

Rhode Island Immunization Case Study

I. The Basics: The Requirement

In August 2015, Rhode Island implemented an HPV vaccine requirement for middle school children. The number of HPV vaccine doses required is based on age. Generally, seventh graders were required to have the first dose, eighth graders were required to have the second dose and ninth graders were required to have the third dose. Under the current recommendation, however, adolescents receive two doses of the vaccine before age 15. Therefore, the recommendation for incoming ninth-graders is now two doses.

There are two exemptions, medical and religious. Religious exemptions are available with no questions asked. The instance of religious exemptions increased from about .9 percent to about 4 percent with the introduction of the HPV vaccine requirement. The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) advised schools to refrain from excluding students who did not receive the vaccine, even if they did not submit a religious or medical exemption form. At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, of 11,533 seventh-grade students, 72.4 percent had received at least one dose of the vaccine. Of those exempted, 4.7 percent were exempted on religious grounds and .3 percent on medical grounds. About 22.6 percent of students had neither an exemption nor the vaccine, according to the Annual School Immunization Assessment Survey.

The ACIP recommends vaccination against HPV starting at 11-12 years of age with series completion by age 13. Vaccination is also recommended for males through 21-years-old who are not vaccinated, females through 26-years-old who are not vaccinated, people with compromised immune systems and others who are at high risk for HPV. All teens are required to have specific immunizations to attend school. Students without the required immunizations can be excluded from school, however the DOH advised against this in the case of the HPV vaccine. Eventually, though, they may need many of these immunizations, including the HPV vaccine, to attend college or obtain a job.

II. Process

A vaccine in adequate supply can be added to the Rhode Island school immunization requirements after it has been used statewide for three to five years and proven that it is effective and safe. In Rhode Island, the RIDOH has the authority to set vaccination regulations without legislative action or approval. Rhode Island does not have local health departments like many states – it only has one at the state level.

Steps to approve vaccine regulation:

1. The CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practice recommends a new routine vaccine to the Director of the CDC.



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2. At least three to five years later, after routinely implemented statewide usage, the Rhode Island DOH considers requiring the vaccination for school attendance.
3. The Rhode Island Vaccine Advisory Committee reviews the vaccine and makes a recommendation for its requirement to the Director of Health.
4. The Director of Health meets with the Health Regulation Committee for approval to proceed with the public hearing.
5. The recommendation is subject to community review.
6. A public hearing is scheduled.

From start to finish, this process took about three years for the health department to implement the HPV vaccine as a school requirement, which is a little longer than normal due to the controversy surrounding the vaccine. At the time considerations began, Rhode Island already had the highest HPV coverage rate in the nation.

III. Timeline

2012: Considerations regarding an HPV vaccine requirement begin.

2013: The Rhode Island Vaccine Advisory Committee formally recommends the vaccine to the Director of the RIDOH.

- The committee receives information on vaccine safety and efficacy, acceptability and current coverage rates (the highest in the nation) to support its recommendation.
- The committee agrees to make a recommendation and the Director of Health decides to move forward with a proposal to add the HPV vaccine to school immunization requirements.

January 2014: The public hearing is held at 3:30 on a Monday. A small number of people show up, some of which were supporters, and there is little opposition.

July 2014: The vaccine is officially added to the RIDOH regulations. The regulation does not go into effect for a year to give providers, school nurses, teachers and parents time to acclimate.

August 2015: The program begins, and incoming seventh graders are required to have the first dose of the HPV vaccine.

IV. Backlash

Opposition began around May to June 2015 when parents began learning about the requirement from their healthcare providers and school nurses. In response to the concerns, the RIDOH scheduled community meetings to educate the public about the importance of HPV vaccination and its role in cancer prevention. Those opposed to the vaccine used the meetings as a platform to put forth negative information about the vaccine, including information and propaganda not backed by science. The events were cancelled after becoming too volatile. The Rhode Islanders Against HPV Mandate was formed, and several bills were introduced in the state legislature to reverse the regulation. None of these bills were successful. Any vaccine regulation can be reversed via the state legislature or by



