Virginia are the only other states that have comparable laws in place.

In Washington state, a similar effort to remove personal or philosophical opposition to vaccines as an authorized exemption from childhood school immunizations died in the state House after failing to come up for a vote before a

key deadline. Religious and medical exemptions would have remained under that bill.

Washington state Rep. June Robinson, who had sponsored the bill, said she didn't have the votes she needed. The Democrat from Everett said the pushback from parents and others opposed to the change had an effect on some lawmakers.

"There was a very loud outcry, much of which was filled with false information," she said.

The Oregon bill's sponsor, Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, of Portland, said opposition largely revolved around who was right or wrong about the benefits of vaccines, and she has decided not to pursue the legislation.

"She strongly believes that making personal choices such as whether or not to vaccinate children are largely a matter of privacy, but — as with all matters of personal choice — we have to be certain that our choices don't impinge on our neighbors' health and well-being,"

said Paige Spence, Steiner Hayward's chief of staff.

Several other states have been considering similar bills eliminating personal and philosophical exemptions to vaccinations as dozens of people across the country fell ill from a measles outbreak that started at Disneyland in December. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 142 people from seven states, including one from Oregon and two from Washington, were linked to the outbreak.

In February, three California lawmakers introduced legislation that would require parents to vaccinate their children before they enter school unless they can't for medical reasons. That bill has yet to come up before a committee, though Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown has suggested he'll support it.

In Vermont, which is in the top three states for people taking an exemption, a group of lawmakers announced plans last month to introduce legislation eliminating the philosophical exemptions for parents who don't want

their kids immunized, though a similar effort failed three years ago. In Maine, two bills, one removing philosophical exemptions and one that aims to make it harder for parents to get that exemption, are awaiting a public hearing.

Last year, Oregon passed a law requiring parents with kindergartners to consult with a health professional or watch a one-hour educational video before shots are waived. Steiner Hayward, who also sponsored that bill, said she'd heard parents were only going through the motions of watching the video when they attended consultations, which is why she sought to strengthen the state's immunizations requirements.

This year's measure drew heated testimony from parents who argued it took away their medical freedom and right to informed consent. The bill was pulled before it got a committee vote, though it did get a public hearing. Dozens of parents who showed up at a hearing in Washington also said the measure would

take away their rights to make decisions for their children.

"The fundamental issue was that of informed consent. We're supportive of safe and effective vaccinations. We're not anti-vaccine. We're pro-informed-consent," said Vern Saboe, a chiropractor from Albany who testified against the Oregon bill.

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La Corte reported from Olympia, Washington. Associated Press writers Alanna Durkin in Augusta, Maine, and Fenit Nirappil in Sacramento, California, contributed to this report.



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