

R.I. bill would impose fines and double the taxes of those who refuse COVID-19 vaccine

The legislation introduced by Senator Bell, a Providence Democrat, drew opposition from Senator de la Cruz, a North Smithfield Republican.

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 20, 2022, 3:44 p.m.

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PROVIDENCE, RI - 8/5/2021 RN John Pizzo administers COVID-19 vaccines at Bucklin Park in Providence on Thursday afternoon. The Rhode Island Department of Health partnered with Providence 02907 Health Equity Zone (HEZ) and other community partners to host vaccination clinics on Thursday to support COVID-19 vaccination efforts as part of Providence's Vaccination Day of Action. Erin Clark/Globe Staff ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — Rhode Islanders who don't get the COVID-19 vaccine would face \$50 monthly fines and have to pay twice what they'd otherwise owe in personal income taxes, under a state Senate bill.

Senator Samuel W. Bell, a progressive Providence Democrat, proposed [the legislation](#), which has drawn sharp and, in some cases, [vulgar criticism](#) on Twitter. And it has prompted Senator Jessica de la Cruz, a North Smithfield Republican, to organize an email campaign opposing the measure.

“The reason I introduced the bill is we have a crisis with the pandemic,” Bell said Wednesday. “Thousands of Rhode Islander have died. I’ve had really painful calls from constituents who can’t go to the store because they’re immuno-compromised, who have lost loved ones to this pandemic, who are really ill and not fully recovered, suffering long-term effects.”

Also, Bell said his 4-month-old son has interstitial lung disease, which places him at risk of serious illness or death if he gets a respiratory infection.

“My son’s condition has made me feel more compassionate and ready for the heavy level of abuse I knew I’d receive,” he said. “I love my son more than I can put into words, and the idea of him not being able to interact with people and to go to school – those things terrify me. And I’m not the only parent of a child with a serious immune condition.”

De la Cruz, the Senate minority whip who [dropped out](#) of the 2nd Congressional District race last week, wrote an email to supporters on Tuesday, saying people across the state have been asking her about Bell’s bill.

“I have not, nor will I ever support, legislation that coerces Rhode Islanders into making medical decisions or face steep financial damages,” she wrote. “I hear my constituents and others around the state loud and clear – this is dangerous legislation and sends the message that our government doesn’t trust you to make the right choice for you and your family. This is an unconscionable overreach of legislative powers.”

De la Cruz said the “good news” is that the bill stands little chance of becoming law. “That said, I’m not taking it for granted, and neither should you,” she wrote.

She provided voters with the template for an email to sign and send to Bell and the bill’s cosponsors. “Senate Bill 2552 is dangerous and an unconscionable overreach of legislative powers,” the email says. “Trust Rhode Islanders to make medical decisions for themselves and their families without facing steep financial penalties.”

On Wednesday, Bell [tweeted an image](#) of an email filled with expletives, urging him to “move to communist China,” repeating unsubstantiated claims about deaths from the COVID-19 vaccine, and threatening him: “You attack our kids, we attack yours. You attack our bank accounts, we attack yours.”

In a tweet Monday, Bell noted that the Globe had reported on [a survey showing](#) “Rhode Islanders still strongly support a vaccine mandate.”

He was referring to a new survey that shows Rhode Island ranks No. 6 in the country for residents supporting a universal COVID-19 vaccine mandate. The poll from the COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public’s Policy Preferences Across States found 64 percent of residents believe everyone should be required to get the vaccine.

“Despite the McKee administration pushing hard for the surrender policy, it’s time for us to pass my mandate bill,” Bell wrote. “Cases are rising again. Surrender isn’t working.”

Bell introduced the bill on March 1, and it was referred to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. No hearing has been held, and it remains to be seen if the bill will emerge from a Senate whose leaders are often at odds with Bell.

On Wednesday, spokesman Dan Kittredge said Senate leadership had “no comment on this time.” No companion bill has been introduced in the House.

Joseph Wendelken, a spokesman for the state Department of Health, said, “We have not taken a position on the bill.”

One of the bill’s cosponsors, Senator Tiara Mack, a Providence Democrat, said, “I signed onto the bill because I support public health measures.” And she said she has no intention of removing her name from the legislation.

Mack said she has received hundreds of emails and phone calls from opponents of the bill, but none of the objections she has read came from her constituents. “It is a small percentage of Rhode Islanders riled up by a very divisive force,” she said.

Mack she said it’s infuriating to see critics using homophobic slurs and referencing Bell’s infant son. “It’s one thing to disagree about how we protect Rhode Islanders from the virus that continues to devastate many of our communities,” she said. “But it’s another thing to completely disregard people’s humanity.”

The bill would require every eligible person who is at least 16 years old and lives, works, or pays personal income tax in Rhode Island to be immunized against COVID-19. And it would require every eligible resident under 16 years of age to be immunized against COVID-19, with the responsibility for ensuring compliance falling on parents or guardians.

Under the bill, anyone found in violation may present a signed petition of exemption to Department of Health. Petitions must be signed by three licensed physicians stating that the person is not a fit subject for immunization against COVID-19 for medical reasons.

The bill would require employers to provide proof of compliance for any employee working in-person within the state, although employers may choose to waive proof for purely remote work. Any employer found to be knowingly in violation of the law for more than seven days would have to pay a monthly civil penalty of \$5,000.