BILL: AB 2109 (Pan)

SUBJECT: IMMUNIZATION EXEMPTION

RECOMMENDATION: Support

Recommendation: The State of California requires children to receive a variety of immunizations before they can begin attending child care or school. Different vaccinations are required for different levels of school. A parent or guardian may seek an exemption from these requirements by presenting a letter stating that the immunization is contrary to his or her beliefs.

AB 2109 would require this letter to be accompanied by a written statement, signed by a health care practitioner, which indicates that the practitioner provided the parent or guardian with information detailing the benefits and risks of the immunization and the health risks of specified communicable diseases. By requiring a health care practitioner to provide this notice, AB 2109 would increase parental knowledge of these risks, and staff recommends support.

Background and Analysis: The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that 95% of kindergartners should be vaccinated for nine diseases, and California law requires this immunization before a child starts school. A CDC report issued in June of 2011 found that that, for the 2009-10 school year, only about 93% of kindergartners in California were inoculated against seven diseases: polio; diphtheria; tetanus; pertussis (also known as whooping cough); measles; mumps; and rubella. Ninety six percent of kindergartners were inoculated against Hepatitis B and varicella, also known as chickenpox.

Currently, parents may receive a medical exemption to the immunization requirements if a licensed physician feels a vaccine is not indicated because of medical reasons. A parent may also obtain a “personal beliefs exemption.” Children with any of these exemptions can be excluded from school during an outbreak of a disease against which they are not fully immunized, since schools with lower immunization rates are more vulnerable to the spread of diseases such as measles and whooping cough.

Some of the resistance to immunization relates to the concern – not scientifically-proven – that there is a link between vaccinations and autism. The California Department of Public Health, American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, the
Institute of Medicine and World Health Organization all advise that there is no connection between vaccines and autism.

In 2009, the Los Angeles Times reported that exemptions from vaccines had more than doubled since 1997. Research presented at the 2011 American Public Health Association (APHA) Annual Meeting showed that, “In evaluating data on the rates of exemptions from the California Department of Public Health, the state’s Department of Education and the US Census, researchers found that in 2010, the state had about 11,500 kindergartners with personal belief exemptions, representing a 25% increase over the previous 2 years.” The resurgence in measles in Europe is a result of lower vaccination rates (especially among susceptible populations), and is responsible for a significant increase in imported measles cases in the US in 2011.

Parents opting out of immunization put not only their own children, but all people at risk, particularly those individuals who for medical reasons cannot be immunized. Without vaccines, epidemics of many preventable diseases could return, resulting in increased - and unnecessary - illness, disability, and death among children. In our mobile society, over a million people each day people travel to and from other countries, where many vaccine-preventable diseases remain relatively common.

AB 2109 is intended to ensure that parents realize that they place their child and other parents’ children at risk by failing to get their children immunized. This measure passed out of the Assembly Health Committee on a 13-5 vote, is supported by the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) and the County Health Executives of California (CHEAC), and staff recommends support.