Fewer state parents seek vax waivers

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The percentage of Michigan parents opting out of vaccinating their children has continued to drop since the state changed its waiver rules, Health and Human Services Director Nick Lyon said.

"We've changed the way the waivers worked for parents to basically ask for an exemption for vaccinations for their children," he said. "We've seen those waiver rates drop from 4.6 percent in November 2014 to 2.9 percent in 2016."

Now, Michigan parents must speak with a public health provider to obtain a nonmedical waiver. In 2015, the year the changes were implemented, statewide waiver rates dropped to 3.1 percent.

The changes were prompted by the large number of Michigan parents waiving vaccines for their children. Michigan has one of the highest immunization waiver rates in the country, with some counties reporting rates as high as 12.5 percent, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS).

Parents can opt out of having their child vaccinated for medical reasons, such as allergies to vaccines. Nonmedical reasons include religious beliefs or other philosophical or personal beliefs, according to the National Vaccine Information Center.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Michigan is one of 20 states that allow waivers for philosophical reasons.

High nonmedical waiver rates can make communities more susceptible to preventable diseases like measles, pertussis and chickenpox, according to the MDHHS.

"What we've seen in some places is an increase in preventable childhood diseases where the vaccination rates were lower than they had been in previous years," Lyon said. "And that's something we take very seriously."

Even though the statewide trend is a drop in waiver rates, at least 20 counties experienced increases from 2015 to 2016. One of those counties is Grand Traverse County, according to data from the department.

A whooping cough outbreak occurred in the Traverse City area in 2014, but Michigan continues to see ongoing pertussis cases in every county, Bob Wheaton, the communications manager for the MDHHS, said by email.

"Higher immunization rates could've prevented the outbreak from being as widespread as it was," Lyon said. "I understand that people have to make their own decisions around healthcare, but when we have something that's very effective in preventing illness and death, that's something that we need to be working on with the provider community and really demonstrating the value of vaccinations to parents."

In 2015, 9.7 percent of Grand Traverse County parents requested a waiver from vaccinations. Unlike most of the state, that percentage increased to 6.3 percent in preliminary data for 2016.

Roseann Davis, a public information officer for the Grand Traverse County Health Department, said the department works to educate people looking to obtain a waiver:

"If we get a sign that immunization waivers are increasing, we would certainly, most definitely look at that and see what the reasoning might be," Davis said. "We do have a fairly large populous in this area though who, you know, for their own personal reasons, don't believe in vaccinations."

"Obviously that is something we would try to discourage because we are a big proponent of vaccinations and their benefits."