

ASSEMBLY DEMOCRATS NEWS RELEASE



FOR RELEASE:

March 10, 2003

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SENATE PANEL ADVANCES GREENWALD/PREVITE BILL **MANDATING MENINGITIS VACCINATIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS**

State College and University Students Would Be Immunized For Bacterial Disease

(TRENTON) -- A Senate panel today released legislation Assemblyman Louis Greenwald and Assemblywoman Mary T. Previte sponsored to require meningitis vaccinations at New Jersey's public institutions of higher education.

The Greenwald/Previte bill was part of the "Safeguarding Our Children" legislative package the Assembly passed in January.

Under the measure (A-1546), full-time college and university students who live in dormitories would be required to receive meningitis vaccinations. New Jersey would be the 15th state to impose such an immunization mandate if the bill became law.

College students, particularly those living in dorms, are in very close contact with one another and can inadvertently spread a contagious disease like bacterial meningitis, said Greenwald (D-Camden). Vaccinations would help prevent potential cross-contamination of this deadly illness.

If enacted, a meningitis vaccination and proof of the vaccination would be required for enrollment in a college or university. Institutions of higher education also would be required to offer the meningitis vaccinations to students.

Meningitis is a devastating illness that can be controlled if caught in time," said Previte (D-Camden). Requiring vaccinations will help to combat the spread of bacterial meningitis, which can spread easily from one student to another.

The meningitis vaccination legislation is one in a series of meningitis-related bills Greenwald has introduced over the last five years after meeting the parents of a 19-year-old Camden County student, whose life was claimed by meningitis in 1996. The young man, Micheal Skowronek of Collingswood, contracted the infection while attending Drexel University.

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According to an article published last year in the Journal of the American Medical Association, a study conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found meningitis to be three times more prevalent among first-year college students than among other undergraduates, particularly those who reside in dormitories.

The CDC study examined 96 college students nationally -- 30 of them freshmen -- who were diagnosed with meningococcal infection between September 1, 1998, and August 31, 1999. The study concluded that of the 79 patients for whom information was available, 68 percent had infections that might have been prevented through vaccination.

“It makes sense to immunize people starting with the most at-risk populations,” said Greenwald.

Bacterial meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges, the thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord. Between 10 and 25 percent of the population carry the bacteria responsible for meningitis in the back of the nose and throat. The bacteria are spread by sneezing, coughing or kissing.

The bacteria cannot live outside the body for long; therefore it is not contracted through water supplies, swimming pools or factories.

Although cases are usually isolated and not related to "outbreaks," anyone can be at risk for contracting bacterial meningitis. The disease kills people in roughly 10 percent of bacterial meningitis cases and does serious harm -- including brain damage -- in another 10 percent.

“We’re not dealing simply with the common cold or a headache,” said Previtte. “Meningitis is a serious disease that warrants aggressive counter measures.”

The measure would allow institutions to grant students an exemption due to an increased health risk for the student or a conflict with a student’s, parent’s, or guardian’s religious beliefs.

The Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee released the measure 5-0 with one abstention. It is now poised for consideration by the full Senate.

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