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EDITOR'S PICK

Public Health column: Vaccines and civil liberties

AMBER JOHNSON Lewis and Clark Public Health

Feb 11, 2025

“Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.” – **Alexis de Tocqueville**, *Democracy in America*

For many thousands of years, political philosophy has been busy trying to explain and argue and debate for the best way to organize people into societies and governments. It ain't easy; a lot like herding cats. Meow.

At the center of American political philosophy is our deep and abiding love for freedom. We are particularly enamored with our civil liberties, and rightfully so. The Oxford Dictionary defines “Civil Liberties” as “the state of being subject only to laws established for the good of the community, especially with regard to freedom of action and speech.”

And it has been proven repeatedly that communitywide vaccination is good for society at large. But hear this loud and clear. Vaccination is not forced.

No one will hold you or your child down and put a needle in your arm. Should you choose not to be vaccinated, you will not be jailed, and you will not be fined. Hurrah for freedom and civil liberties.



Amber Johnson

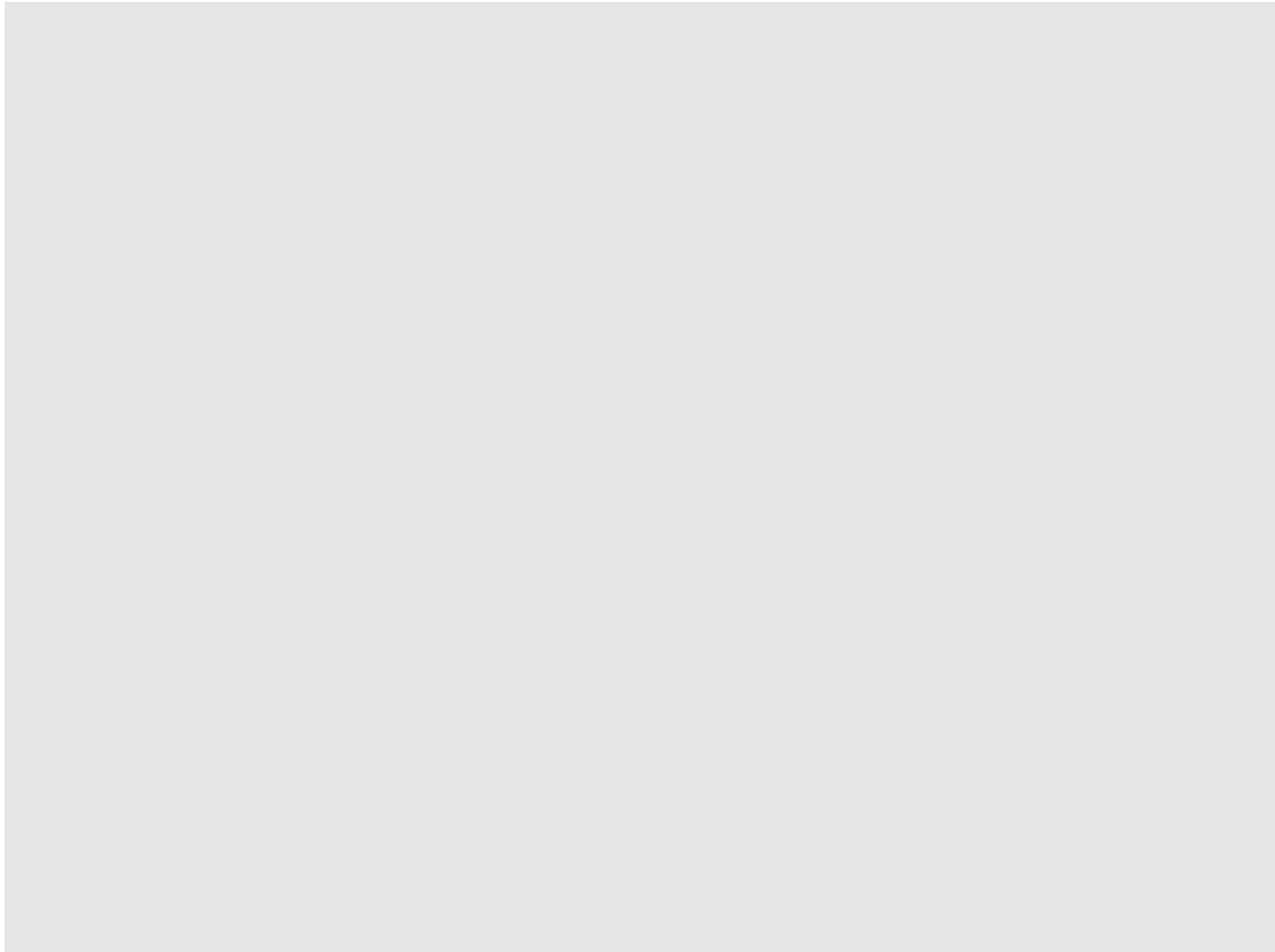
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But institutions, be they public or private, should have the right, even the responsibility, to enforce vaccine requirements for the good of the public. Particularly in schools and day cares. Remember the days when 46% of American children died before the age of five, often from communicable diseases now easily prevented with vaccinations? Neither do I. What a time to be alive!

The U.S. Armed Forces, created to protect and defend America and our freedoms and civil liberties, mandates vaccinations for all service members before they commence basic training. Here is their mandated list: Adenovirus, Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Influenza, Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Meningococcal, Poliovirus, Tetanus-Diphtheria. Other vaccines administered depending on risk and occupation are Anthrax, Japanese Encephalitis, Pneumococcal, Rabies, Smallpox, Typhoid Fever, and Yellow Fever. A mandate started by Gen. George Washington still applies to today's men and women in uniform.



The measles, mumps and rubella virus vaccine, shown at the International Community Health Services clinic in Seattle in 2024, will have prevented millions of hospitalizations among children born from 1994 to 2023.

Lindsey Wasson/Reuters via CNN Newsource

Again, the backbone of free and representative government is constructed with laws established for the good of the community. Very different people with very different opinions have very different ideas about what constitutes “the good of the community.” For this reason, debates about civil liberties will continue at the local, state, and federal level. Laws will continue to be passed, repealed, and amended until the end of time. This includes laws and regulations about vaccine requirements and exemptions.

Speaking of exemptions. Like all states, Montana has historically had immunization laws that require school-aged children to receive certain vaccinations to attend school or day care. Vaccine exemptions vary from state to state, and in Montana, as in 44 other states, residents can apply for both religious and medical exemptions.

In an ideal world, I would love to see 99% vaccination rates for children. But in a truly free society, nobody gets exactly what they want. Even the creation of the U.S. Constitution was finalized with the passage of The Great Compromise.

If you and your people have and get everything you want, particularly at the expense and oppression of minority populations, you might have to consider that you prefer authoritarianism over freedom. For this reason, religious exemptions for vaccines are important to the protection and preservation of our First Amendment rights, particularly a citizen's right to practice their own religion, or no religion at all.

While I am pro-vaccination, I am also pro-religious freedom, and I am grateful to live in a state and country that values religious freedoms and religious exemptions.

As our state legislators gather for another session of the Montana State Legislature, we hope they will consider the good of the community, continue to champion immunizations, and protect our children with safe and affordable vaccines.

Amber Johnson is the communications specialist for Lewis and Clark Public Health.

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