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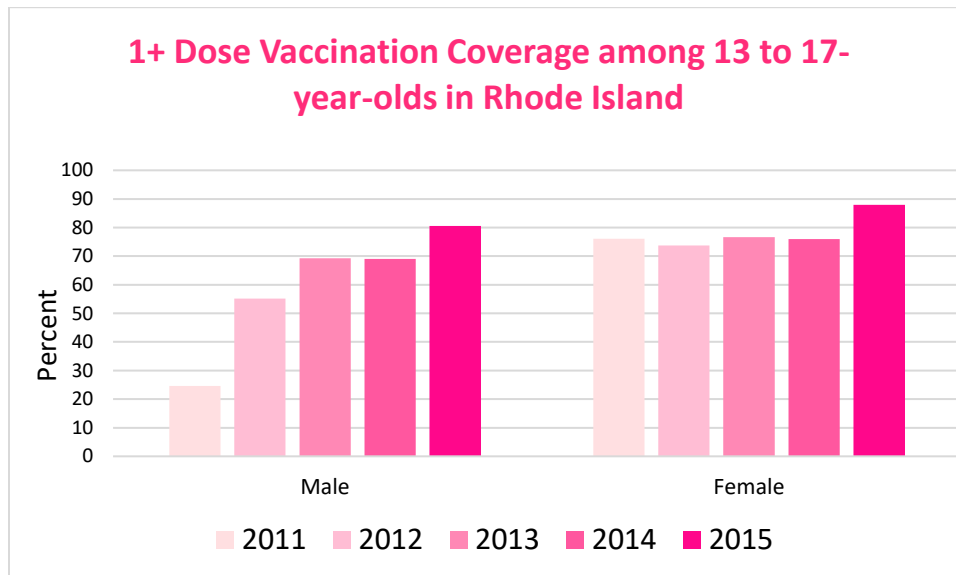
decision of the Director of Health. The latter is unlikely due to the success of the regulation in increasing the state’s coverage rate and therefore protecting more people from preventable disease.

V. Support

The primary supporter of the regulation is the Ocean State Immunization Collaborative, a 501(c)(3) organization which aids efforts to increase vaccination coverage rates. The collaborative is made up of organizations such as the American Cancer Society, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Academy of Family Physicians, among others. The collaborative messaged to its community partners who performed advocacy work at the community level by working with local providers and organizing a grassroots effort to increase support for the vaccine. The Immunization Action Coalition, a national organization, also offered to mobilize its local networks to send people to Rhode Island to advocate against bills attempting to reverse the HPV vaccine regulation. The Rhode Island healthcare provider community and the Rhode Island Medical Society was vocal in its support of the regulation, which proved influential as Rhode Island providers testified against bills attempting to overturn the vaccine requirement.

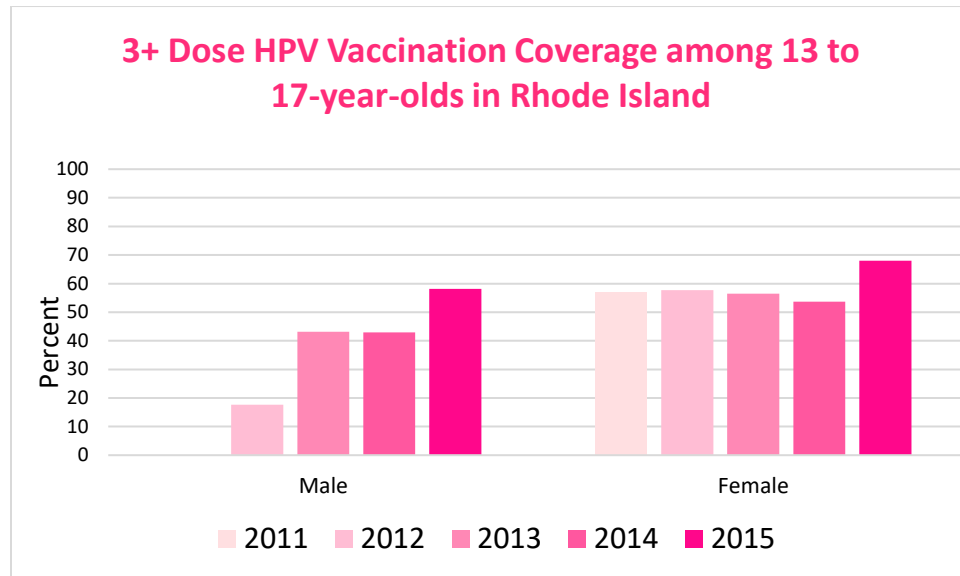
VI. Results & Data

In 2015, the year the vaccine was required, about 68 percent of girls and 58 percent of boys aged 13 to 17 had received all three doses of the vaccine, up from 56.5 percent and 43.2 percent from 2013. By the end of 2015, the first year it was implemented, 74 percent of seventh graders, including both public and private students, in Rhode Island had received the first dose.



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Sources:

- Statistics
 - Tricia Washburn, Rhode Island Department of Health
 - Rhode Island Department of Health
 - National Immunization Survey, CDC
 - Rhode Island Immunization Registry for Children
 - Annual School Immunization Assessment Survey, 2015-2016 school year
- Background & process
 - <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/08/25/how-did-win-acceptance-hpv-vaccine/7gujQkn522RoNT4DnOq6mN/story.html>
 - Title 23 Health and Safety, Chapter 23-1(Regulations process PDF)
 - <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/hpv-vaccine-state-legislation-and-statutes.aspx>
 - Immunization Action Coalition: <https://www.immunizationcoalitions.org/>

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