



## New vaccine opt-out rules irk parents, prompt legislative hearing

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LANSING, MI -- Concerned parents came in droves to the state capital Wednesday morning to protest a new vaccine waiver policy which opponents say bullies parents.

But supporters say the new policy, which requires parents to **make an appointment** with the county health department to officially obtain a waiver, is working. Although some counties had already been doing this, it's a big change for parents who had previously been able to waive their child's vaccinations with a quick signature in a school's office.

Reps. Mike Callton, R-Nashville, and Thomas Hooker, R-Byron Center, held a joint hearing of their respective Health Policy and Families, Children and Seniors committees Wednesday morning to discuss the change.

"A lot of parents got upset right there because they felt it's their right, why should they have to drive all the way to the health department? And for some of them it's not that easy and some of the health departments aren't real nice," Callton said.

Parents testified Wednesday about the extra trouble of making health department appointments, which serve primarily to educate them about vaccines before opting out with a waiver.

Parent Kim Boer said she had to take time off of work to go to the appointment, and the county worker incorrectly told her she couldn't get a waiver on religious grounds before lecturing her.

"I am very concerned over the ruling and the experience I had. I don't feel it was educational whatsoever," Boer said.

Officials with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services said the new policy helps address a public health problem. Last school year, 5 percent of school children were waived from vaccination requirements for a mix of medical, religious and philosophical reasons. That's the sixth highest of any state in the country.

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The department only has about half of the data it needs to measure this year's waiver rate, but preliminary data puts it at 1 percent. A final number will be available in February.

Elizabeth Hertel, DHHS policy and legislative director, said for the most part health departments have been efficient in processing the waivers. Oakland County alone has done 2,100 already.

"We continue to look at ways to make sure this is as easy as possible for parents and families," Hertel said.

Dr. Jane Turner, a practicing physician and professor of pediatrics and human development at Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine, said in her experience more affluent, educated people tend to seek waivers.

But much of their information comes from what she considers to be scientifically unreliable Internet sources. The meetings, she said, provide them with scientific information.

"I'm pro-choice in terms of people being able to choose what is right for their child's health, but I also want it to be really, really informed choice," Turner said.

Opponents including Dr. Katherine Ehrlich, a pediatrician in Oakland County, said parents are making informed choices. She chose not to vaccinate her children for Hepatitis B at birth, since neither she nor her husband had used intravenous drugs or were ever exposed to the disease.

"It seemed absolutely ridiculous to give them the shot. There was no benefit but some cost," Ehrlich said.

Even as a highly educated doctor, she had to make an appointment and be educated by the county health department under the administrative rule change implemented this year.

The crowd at Wednesday's committee hearing was mostly quiet, although Callton did twice ask them to refrain from outbursts. It's unclear what the outcome of the meeting might be. No action was taken Wednesday, although Callton said it's possible parental concerns could spark legislation.

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