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Gretchen Rupp, Chair
Gallatin City-County Board of Health
215 W. Mendenhall
Bozeman, MT 59715

Legislator Tom Burnett
House District 63
4143 Rain Roper Dr
Bozeman, MT 59715-0634

Dear Legislator Tom Burnett,

As Chair of the Gallatin City-County Board of Health, I write on behalf of the Board to offer comments on legislation currently being considered by the Legislature that would place Montana children at greater risk of preventable communicable diseases. As you may know, HB 227 seeks to make it easier to obtain exemptions from immunization requirements for children attending large day care centers in Montana. The Gallatin City-County Board of Health voted today to contact you to make you aware of the serious potential adverse consequences of this legislation.

First, let me say that we understand and support the effort to protect all peoples' right to pursue their beliefs and practice their own religion. That is not the issue.

The problems with HB 227 are those of unintended consequences. If passed, all agree that the legislation would result in more unimmunized or under-immunized children in large day care centers throughout Montana. It would weaken immunization coverage in a state that already ranks near the bottom in vaccination coverage. From a health perspective, this is a disturbing possibility, especially considering that the ongoing pertussis (whooping cough) outbreak in Montana and the full-blown pertussis epidemic in California claimed the lives of 10 infants in 2010.

The consequences of this legislation are not theoretical. Already in 2011, 30 cases of pertussis have been reported to state health officials, compared to just four or five cases over the comparable period in 2010, 2009, and 2008.

The situation of pertussis is a good representation of the health threat posed by HB 227. Infants less than three months old cannot receive the pertussis vaccine. The only way we protect babies from pertussis is by vaccinating those around them. HB 227 would result in more unimmunized children within the same large day cares that are serving infants that cannot receive the pertussis vaccination. The risk of an epidemic would be heightened because disease transmission is much more likely in the large day care centers with more kids.

This is not a theoretical discussion in Gallatin County. We have seen at least seven confirmed cases of pertussis in Gallatin County in recent months. In 2004, a baby girl from our county who was less than two months old died from pertussis. That little girl's siblings all had been vaccinated, but she also attended day care, and likely contracted the disease somewhere in the community. As parents and as members of

the Board of Health, this is the personal nightmare and the public health risk that we are working to avoid. The legislation being proposed would undermine those efforts, and place all children at greater risk.

Again, this is not a theoretical risk. Prior to the advent of vaccines, an average of 4,000 Americans died each year from pertussis. Comprehensive immunizations helped cut that number to less than 30 deaths per year. But legislation that weakens immunization coverage will increase health risks for all children, as evidenced by the 10 deaths of babies in California last year.

HB 227 also has serious economic ramifications. In the case of an outbreak, it would be necessary to ensure that children are excluded from day care settings during an outbreak, most likely for several weeks. For some day cares, this would be a devastating financial impact. For most parents, it would be a terrible economic burden. We hope that legislators will consider this potential economic impact of the legislation. This is a concern also shared by day care providers, as attested in the attached letter from the executive director of Childcare Connections, a non-profit organization that works to help hundreds of families find safe and affordable day care.

Finally, we want to address the issue of choice. Currently, parents who choose not to vaccinate their children for religious reasons have a multitude of choices for day care. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of smaller day care providers that operate completely legally and allow religious exemptions. But for other parents, especially parents of infants, the larger regulated day care centers are the only place where they can place their kids and know that other children are all immunized. HB 227 would take away that choice. It would force working parents to place their children in settings where there is a higher degree of risk that their child might contract a preventable disease. For parents of a newborn, that is a terrible and unnecessary choice. It is a choice you can help them avoid.

Thank you for taking the time to consider these issues. We would appreciate hearing from you about these issues in the near future.

Sincerely,



Gretchen Rupp

Chair

Gallatin City-County Board of Health