

December 7, 2020

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser:

On behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, which is dedicated to improving the lives and well-being of children in this country, I am writing to urge you to approve the Minor Consent for Vaccinations Amendment Act sponsored by Councilmember Mary Cheh that passed the D.C. Council by a 10-3 vote on November 17, 2020.

The legislation recognizes that children have a fundamental right to seek out and receive medical treatment to protect their health and well-being without the approval of their parents. In the case of vaccinations, it also helps stop the spread of preventable diseases for everyone.

D.C. has long recognized that young people have affirmative rights in protecting their own health and well-being for reproductive and behavioral health care services. Although there are a limited number of instances where children need to seek out health care services that parents are denying, in those instances, adolescents have a clearer understanding of the health care decisions that make the most sense for them.

In the case of Councilmember Cheh's bill, it was originally drafted in response to the measles outbreaks across the country in communities where parents were opting not to vaccinate their children with proven and safe vaccines. Despite the fact that measles was declared eliminated in the U.S. two decades ago, there have been recent surges in vaccine-preventable measles and other diseases in recent years. To prevent that, Chen's bill would allow children to protect themselves and others in the community from communicable diseases.

Arguments against Cheh's bill argue that parents should control all aspects of the lives of children, including their health. However, the fact is that children in this country count on and need the support and protection *by* parents and government but sometimes need the support of protection *from* parents and government. Children have fundamental rights to have voice and agency in decisions that impact their lives and that includes protection from threats to their health and safety. Measles, rubella, HPV, polio, rubella, tetanus, mumps, hepatitis, influenza, pneumococcal diseases, and meningococcal diseases are all vaccine preventable diseases, and hopefully, COVID will be added to that list soon.

Cheh's bill was not written as a COVID vaccine bill. It would allow young people to disagree with parents or caregivers who have bought into unfounded and dangerous anti-immunization misinformation. The bill provides adolescents with the opportunity to receive proven health care treatments and services offered by and recommended by science and medical professionals.

Young people, like every other person in this country, have a right to seek out and protect themselves from diseases that can be prevented by immunizations, just as they should be allowed to do for cancer treatment, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases and other reproductive health care services, mental health and substance abuse treatment.

Opponents of Cheh's bill are effectively arguing that young people should remain voiceless, or even invisible, with respect to the health care decisions about their bodies, their lives, and their well-being. The vast majority of cases involving the health of children are made by parents, but in those instances where there is a dispute and young people believe it is in their own best interest to seek out medical care, opponents are effectively arguing that children are literally property and they have no voice or self-determination.

Children have rights, particularly when it comes to their own bodies and lives. Councilmember Cheh's bill recognizes this, and we urge you to support its enactment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent "L" and "y".

Bruce Lesley
President